

Catholic Fasting Literature in a Context of Body Hatred: A Feminist Critique

JESSICA COBLENTZ

Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN

*Some concerned Catholic theologians and popular writers have addressed the ubiquity of body hatred in the United States in their prescriptive considerations of liturgical fasting. This essay brings a feminist theological lens to their writings to argue that this Catholic fasting literature presents dualistic and decontextualized accounts of embodiment and of sacramental practice that reify the discursive structures of body hatred in the US context. In response, the author advocates for a shift in Catholic theological discourse about fasting as one attempt to resist body hatred and support more liberative possibilities for embodiment in this context.**

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As a result of renewed interest in liturgy and culture at the Second Vatican Council, many theologians, especially those engaged in liberationist discourses, have considered the relationship between liturgical practices and contexts of oppression.¹ This scholarship supports a

* Thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers who bettered this essay with their generous feedback, and to the many colleagues who discussed and read this argument over the years, especially Susan Reynolds and Cynthia Cameron, my collaborators on the panel that first occasioned this paper.

¹ See for example Tissa Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998); James L. Empeur and Christopher Kiesling, *The Liturgy That Does Justice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006); Joseph Grassi, *Broken Bread and Broken Bodies: The Lord's Supper and World Hunger* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985); Katie Walker Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiracism as*

Jessica Coblentz is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, Indiana). Her research has also been published in Theological Studies, Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, and Journal of Catholic Higher Education. She earned her PhD from Boston College in 2017.

growing consensus that liturgical practices should account for—and even critique and resist—realities of injustice. Meanwhile, feminist theologians have illuminated the entanglements of theological discourse and contexts of oppression.² Arguing that symbols function and names are powerful, feminists have demonstrated that talk about God and the Christian life can perpetuate oppression or advance liberation.³ Bringing these theological issues together, this essay investigates how theological discourse about one liturgical practice—fasting—relates to social injustice. Namely, I explore how discourse about Catholic fasting practices relates to women’s socialized body hatred, which I recognize as an instantiation of sexist oppression in the contemporary United States.⁴ I focus my analysis on Catholic theological and popular

Corporate Vice (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017); Monika Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1976); Anne Koester, ed., *Liturgy and Justice: To Worship God in Spirit and Truth* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002); Patrick McCormick, “How Could We Break the Lord’s Bread in a Foreign Land? Eucharist in ‘Diet America,’” *Horizons* 25, no. 1 (1998): 43–57; Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), esp. 171–202; Kevin R. Seasoltz, “Justice and the Eucharist,” *Worship* 58, no. 6 (1984): 507–525, esp. 509, n4–5; Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974).

² See for example Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 92–132; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1973); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Crossroads, 2017); Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1983).

³ Johnson, *She Who Is*; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), esp. 161–74.

⁴ I use the phrase “body hatred” to denote the perceptions and practices that scholars associate with the socially constructed devaluation of the body, especially particular kinds of bodies. I intend this phrase to encompass what many scholars speak of with alternative language such as “negative body image” as well as “embodied practices of social subjectification.” These and other phrases reflect distinct theoretical interpretations of the same embodied experience, but I have opted for a broader label that enables me to address the concerns of various schools of thought about women’s experiences of embodiment in this context. Also, there is growing attention to the effects of body hatred on ciswomen and people of trans and nonbinary gender identities as well, and some of this literature posits that body hatred among men is underreported because of stigma and the biases of researchers and health-care providers. See Leigh Cohn and Raymond Lemeberg, eds., *Current Findings on Males with Eating Disorders* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013). As a feminist concerned with how social constructions of the person affect the flourishing of all, I am troubled by the burdens of body hatred in all lives. Because the

writings from recent decades that prescribe for contemporary US Catholics how religious fasting ought to be practiced in a context of body hatred. Although the authors of these materials possess differing academic and ecclesial credentials, their fasting directives are consistent in a number of ways. I demonstrate that to the disproportionate detriment of women, this Catholic fasting literature frequently maintains the discursive structures that constitute body hatred in this context. In response, I explore how shifts in theological discourse about fasting might support new and more liberating avenues of women's embodiment.

I commence with a survey of how Catholic authors often present the relationship between fasting and women's body hatred. I then show how this configuration of fasting and body hatred mirrors and perpetuates the discursive structures that constitute body hatred. First, I establish that this literature presents a dualistic and decontextualized anthropology wherein the mind overcomes the socialization of the body, enabling spiritually pure fasting. Feminist scholars, especially psychologist Sylvia Blood and philosopher Susan Bordo, help me illuminate the inadequacies of this anthropology and demonstrate how it reinscribes body hatred. Second, I showcase how this Catholic fasting literature presents a dualistic and decontextualized account of fasting wherein the ritual, like the practitioner's will, is presumed to be immune to the influence of social context, including body hatred. I utilize the work of feminist theologian Susan Ross to establish that this is theologically insufficient and also, again, perpetuates body hatred. In response, I advocate for shifts in Catholic talk about fasting that resist the discursive patterns that shape this sexist oppression. To promote new possibilities for women's embodiment in the United States, including women's embodied practices within the Catholic community, I propose alternative accounts of how to fast, who can fast, and what results from Catholic fasting in a context of body hatred.

Fasting and Body Hatred in Catholic Fasting Literature

Aware of the prevalence of negative constructions of embodiment throughout Western society, a number of Catholic theologians and popular writers have begun to address body hatred in their directive writings on

available research has long concluded that body hatred disproportionately affects people according to their gender differences, however, I choose to focus this essay on how it operates in the lives of cisgender women. Nevertheless, my examination of the particularities of body hatred in ciswomen's lives engenders theological insights about fasting that could benefit all people struggling with body hatred, including cismen, nonbinary, and transgendered persons.

fasting.⁵ Across their writings, a number of patterns emerge. Frequently, these authors caution that cultural pressures can lead Catholics to confuse or conflate the food abstinence of dieting with that of fasting, and in response, they distinguish Catholic fasting practices from the disciplines of food abstinence that pervade women's daily lives. For example, Heidi Schlumpf reminds readers of the *National Catholic Reporter* that Lenten fasting is "supposed to be penance, not a weight-loss plan."⁶ Dianne Bergant similarly suggests in an *America* magazine essay for Ash Wednesday that "we should fast—not diet—from our favorite indulgence."⁷

This differentiation often hinges on practitioners' intentions: when a conscious desire to modify the body according to normative social ideals influences one's abstinence from food, then abstinence is no longer "fasting" but "dieting." We see this theological reasoning in the writing of Kathleen Dugan, who expresses concern for how the "food-related illness that currently afflicts so many young women in our society" has negatively affected images of fasting. In response, she cautions that "we do not make the mistake of identifying this modern dilemma with the voluntary undertaking of fasting as an aide in the spiritual life."⁸ Indeed,

when fasting becomes a symptom of pathology in persons afflicted by eating disorders, the very question of fasting's value is endangered. There are some clear principles that need to be enunciated, and perhaps the most critical is that which simply states that abuse of the body through fasting has always been diagnosed as unhealthy and pathological.... Today, the phenomenon of eating disorders is linked with fasting,

⁵ Many Catholics and other Christians fail to recognize body hatred as a problem at all. There is a large collection of Catholic and other Christian dieting literature that is overwhelmingly inattentive to the entanglements of body hatred and the diet industry, for example. For academic analyses of these Christian weight-loss programs, see Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Christianity and Body Image* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2008); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁶ Heidi Schlumpf, "Facebook as the New Chocolate: Should You Give Up Social Media for Lent?" *National Catholic Reporter*, February 9, 2016, <http://ncronline.org/news/people/facebook-new-chocolate-should-you-give-social-media-lent>.

⁷ Dianne Bergant, "Rend Your Hearts," *America Magazine*, February 16, 2004, <http://americamagazine.org/content/the-word/rend-your-hearts>.

⁸ Kathleen M. Dugan, "Fasting for Life: The Place of Fasting in the Christian Tradition," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 3 (1995): 542.

but we should note that fasting is neither the purpose nor the cause of the disorder.⁹

In light of this, Dugan clarifies her definition of fasting: “Fasting in Christianity is only truly itself when it realizes the sacredness of the body.”¹⁰

Dugan’s commentary illuminates a requisite component of fasting that other Catholic authors also assume: a practitioner must be free of any intention to modify her body aesthetically through fasting. Sometimes, authors express this as directly and explicitly as Dugan does. Other times, authors emphasize the practitioner’s singular orientation toward God throughout the fasting practice, which implies the absence of other motives, including a desire to alter one’s body for social power or approval. Charles Murphy, for example, asserts that fasting is “focused on God and not ourselves.”¹¹

George Maloney presents a similar set of social concerns and assumptions about fasting in his book *A Return to Fasting*, asserting, “No doubt we can all see how worldly materialism, boasting a cult of the body and an artificial, sickening eroticism, has made its deadly inroads into our spiritual life.”¹² Like Dugan, Maloney delineates fasting from practices of body hatred, and in doing so, emphasizes how the intention of the practitioner distinguishes fasting from dieting. He suggests that only with pure intentions can one’s fasting lead to spiritual benefits, writing, “Fasting, to be truly Christian, must consist in a radical turning of man [*sic*] to God (*metanoia*) with a corresponding openness to love and serve his neighbor. If these two elements are lacking, fasting may be of beneficial effect on a purely humanistic level, but it will not be a true religious act.”¹³ It is one’s orientation toward God, “our efforts on the corporeal and psychological levels by way of technique, will-power, desires, etc.,” that does—or does not—open us to the work of the Spirit in fasting.¹⁴

Matthew Kelly, an Australian Catholic author whose books have appeared on bestseller lists in the United States, also contrasts Catholic fasting and dieting. The latter, he suggests, serves a consumerist culture that promises quick bodily improvements without discipline and moderation. Fasting, however, “involves turning away from evil and turning back to God. Fasting that involves no such conversion of the heart is useless.”¹⁵ This turning,

⁹ *Ibid.*, 548.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Charles Murphy, *The Spirituality of Fasting: Rediscovering a Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2010), x.

¹² George Maloney, SJ, *A Return to Fasting* (Pecos, NM: Dove Publications, 1974), 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ Matthew Kelly, *Rediscover Catholicism: A Spiritual Guide to Living with Passion and Purpose*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Beacon Press, 2011), 252.

through the guidance of the Spirit, is what makes fasting a “spiritual practice” as opposed to a merely “physical practice or another personal accomplishment,” such as dieting.¹⁶ Kelly reiterates the trend of distinguishing dieting and fasting based on the purity of one’s intentions, writing, “It is important to note how different the reasons for fasting are from the reasons for dieting. Fasting is by its very nature a statement of humility, while dieting is usually linked to ego, vanity, and pride.... Dieting is devoid of the strongest motives and reasons: repentance, self-denial, humility, self-mastery, and the spiritual power that comes from these dispositions.”¹⁷ “We do not fast to impress other people. We fast to cultivate the inner life,” he asserts.¹⁸ Mary DeTurris Poust assumes pure intentions in her presentation of fasting as well, writing, “Fasting requires an underpinning of prayer to prevent it from morphing into a diet designed to make us more appealing by worldly standards, not godly standards. Fasting is not an effort to lose weight; it is an act of humility before God.”¹⁹ She continues, “Fasting, in the Catholic sense, takes what might otherwise be a diet and gives it the direction and motivation needed to become truly life-changing and, when practiced regularly, potentially world-changing.”²⁰

For DeTurris Poust, the unique intentions of fasting facilitate a different outcome from dieting. What results from fasting, she suggests, is greater individual awareness of the needs of the world, which can in turn inspire a practitioner to help others. Other authors also emphasize how fasting’s outcomes differ from dieting. Dugan identifies a strengthened perception of the body’s sacredness as an outcome of fasting.²¹ In addition to the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22), Maloney identifies “a different level of consciousness” as an

¹⁶ Ibid., 253.

¹⁷ Ibid., 255–56.

¹⁸ Ibid., 254.

¹⁹ Mary DeTurris Poust, *Cravings: A Catholic Wrestles with Food, Self-Image, and God* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 83.

²⁰ Ibid. The definitive predication of fasting on pure intentions is not unique to these Catholic authors. Catholic teachings and scripture often support this view. For example, Pope Paul VI cites Scripture to support his claim in the first chapter of *Paenitemini* that “Penance therefore—already in the Old Testament—is a religious, personal act which has as its aim love and surrender to God: fasting for the sake of God, not for one’s own self. Such it must remain also in the various penitential rites sanctioned by law. When this is not verified, the Lord is displeased with His people: ‘Today you have not fasted in a way which will make your voice heard on high.... Rend your heart and not your garments, and return to the Lord your God.’” Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Constitution on Fast and Abstinence*, February 17, 1966, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-vi_apc_19660217_paienitemini.html.

²¹ Dugan, “Fasting for Life.”

outcome.²² The practitioner “understands experientially a new oneness with every human being, and in his [*sic*] creaturely poverty he is one with every God-created being that exists.”²³ Kelly testifies to how “authentic Christian fasting helps to release us from our attachments to the things of this world” and “help[s] us become aware of God’s presence in our lives and in the world around us.”²⁴ Likewise, “fasting should be an occasion of joy, not a cause of sadness.”²⁵ Echoing Kelly’s claim that fasting can counteract worldly influences, Murphy presents fasting as a healing remedy for the pressures of cultural body hatred. That is, even as fasting is immune to—or outside of—the influence of body hatred, the liturgical practice directly combats it.²⁶

Among the range of outcomes identified by these authors is the shared claim that a faster’s pure intentions produce spiritual growth. This is a point of contrast to dieting, which begins with desires corrupted by society’s obsession with a white, slender, youthful, and ableist ideal of physical beauty and accordingly results in stronger misguided desires; the food abstinence of dieting merely reinscribes one’s socialized body hatred. Because the authors’ views of fasting are predicated on the assumption that one does not desire improved appearance from food abstinence, fasting is a practice for those whose wills escape the pervasive socialization of body hatred. Body hatred cannot, therefore, corrupt fasting, for the presence of body hatred makes food abstinence dieting, not fasting. This guarantees the efficacy of fasting, even in a context of body hatred.

Interrogating the Assumptions of Catholic Fasting Literature

The patterns we witness across this fasting literature establish how to fast (rationally eschew one’s socialized body hatred to abstain from food for God alone), who can fast (anyone who purely wills it, abjuring the influence of body hatred), and what results from fasting (spiritual growth and not anything that serves body hatred). Common as these views may be, the differentiation between dieting and fasting that underlies this portrait of the liturgical practice relies on an anthropology and a conception of sacramental practice that are theologically and phenomenologically inadequate and also complicit in the ill effects of body hatred. This section demonstrates this in two parts,

²² Maloney, *A Return to Fasting*, 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ Kelly, *Rediscover Catholicism*, 253.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁶ Murphy, *The Spirituality of Fasting*, 52–53, 63.

first with a critique of anthropology and then with a critique of sacramental practice.

A Dualistic and Decontextualized Anthropology

The view that fasting requires pure intentions presumes a dualistic and decontextualized anthropology. Anthropological dualism contradicts the apparent intent of many authors. Knowing well that the Christian tradition has long defined itself against body dualisms like that of gnosticism, such writers explicitly position their theologies of fasting over and against the dualistic denigration of the body that they associate with Western culture. Many strive to promote the “sacredness of the body,” as I have noted. Despite this effort, anthropological dualism surfaces in their conceptions of the human will, on which their distinction between fasting and dieting hinges. The suggestion that the human will can exist apart from the influence of its social context implies an ahistorical will; the claim that a faster can—and must—freely exercise this ahistorical will in direct defiance of the pervasive influence of socialized body hatred assumes not only the will’s ultimate freedom from culture but also the will’s power over it. This is a hierarchal dualism in that it positions the power of an ahistorical will *over* historically situated, embodied practices.

This anthropological dualism is not unique to Catholic fasting literature, of course. Philosopher Susan Bordo observes that “the constant element throughout historical variation [in the West] is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom...) and as undermining the best efforts of that self.” As in Catholic fasting literature, “that which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization.”²⁷ Bordo’s work, which I will explore further as the essay proceeds, recognizes that this historical precedent has always also been gendered: male is the “active, striving, conscious subject”—the ahistorical will—and female is the “passive, vegetative, primitive matter”—the historicized body.²⁸ To the point, Bordo explains that the desires that

²⁷ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12. Though not apparent in the quoted passages from Bordo, she joins other feminists in naming how the gendering of mind/body dualism in the West was—and continues to be—refracted through intersecting structures of marginalization such as race, sexuality, and ableism. For more on this from scholars in theology and religious studies, see M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 11–59; Riggins R. Earl Jr., “Loving Our Black

allegedly weigh the body down from actualizing possibilities of transcendence “have frequently been culturally represented through the metaphor of female appetite.”²⁹

So entrenched are Westerners in this gendered mind/body dualism that even scholars who are aware and critical of this history nevertheless replicate dualistic accounts of the person in their work. Psychologist Sylvia Blood sees this among many social psychological researchers who study negative body image today, for example, and her analysis puts into focus the troubling anthropological assumptions underlying this Catholic fasting literature as well.³⁰ In psychological literature, Blood explains, the concept of “negative body image” assumes a disjunction between a person’s perception of her body and her “actual” (physical) body. A “normal” woman rationally aligns her body image with her “real” body, whereas a “sick” or “pathological” woman perceives her body as much larger or misshapen than it “actually” is. This common reasoning assumes a separation of the body from the perceiving and willing mind; it also assumes that the mind can control how the person experiences her body, regardless of the person’s historical situation and socialization. This is precisely the logic we see at work in the Catholic fasting literature previously examined.

Blood notes that as researchers have reported increasing rates of so-called “negative body image” (data she deems suspect for a variety of reasons), their dualistic framework has left them to conclude that today’s women are exceptionally and more widely irrational than before: they increasingly fail to align their mental perceptions and physical body shape. This conclusion assumes, again, the possibility of an ahistorical and entirely self-determining mind, and it also showcases another problem with dualistic accounts of women’s embodiment: this reasoning blames *individual* women for their negative experiences of embodiment. It presumes that the woman with a historically untethered mind should be capable of willing herself out of a distorted

Bodies as God’s Luminously Dark Temples: The Quest for Black Restoration,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2004), 249–69; Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33–37; Michelle Mary Lelwica, *Shameful Bodies: Religion and the Culture of Physical Improvement* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2017), 9–44; Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2011), 143–170; Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 6–15.

²⁹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 8.

³⁰ Sylvia Blood, *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women’s Body Image* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).

body image. Therefore, the woman whose body image is shaped by social body norms is ultimately at fault for her own negative experience of embodiment.

The individualism of social psychological literature runs throughout Catholic fasting literature as well. Just as “sick” women with distorted body images are told to use their will to effect change in their self-perceptions, so too Catholic authors instruct fasters to invoke the power of their will to reject any desires that result from socialized body hatred in favor of a pure, God-centered will. The presumption and high estimation of the individual will in this dualistic anthropology reduces the social condition of body hatred to a matter of individual culpability and responsibility. This point is especially clear in the writings of Catholic authors such as Murphy, who suggests that an individual’s fasting practices can remedy body hatred, implying that body hatred is caused by individual psychological neuroses and therefore resolved through individual corrective practices.

In addition to clarifying the anthropological dualism of Catholic fasting literature and its ahistorical and individualistic qualities, Blood’s work also offers perspective on the appeal of such an anthropology. Blood frames the dehistoricization of the mind and concomitant overestimation of its power over women’s embodiment as a corrective to an opposing trend in earlier psychology and feminism more broadly. Previously, researchers regularly presented women as helpless victims of oppression, which feminists decried as simplistic and even similarly oppressive.³¹ In response, feminist psychologists reasserted women’s agency in the face of sexist oppression, which informed optimistic accounts of women’s control over their negative body perception and other oppressive realities. In light of this, we can recognize one boon of the dualistic anthropology in Catholic fasting literature: it emphasizes the agentive freedom of fasters in a context fraught with forces that engender body hatred.

Yet Blood argues that the overestimation of women’s agency in this patriarchal world is an exaggerated and mistaken corrective. The merits of her critique are apparent in the disjunction between this dualistic anthropology and women’s own accounts of embodiment. If women possess ahistorical wills that enable them to free themselves of their socialized body hatred, then why do so many women struggle to escape its reach? Even feminist scholars with expertise in the social construction of women’s body hatred find themselves self-consciously struggling to break free of its grip. Looking back on years of body hatred, Harriet Brown confesses, “I knew better.... I understand

³¹ Ibid., 43–63. Bordo also traces the historical movement among these shifting views of women’s relationship to sexist oppression in *Unbearable Weight*, 15–29.

intellectually that the more freedoms and powers women achieve, the more insistent and damaging the social pressures that squeeze us (and, increasingly, men) into a certain shape, size, and attitude. But when it came to my own body, everything I *knew* evaporated and what I *felt* became overwhelming.”³² Michelle Lelwica echoes Brown’s commentary: “Even those of us who recognize both the fabricated quality of the unattainable ideal and its commercial function may nonetheless find ourselves involuntarily wishing we looked more like it.”³³ These testimonies and countless others belie the dualistic anthropology that assigns women ultimate agency over their experiences of embodiment.

So too does the preoccupation in this Catholic fasting literature with distinguishing between fasting and dieting. That fasting books and articles regularly police the boundaries of fasting and dieting evinces their common entanglement in the experiences of women. Authors would not labor to distinguish these boundaries if they were not phenomenologically indistinguishable with some frequency, and these boundaries would not blur if self-conscious women possessed the unfettered capacity to will against the contextual realities of body hatred.

Bordo’s 1993 monograph, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, offers an influential account of the social construction of women’s body hatred that further clarifies the discontinuities between the anthropological dualism of Catholic fasting literature and the complex realities of women’s embodiment.³⁴ Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, she constructs a nondualistic account of women’s embodiment in the capital-driven, mass-media-infused, contemporary Western world that mediates between anthropological extremes that paint women as helplessly oppressed, on the one hand, or as wholly self-determining, regardless of social context, on the other. Women’s experiences of body hatred result not from a weakness of the will, she posits, but rather from the limited possibilities of social subjectification that are available to women-gendered persons in the modern West. With Foucault, Bordo holds that a complex matrix of social

³² Harriet Brown, *Body of Truth: How Science, History, and Culture Drive Our Obsession with Weight—And What We Can Do About It*, first Da Capo Press ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2016), xxiii–xiv.

³³ Lelwica, *Shameful Bodies*, 37.

³⁴ Though twenty-five years have passed since the project’s initial publication, Bordo’s book remains widely cited in contemporary feminist literature, and its account of embodiment and socialized body hatred together endure as a theoretical foundation for a great deal of current scholarship on these matters. Michelle Lelwica also engages Foucault and Bordo to offer an account of women’s subjectification in *Starving for Salvation*, 34–35.

factors produces and constrains these possibilities for subjectivity. Although this social matrix limits the kinds of subjectivity that are available, it also affords the processes and practices by which one becomes a recognizable, agentive subject within this context. Bordo explains that these processes of social subjectification are not imposed forcefully and explicitly from above—as in “You must become this kind of woman, or else!”—but rather “through multiple ‘processes, of different origin and scattered location,’ regulating the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment.”³⁵

What is it about the processes of women’s social subjectification in this context that so widely facilitates experiences of body hatred? Bordo argues that throughout Western history, women’s bodies—especially their appetitive yearnings, from hunger to sexual desire—have been cast as dangerous, irrational, and unwieldy. To be a female subject, then, is to be a threat to others, a problem for society. Mediating this message are various racialized “controlling images” of womanhood, such as images of black women as the sexually aggressive “jezebel” or “hoochie,” and popular representations of Latinas as sexually alluring and threatening.³⁶ With the rise of mass media, these negative associations are conveyed more widely and relentlessly than ever. Ubiquitous advertisements depict women who appear to have mastered their unwieldy and irrational appetites for food, which often appears to win them the affection of men, the more rational and prized subjects of this context. These ads communicate that actively regulating one’s appetite, staving off food—even to the extremes of eating disorders—and *appearing* as one who controls her hunger—even if that appearance results from painful cosmetic surgeries or dangerous levels of exercise—are not only regular realities of womanhood but what the “ideal women” of this context do. “The slender, fit body [is] a symbol of ‘virile’ mastery over bodily desires that are continually exercised as threatening to overtake the self,”

³⁵ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27.

³⁶ Patricia Hill Collins introduces the concept of “controlling images” in *Black Feminist Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 76–106, where she analyzes how controlling images such as the “jezebel” and the “hoochie” support black women’s oppression. For a more recent look at images of black womanhood, see Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2013) and Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). In Gary D. Keller’s analysis of representations of Latina women in US film, he observes three stereotypical depictions of Latina women, two of which are definitively characterized by their aggressive sexuality—the “cantina girl” and the “vamp.” See Gary D. Keller, *Hispanics and United States: An Overview and Handbook* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press, 1994).

observes Bordo.³⁷ Therefore, the woman who disparages and actively regulates her appetite is a good woman—a normal woman, not a rare or pathological female subject in this context.

Note here that a socially constructed distinction between the mind and body—that is, between the controlled, immaterial will and the unwieldy, ravenous body—underpins the social subjectification of women that Bordo critiques as the source of body hatred. Women become subjects according to this dualistic framework through recognizing their ravenous desires and striving to control them. And when women cannot control their appetites according to these dualistic cultural ideals, they are set up to experience themselves as social failures. The anthropological dualism that structures the Catholic fasting literature under review is the same anthropological dualism that structures women's body hatred.

It follows from this account of social subjectification that women (and others) commonly experience their embodiment negatively and engage in practices to alter their experiences of embodiment—from food regulation and exercise to an array of self-harming practices—not because an external agent requires it but because the current social matrix produces gendered subjectivity such that self-surveillance and these bodily regulations are the way these women exercise “good” female subjectivity. Good women use their “minds” to control and restrain the unwieldy appetites of their “bodies.” Such discipline is the means by which they exercise gendered agency; neglecting such practices renders them aberrant females.³⁸

From Bordo's account of social subjectification, we garner a number of additional insights about the inadequacies of anthropological dualism in the examined Catholic fasting literature. First, Bordo's account of social subjectification illustrates the wrongfulness and the negative implications of a decontextualized and dualistic anthropology. She positions no person—or part of the person, such as the will—outside the social matrix that engenders body hatred, which means that in this setting, there is no faster outside of body hatred. There is no will exercised outside of this context of body hatred because, at present, body hatred constitutively shapes all gendered subjects. All human agency, including resistance, is constituted by and

³⁷ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 15.

³⁸ The contextual sensibility and moral valor of women's self-surveillance and body regulation should be apparent. Bordo emphasizes this point, writing: “Recognizing that normalizing cultural forms exist does not entail, as some writers have argued, the view that women are ‘cultural dopes,’ blindly submitting to oppressive regimes of beauty.... [Yet] people know the routes to success in this culture—they are advertised widely enough—and they are not ‘dopes’ to pursue them. Often, given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it.” *Ibid.*, 30.

exercised within it. This explains why women, including determined feminists, struggle momentarily to eschew body hatred's disciplining practices.

That no one possesses a pure will unaffected by body hatred does not mean that everyone experiences embodiment negatively, or even in the same way, however. It simply means that embodiment presently occurs in relation to a social matrix that is determined by and determining of negative associations with bodily desire, especially certain manifestations of bodily desire such as female appetite. In view of this, we should see all fasters as Christians of unified "body" and "mind" whose subjectivities are negotiated and performed within a context that renders suppression of the female appetite and the accompanying regulation of bodily appearance as the primary means of becoming a good female subject.

Second, by locating body hatred not primarily within the agency of the individual female subject but rather more broadly in the complex social matrix that comprises the preconditions of one's subjectivity and agency in the first place, Bordo's work undermines the suggestion of Catholic fasting literature that the individual faster is singularly responsible for her own body hatred—or for her other embodied experiences, including fasting. Although women are agentive participants in the self-surveillance and body-regulating practices that comprise body hatred, it is the broader social matrix that first conditions such practices and constrains alternative possibilities of gendered embodiment. In sum, body hatred is first and foremost a social problem, not an individual one, and although embodiment is exercised personally, it is never a matter of the individual alone.

Moreover, Bordo's analysis reveals that the social construction of the good female body is not only gendered but also refracted through the additional and intersecting social structures of race, ability, age, size, and class, among others. Michelle Lelwica speaks to this as well in her 2017 monograph, *Shameful Bodies*, where she elaborates on the socialized qualities of the female ideal. The ideal female subject "is tall and lithe, soft and hairless," which is furthermore associated with economic, age, and ethnic privilege.³⁹ In advertisements, she is:

[t]ypically depicted in affluent settings (e.g. tropical beach) or garnished with expensive clothing and other markers of affluence (e.g. sparkling jewelry). A disproportionate number of perfect bodies are blond and

³⁹ Lelwica, *Shameful Bodies*, 11. Lelwica previously expounds on the social specifics of the Western beauty ideal in *Starving for Salvation*, 45–64. See also Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introduction to Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 3–22. Barbara Andolsen also explores this in "Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks": *Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

Anglo-Saxon, representing what some have described as an implicitly white Protestant ideal. Those that have darker skin often have Caucasian-looking features (thin lips and nose).⁴⁰

Maxine Leeds Craig documents the disproportionate repercussions of this beauty ideal on African American women in her book *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?*, where she states, "In a male supremacist society in which women were valued as much for beauty as men for their accomplishments, an ugly woman was a failure.... [A]s long as dominant standards of beauty excluded brown skin and short, tightly curled hair, beauty status was unavailable to most black women."⁴¹ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, too, observes that "failure to meet society's beauty norms is ... 'visual deviance.' Visual conformity in the United States, of course, is tied to the idolatry of whiteness."⁴² This informs her conclusion that "African-American women, by choice and by circumstance, violate nearly every dimension of American gender norms."⁴³

Gilkes exposes the disadvantages of black women in the Western social matrix further when she explains the complications of contending with white beauty norms within African American communities where standards of beauty and respectability often differ:

Many African-American women know that the most respected physical image of Black women, within and outside of the community, is that of a large woman. Although it is respected, it is a culturally deviant image

⁴⁰ Lelwica, *Shameful Bodies*, 11. Lelwica describes the Western ideal image of beauty as "protestant" based on the work of R. Marie Griffith, who argues that white middle-class protestantism contributed to American views of and prescriptions for the body throughout history. See Griffith, *Born Again Bodies*. Lelwica also points to research on denigrating stereotypes of the "large, fleshy figures" associated with "poor, working-class, or ethnic immigrants—especially Jews and Catholics from eastern and southern European countries or Ireland" in the United States during the nineteenth century as another example of how Western beauty ideals have been associated with protestantism. See *Shameful Bodies*, 108–10, esp. 108, n45. More recently, Sabrina Strings traces fat phobia and its racialization to the self-abnegation of British and American protestantism in and beyond the eighteenth century in *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York, NY: New York University, 2019), 99–121.

⁴¹ Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 24. For more on how prevailing standards of beauty derogate black women, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 97–101.

⁴² Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies: The Womanist Challenge to Cultural Humiliation and Community Ambivalence," in *Womanist Theological Ethics*, eds. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 90.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

that is not necessarily loved.⁴⁴ ... If we are light and European-looking, we may find it easier to become campus queens, wives, and girlfriends, but we may have trouble being taken seriously as leaders in our church, organizations, and communities unless we are a man. Our so-called European “good looks” also mean that our behavior is excessively scrutinized for flaws in our commitment to and solidarity with “the Folk.” ... If we are dark and full-featured we are often made to feel unloved and unlovable, and if we are light and fine-featured we find ourselves asking, like Alice Walker’s Squeak/Mary Alice [*sic*], “do you really love me, or just my color?”⁴⁵

In view of this, writes Gilkes, black women live in “multiple jeopardy,” in that bodies and disciplining practices that conform to Western society’s white-racialized, slender beauty ideal often embody different, sometimes negative, meanings within the African American community.⁴⁶ As such, black women find themselves at an unresolvable disadvantage in society. The Western beauty ideal leaves those who do not embody its racial, economic, age, and shape prescriptions with deficient and ever-imperfect bodies. To the point, sociologist Sabrina Strings argues that “the phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness ... have been one way that the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies.”⁴⁷ And, although some gendered subjects have always been assigned more advantage than others in the Western social matrix, Bordo argues that these differentials have

⁴⁴ Echoing this, Leeds Craig explains, “The image of the strong black woman, though usually presented in a sympathetic light, is itself limiting. At its core is a racialized construction of gender that excludes black women from more generally accepted ideals of womanhood. See *Ain’t I A Beauty Queen?*, 7. On this point, Chanequa Walker-Barnes offers a magisterial account of the stereotype of the “StrongBlackWoman” in *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

⁴⁵ Gilkes, “The ‘Loves’ and ‘Troubles’ of African-American Women’s Bodies,” 84–85. Katie G. Cannon also speaks to black women’s experiences of “colorism” in “Womanist Perspectival Discourse and Cannon Formation,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no. 2 (1993): 39–37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85–86. Gilkes asserts that “the abuse and degradation of slavery was the first step in a devaluation or labeling process that shaped attitudes and actions toward Black women,” reminding us that the policing of black bodies, even within the African American community, is an instantiation of the white supremacist gaze. Kelly Brown Douglas’s incisive look at the link between white supremacy and homophobia of the Black Church elucidates this, too, as does Eboni Marshall Turman’s critique of constructions of black womanhood in the Black Church in *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2013). See Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*.

⁴⁷ Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*, 6.

increased exponentially as the media bombards us with an increasingly “homogenized” ideal of the slender body.⁴⁸ Although nonconforming individuals may garner social capital by participating in the disciplines of body modification that constitute ideal female subjectivity, they are nevertheless positioned to suffer more than others who have the economic resources or natal qualities that better equip them to perform gender in accord with this multifaceted slender ideal.

These last insights—that body hatred is first and foremost a social problem that results in a variant distribution of meanings and possibilities across diverse subjectivities—expose yet another problem with the presentation of body hatred that results from the dualistic anthropology of Catholic fasting literature. Because in these writings body hatred is decontextualized as a problem of the individual mind rather than as an outgrowth of subjects’ participation in their broader social matrix, the disproportionate social stigma that burdens some subjects more than others goes unnoticed. That women negotiate different agentive possibilities and constraints than men; and white women, different agentive possibilities and constraints than black and brown women; and able-bodied women, different agentive possibilities and constraints than those who are differently abled; and young women, different agentive possibilities and constraints than those who are older, and so on, goes unnoticed by these Catholic authors, despite the fact that these differentials are constitutive of body hatred in the contemporary United States. Consequently, these Catholic authors never consider how this social problem disproportionately burdens some vulnerable populations—female-gendered persons, people of color, larger people, older people, differently abled people, queer folk, impoverished and under-resourced persons, and the many who embody more than one of these realities at once.

Bordo spotlights the reality of body hatred as a complex social injustice that is gendered, racialized, classed, sizeist, and ableist. It is a social injustice that disproportionately burdens social groups already rendered exceptionally vulnerable by many other forms of social oppression. For these reasons, feminist liberation theologians such as Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid have identified body hatred as an instantiation of the patriarchal structures that feminist theologians have long identified with social sin.⁴⁹ Entangled with the sinful structures of oppression, body hatred is a social reality that compromises the flourishing of women. “In a society where many perfectly healthy women are modelling themselves on an anorexic ideal we have to

⁴⁸ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 24–25.

⁴⁹ See Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*; see also Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, eds., *Controversies in Body Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

ask if there is something in our society that worships death,” asserts Isherwood.⁵⁰ Her words recognize women’s socialization to body hatred as antithetical to the flourishing that God intends for all people. Therefore, she suggests that Christians have a duty to reject and resist the social messages and practices that perpetuate body hatred.

In view of Isherwood’s moral exhortation, it is vital to name a last, summative problem with the anthropological dualism of this Catholic fasting literature. Its presentation of the human person reinscribes the discursive matrix that engenders body hatred. As I noted earlier, the socially constructed distinction between the mind and body—that is, between the controlled, immaterial will and the unwieldy, ravenous body—underpins the subjectification of women that Bordo critiques as the source of body hatred. Dualistic attempts to control one’s appetitive desires are at the crux of body hatred, wherein women become gendered subjects by recognizing their ravenous desires and by striving to control them. This is precisely the vision of the human person represented in Catholic fasting literature. It, too, posits that the rational mind or will is separate from and ultimately controlling of the faster’s appetitive desires, though in this case Catholic authors are primarily concerned with controlling a faster’s desires for social validation and legitimacy. It is not a person’s uncontrollable hunger for food but one’s unwieldy desire to conform to the slender ideal that must be tamed in order to fast. The account of fasting forwarded in this literature is therefore not a radical departure from or alternative to body hatred, at least with regard to its vision of the human person. Indeed, like the mass media that mediates body hatred in the broader US context through dualistic portrayals of the humans who have mastered their desires, fasting literature presents an ideal faster who has rational mastery over her socialized experience of embodiment. In this way, this Catholic fasting literature is itself complicit in the discursive structures of body hatred.

A Dualistic, Decontextualized, and Sexist Construction of Sacramental Practice

Having critiqued the anthropology of Catholic fasting literature, I turn now to the suppositions about fasting that also emerge from these writings. Here, the analysis of the Catholic sacramental tradition advanced by feminist theologian Susan Ross illuminates some of the literature’s troubling assumptions about the practice of fasting. Ross’s book, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology*, helps us see that this literature reflects a sacramental dualism that, like anthropological dualism, is theologically inadequate and reflective of body hatred’s troubling discursive structures.

⁵⁰ Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus*, 20.

Examining the broader Catholic sacramental tradition, which includes but exceeds the seven sacraments, Ross identifies a “sacramental dualism” that results from a preoccupation with sacramental “validity.” According to this mindset, “There is a ‘right’ way and a ‘wrong’ way; a ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ way” to enact and participate in sacramental practice.⁵¹ The rigidity of sacramental dualism is inherently decontextual, for it establishes the theological parameters of a practice in the abstract, never accounting for how the particularities of social context might affect the workings of a given ritual. As a result of such either/or caricatures of sacramental practice throughout Christian history, the complex, contextual symbolic meanings, metaphysical effects, and moral implications of sacramental practice are often lost.

Due in part to Ross’s groundbreaking feminist critique as well as other advances in ritual studies, recent sacramental theology is increasingly attentive to and suspicious of this dualistic thinking.⁵² But there is little evidence of this shift in the examined Catholic fasting literature. Predicating fasting on the pure intentions of the faster reflects the dualistic thinking that Ross criticizes here. Because fasting’s efficacy is presumed to hinge entirely upon the practitioner’s intentions, which are presented as transparent, self-determined, and unambiguous, the validity or invalidity of fasting is always clear; its results—various forms of holiness—are also guaranteed. What results from this sacramental dualism is a decontextualized theology of fasting that erases the expressive, metaphysical, and moral ambiguity of this practice, which ultimately renders fasting complicit in the realities of social injustice that many of these Catholic authors seek to address.

A closer look at the decontextualized sacramental dualism of this Catholic fasting literature reveals the theological and ethical inadequacies that Ross associates with the sacramental dualism of the Catholic theological tradition more broadly. First, according to Ross, within a framework of sacramental dualism, “the ‘tensive’ quality of symbols, and thus sacraments, has been too often overlooked in favor of a more ‘certain’ and decidedly unambiguous quality.”⁵³ She points to debates surrounding the “real” or “symbolic” in Eucharistic theology to illustrate her point:

Controversies regarding “real presence” involved, on the one hand, stressing the physicality of the body of Christ in the Eucharist (often to vivid extremes), and, on the other, emphasizing the “figurative” quality of the

⁵¹ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 55.

⁵² For a concise account of this shift in ritual studies, see Catherine Bell’s essay, “Performance,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 205–24.

⁵³ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 55–56.

representation of Christ (often to making the presence of Christ a mere memory). Again, here, an either/or situation—either Christ was “really, physically” present, or he was “only symbolically” (and, thus, not “really”) present—resulted in a lack of a sense of the ambiguity of symbolic representation. The result was the symbols were reduced to the category of mere sign (which bears a one-to-one relationship to its signifier) and the multivalent possibilities for symbolic representation were lost. The fact that symbols *disclose as they conceal* was, and often still is, forgotten.⁵⁴

In Eucharistic theology, sacramental dualism reduces the constitutive mystery of sacramental practice and overdetermines the possible effects of divine grace in this Christian ritual. Although all theologies seek to understand the work of God in Christian life, to be sure, sacramental dualism so stringently polices the possibilities (and impossibilities) of ritual efficacy that it oversimplifies sacramental practice and collapses the “multivalent possibilities” that Christians otherwise affirm.

Ross suggests that theologians can clarify the workings of sacramental practice without eliding what she calls “sacramental ambiguity,” which includes a “metaphysical ambiguity” that recognizes these multivalent possibilities of grace between the “order” and “chaos” of the world in general and within the local context of ritual practice, in particular. The “continually changing character of the world de-absolutizes any kind of human expression as inadequate to the reality it attempts to describe,” and because of this, theologians must retain an openness to the unstable, evolving, and potentially opaque dimensions of sacramental practice, Ross explains.⁵⁵ Although Catholic sacramental theology has tended to rely on theories of order that take on an “‘objectivity,’ which is then used to establish normative judgments,” she suggests that “such an assumption of fixity, of hierarchy, of clear and distinct order, may, in fact, be quite different than the kind of ‘order’ that *does* exist, and is more changeable and in flux than most human conceptions of order may realize.”⁵⁶

The denial of metaphysical ambiguity and the “objectification” of false and rigid notions of order facilitate the either/or framework I have identified in Catholic fasting literature. These Catholic authors assume the existence of an absolute formula for fasting that, if observed, guarantees that grace will bring to fruition a set of particular spiritual outcomes: If one brings pure intentions to fasting, then one channels God’s grace for spiritual improvement. Yet Ross’s analysis of metaphysical ambiguity reveals how this rigid

⁵⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70.

presentation of order preemptively denies the possibility of the work of God's grace in the lives of women who fast while also negotiating socialized body hatred. This unambiguity limits the possibilities of grace at work in these women's lives. Likewise, it also precludes the possibility that a faster with self-consciously pure intentions could experience fasting adversely, perhaps because her intentions are unstable, her unconscious motives unknown, or other circumstances in her life inhibit it.

What enables this troubling erasure of metaphysical ambiguity is in part sacramental dualism's disregard for the wider social context in which liturgical practices take place. This Catholic fasting literature has decontextualized the ritual, perpetuating the sacramental dualism that has long shaped sacramental theology. "Symbols emerge from particular social and historical circumstances that inform their meaning, and apart from which they become museum artifacts," explains Ross.⁵⁷ The unambiguous assertion that a practice can assuredly engender a singular outcome, that we can determine its validity or invalidity with absolute certainty, does not account for the variegated social and historical circumstances that shape symbolic practices such as fasting.

More concretely, the sacramental dualism of this fasting literature assumes a decontextualized practitioner whose intentions are free from socialized body hatred, which overlooks the multifaceted symbolic meanings of the female body that Christians inevitably bring to fasting in this social context. Many Catholic authors describe the fasting body as "sacred," a meaning they attribute to Christian anthropology. They assume that when a faster recognizes the body's inherent goodness, she can reject society's wrongful denigration of the body. Yet Christianity itself assigns multiple meanings to the body, and more to the point here, it is never the exclusive context of fasting and thus never the singular source of the body's meaning in this ritual. These Catholic authors dismiss the female body's other contextual meanings—namely, that the Western female body symbolizes uncontrollable, excessive, and dangerous drives, not the least of which is a drive to eat. Were these Catholic authors more attentive to the social contextualization and multiple symbolic meanings of the female body, especially the hungry female body, they would likely have to reckon with fasting's metaphysical ambiguity. Likewise, the black body or disabled body—or the black, disabled, female body—each bear contextual symbolic meanings that potentially complicate fasting practices. Yet as it stands, sacramental dualism disregards these contextual variants as irrelevant to the meaning and efficacy of fasting. Ross would identify this as an erasure of "expressive ambiguity," a

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

second, unacceptable consequence of sacramental dualism throughout the Catholic tradition.⁵⁸

This brings us to yet another troubling consequence of sacramental dualism. Ross demonstrates that sacramental dualism disregards social context, not only to the detriment of symbolic multivalence and metaphysical ambiguity, but also to the neglect of the moral implications of a sacramental practice. What results is an inherent disregard for the potentially mixed-moral, or even amoral, effects of a practice when it is exercised within a particular sociohistorical context. Ross illustrates this problem through her analysis of the doctrine of *ex opere operato*, which “is meant to convey the intrinsic sacrality and effectiveness of the sacraments themselves: that they are not dependent upon the piety of the minister, nor necessarily on the conscious awareness of the recipient.”⁵⁹ Ross recognizes this doctrine as a crucial historical and theological development, but her attention to social context informs her concern for how the rite’s intrinsic efficacy might facilitate “a casual approach to sin,” among other things.⁶⁰

Unbinding the efficacy of sacramental practice from human agency rightly affirms the primacy of God’s will. That sacramental practice is not contingent upon the sinlessness of Christians is also sensible because no one is without sin. Yet a sacramental dualism that shields practice from social context so much so that sin and injustice, including sexism, are deemed entirely irrelevant to conceptions of sacramental practice goes against the long-standing principle that Christian liturgy and beliefs, including Christian moral beliefs, are intricately bound (*lex orandi, lex credendi*), and it certainly contradicts the postconciliar theological movement that posits the interconnectedness of Christian liturgical practice and Christian ethical action in the world. In this way, sacramental dualism facilitates an “ethical gap between worship and daily life” that is predicated on the traditional view that “sacraments belong properly to church life, to the realm of ritual and the sacred, whereas ethics is concerned with the concrete appreciation of religious faith to everyday life.”⁶¹ In doing so, sacramental dualism erases the moral ambiguity that emerges from contextually attentive reflection on sacramental practice, as we see in this Catholic fasting literature.

Catholic authors have defined fasting in such a way that it is, by definition, shielded from the oppressive reality of body hatred that constitutes women’s embodiment in the present US context. The separation of liturgical practices

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 75–83.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

from everyday life—especially the realities of injustice that constitute life—is a moral concern because it preemptively dismisses the relevance of sexist oppression in favor of decontextualized beliefs about and practices of fasting. Instead of taking up the problem of body hatred as an issue of social injustice with which Catholics ought to concern themselves, Catholic authors generally acknowledge this reality only for the sake of asserting its irrelevance to this liturgical practice. In doing so, these authors preemptively bracket the question of whether Catholic theologies and practices of fasting might actually be complicit in the perpetuation of body hatred. And, as demonstrated previously, insofar as Catholic theologies of fasting predicate a dualistic anthropology, one composed of an ahistorical and self-determining mind that is expected to control the unwieldy desires of the body, these theologies of fasting *do* perpetuate the discursive structures that engender the very body hatred that many Catholic authors purport to reject. Yet the sacramental dualism that shapes this Catholic fasting literature does not necessitate that Catholics attend to the social complexities of body hatred in order to fast effectively in this context. As a result of the erasure of the multifaceted symbolic and moral ambiguities of fasting practice in a context of body hatred, Catholic fasting literature enables body hatred to continue uninterrogated. The inattention of this literature to the realities of women in a social context of body hatred render it, once again, complicit in body hatred.

Changing Catholic Fasting Discourse for a Context of Body Hatred

Having analyzed a representative sampling of Catholic fasting literature, we now see its disturbing assumptions about the human person and this sacramental practice. At the center of these writings is the presumption of an ahistorical and self-determining will that has the capacity to control all bodily desires and practices, regardless of one's social context. Not only is this dualism theologically troubling and phenomenologically misrepresentative, but Blood and Bordo have helped us see that it also perpetuates the socialized body hatred that these Catholic authors attempt to critique. In the process, it wrongly reduces body hatred to a problem of the individual and diverts Catholics from the disproportionate burdens of body hatred across embodied differences of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, and size, among others. The work of Susan Ross has helped us recognize the sacramental dualism that structures the portrait of fasting that emerges from this literature as well. As with other instantiations of sacramental dualism throughout the Christian tradition, this fasting literature facilitates the erasure of the practice's metaphysical, expressive, and moral ambiguity.

Once again, this represents not only a theological shortcoming but also a feminist concern, for it ignores and thus perpetuates the reality of body hatred that constitutes women's social subjectification.

This analysis demonstrates for a particular context the longstanding feminist insight that theological discourse matters; it has real consequences for embodiment. Like the images and advertising copy that mediate a set of gendered norms by which persons actualize subjectivity in this context, this Catholic fasting literature perpetuates norms and possibilities that contribute to the constraints and possibilities of embodiment. For this reason, it is a matter of great concern that its principles of embodiment and embodied practice are often no different from the troubling norms of the broader social context.

Faced with the complicity of Catholic fasting literature in the discursive structures of body hatred, what are concerned Catholics to do? How should Catholics speak of fasting? Striving for a more liberative fasting discourse not only carries forth the good intentions of the authors who I critique here—who genuinely seek a life-giving discourse about fasting—but it also honors the enduring relevance of fasting among US Catholics. A 2016 survey by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate found that 62 percent of US Catholics still abstain from meat on Fridays during Lent.⁶² This is a far higher percentage than the number of Catholics who attend weekly Mass (22 percent) or report visiting a church “a few times a year or less often” (57 percent). Thirty-six percent of Catholics also report “giving up something for Lent,” which often entails other forms of food abstinence. Although these numbers evince relatively low participation in Catholic liturgical practices overall, they show that liturgical fasting endures as a comparatively popular practice among US Catholics. Consequently, Catholic theological and pastoral reflection on fasting remains relevant; whether the discourse about fasting that is offered to fasters reinscribes body hatred or contributes to liberation rests at least in part on how Catholics will represent this practice in their theological and pastoral discourse moving forward.

Bordo and Ross already offer important insights for developing an account of fasting that reflects a nondualistic, socially contextualized anthropology and a nondualistic, ambiguous account of sacramental practice. To conclude this essay, I summarize their rich theoretical and theological insights in practical terms. I do so with revised accounts of how to fast, who can fast, and what results from Catholic fasting in this context of body hatred.⁶³

⁶² “Sacraments Today Updated,” *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, August 16, 2016, <http://nineteensixty-four.blogspot.com/2016/08/sacraments-today-updated.html>.

⁶³ I focus on revising Catholic speech about fasting for two reasons. First, I have illustrated the effects of discourse on embodiment throughout the essay, which I take to be sufficient

How to Fast

Throughout the examined fasting literature, accounts of how to fast emphasize its distinction from other nonreligious disciplines of food abstinence. Whereas Catholic fasting literature offers a portrait of the self-determining faster who willfully rejects conscious and unconscious social mores and their accompanying practices to fast with a singular regard for God, which results exclusively in increased holiness, the analyses of Bordo and Ross engender quite another portrait. In this analysis, a faster abstains from food in a context where the exercise of appetite and its restraint are inescapably laden with meaning, often negative meanings; depending on the social markings of the faster's embodiment, one's yearnings may be more stigmatized than others. Consequently, abstinence from food is never exercised with total isolation from these other social meanings. Fasting is an ambiguous practice, and one that has variant ambiguities as it is practiced across the diverse experiences of embodiment that emerge in this context. To the extent that fasting is a holy practice—a practice that continues to be a spiritually edifying mediation of God's grace—it is in and through and amid experiences of embodiment shaped and constrained by body hatred, not apart from them.

It follows that what sets the food abstinence of fasting apart from dieting cannot be the purity of the conscious intentions one brings to food abstinence. Examining body hatred through a feminist lens has revealed that ahistorical, pure intentions are a dualistic myth, and one that perpetuates body hatred. What sets fasting apart cannot be its *separation from a context* of body hatred, but rather fasting's *additional contextualization* within a religious community. To put it in Ross's terms, it is the additional symbolic meanings and metaphysical dimensions of this Catholic practice that distinguish it from other food abstinence. Fasting has more complex expressive ambiguity than dieting because the practice participates in religious *and* social symbolic matrixes. Likewise, fasting has a distinct metaphysical ambiguity because it takes place within the Catholic community, which is a unique (though, of course, not exclusive) mediating site of God's grace. Put differently, a feminist theological analysis helps Catholics see that fasting is not defined by its distinctive *decontextualization* from body hatred but rather

groundwork for the discursive intervention I propose here. Second, other significant theological projects have prescribed embodied practices as their remedy to Christianity's complicity in body hatred. See Gilkes, "The 'Loves' and 'Troubles' of African-American Women's Bodies"; Isherwood, *Fat Jesus*; Lelwica, *Shameful Bodies*; Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation*; and Michelle Mary Lelwica, *The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers behind Women's Obsession with Food and Weight* (Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books, 2010). These practices are compelling interventions, and I understand my discursive recommendations to complement theirs.

the multiple and intersecting contexts in which this practice of food abstinence occurs. Therefore, rather than saying fasting occurs when one abstains from food exclusively for the sake of God and the sacredness of the body, Catholics can say that the food abstinence of fasting differs from dieting because it is *never only* about individually regulating the body *but always also* about a collective striving toward holiness.

Who Can Fast

A new account of who can fast results from this delineation of fasting. No longer is fasting reserved for those who have allegedly buffered themselves from the influence of social context. All who abstain from food in communion with their fellow Catholics are fasting, including all who abstain from food while also negotiating the variegated complexities of body hatred.

Recognizing the diversity of who can fast clarifies further the symbolic ambiguity of fasting, for the common religious context of Catholic fasting does not negate or override the diverse social meanings that each faster navigates as a socially embodied being whose appetites and abstinence are always already gendered, racialized, and structured by ableism, classism, and sizeism, among other realities. The common Catholic context of the fasting subject does not negate the expressive ambiguity that shapes all fasters within their common Catholic context.

Furthermore, the common Catholic context of fasting itself assigns differing meanings to persons and their appetites. Christian historians and feminist theologians have thoroughly demonstrated that female desires have long been interpreted and policed differently from those of men within Catholicism.⁶⁴ The same is true of many other (and overlapping)

⁶⁴ In Christian history, see Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, NY: Urzone, 1991); Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1994). In feminist theology, see Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985); Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007), 17–56, 109–73; Doris M. Kieser, *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 57–75; Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 93–115, 159–92; Susan A. Ross, “Extravagant Affections: Women’s Sexuality and Theological Anthropology,” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff, reprint

marginalized groups. As such, abstaining females navigate a distinct set of meanings from their male counterparts, even within the Catholic context alone. It follows that the expressive ambiguity of the fasting body is not only a consequence of the multivariance of the body in Western society, but also of the multivalence of anthropology within Catholicism itself. Therefore, to say that all Catholics can fast does not mean that we should speak of them as experiencing the food abstinence of fasting in the same way. What this requires Catholics to adopt is a discourse about fasting that embraces its diversity. Whereas the current fasting literature restricts fasting to the tidy portrait of a pure-intentioned few, theological and pastoral discourse about fasting should acknowledge the inevitable diversity of fasting experiences that accompany the diversity of Catholic people.

More transparent discourse about the socially constructed differences among the genders and their potential effects on experiences of fasting would witness to this multivariance and help to obviate the pitfalls of the dualistic anthropology that bolsters the current discourse. This necessitates that we also continue the resolute work of feminist and queer theologians who have critiqued the limitations of Catholicism's gender binary and reimagined theological anthropology accordingly.⁶⁵ Our anthropological proposals must attend to the refraction of gender through other social realities such as race, class, and sexuality. Only when Catholics shift their theologies of embodiment *and* embodied practice beyond dualism and decontextualization will each of these discourses contribute to the fullest extent to the possibilities of embodied resistance within this context of body hatred.

That all Catholics can fast does not mean that all Catholics *should*, however. Just as canonical dispensations currently dissolve some from

(Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1995), 105–121; Susan A. Ross, *Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 94–107.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Nancy Dallavalle, "Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology," *Horizons* 25 (1998): 23–42; Craig A. Ford Jr., "Transgender Bodies, Catholic Schools, and a Queer Natural Law Theology of Exploration," *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 1 (2018): 70–98; Katie M. Grimes, "Theology of Whose Body: Sexual Complementarity, Intersex Conditions, and La Virgen de Guadalupe," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016): 75–93; Daniel P. Horan, "Beyond Essentialism and Complementarity: Toward a Theological Anthropology Rooted in *Haecceitas*," *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 94–117; Brianne Jacobs, "An Alternative to Gender Complementarity: The Body as Existential Category in the Catholic Tradition," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (2019): 328–45; Ann Elizabeth O'Hara, "The Struggle to Name Women's Experience: Assessment and Implications for Theological Construction," *Horizons* 20 (1993): 215–33; Donna Teevan, "Challenges to the Role of Theological Anthropology in Feminist Theologies," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003): 582–97.

prescribed fasting because of the danger it would pose to their health, so too some Catholics may need to refrain from fasting because food abstinence will endanger their physical livelihood.⁶⁶ Included among them would be anorexic persons, whose low body weight compromises their physical well-being. Note, however, that refraining from fasting because it compromises one's physical health importantly differs from what emerges from the prevailing Catholic fasting literature. A passage from Kate Wicker's *Weightless: Making Peace with Your Body* helps to illustrate this nuance. Wicker advises readers to change their fasting practices in accordance with their experiences of body hatred, writing, "Fasting is a good regimen for some people, though it is dangerous territory for me. In my eating disorder days, I used lenten [*sic*] fasting as subterfuge for my unhealthy eating habits. There was nothing pious about it; rather, it was a part of my sickness."⁶⁷ Although Wicker's recommendation that sick individuals withhold from fasting is correct, she provides an inadequate justification. Wicker advises some readers to refrain from fasting because their eating disorders would render fasting an impious practice. In other words, their body hatred would necessarily render the practice religiously ineffective. Such reasoning reinscribes sacramental dualism. When the church's canons permit dispensation from fasting, they do so not because such fasting would necessarily be impious or ineffective but because the risk to the faster's health is unnecessary. That is precisely the reasoning I endorse here.

What Results from Fasting

In view of the feminist account of body hatred put forward in this essay, one might conclude that every effort to control the female appetite, including fasting, inescapably reinscribes the contextual workings of body

⁶⁶ The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* currently grants universal dispensation from fasting to the young and the elderly, and it also grants local episcopal conferences "to determine more precisely the observance of fast and abstinence as well as substitute other forms of penance." See *The Code of Canon Law* (1983), cc. 1249–1253. http://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-uris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib4-cann1244-1253_en.html#TITLE_II. Within the United States, the bishops currently grant additional dispensations, explaining, "Those that are excused from fast and abstinence outside the age limits include the physically or mentally ill including individuals suffering from chronic illnesses such as diabetes. Also excluded are pregnant or nursing women. In all cases, common sense should prevail, and ill persons should not further jeopardize their health by fasting. See "Questions and Answers about Lent and Lenten Practices," *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*. Accessed 12 Oct. 2018. <http://uscbb.org/prayer-and-worship/liturgical-year/lent/questions-and-answers-about-lent.cfm>

⁶⁷ Kate Wicker, *Weightless: Making Peace with Your Body* (Cincinnati, OH: Servant Books, 2011), 20.

hatred and therefore represents an instantiation of sexist oppression. This might lead one to conclude that what results from fasting is simply more oppression, more body hatred. But in fact, Bordo's feminist portrait of embodiment offers a much more complicated portrayal of what potentially results from Catholic fasting. Shifting Catholic discourse to represent this ambiguity is a practical step beyond sacramental dualism and toward more liberating speech about fasting.

Recall that Bordo, with Foucault, rejects an account of sovereign power wherein women, as agentless victims to the external forces of body hatred, are forced to despise their bodies and repeat the exercises of body regulation that we associate with this. Rather, women and other persons participate in body hatred not as helpless victims but as active agents, though agents whose embodied lives are shaped and constrained by the limited avenues of subjectification available to them in this context. This view of power and social subjectification led Foucault to emphasize later in his career "that power relations are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new opportunity for transformation. Where there is power, he came to see, there is also resistance," explains Bordo.⁶⁸ Therefore, even as the present social matrix constrains the possibilities of social subjectification, it is also the means by which some women assert their agency and exercise it in socially legitimate and "empowering" ways.⁶⁹ With regard to fasting in a context of body hatred, this view of power and subjectivity necessitates that we recognize not only how food abstinence can reinscribe sexist oppression—which it might—but also how some women might wield disciplinary practices for new and creative means, even within a social matrix of body hatred. By abstaining from food in a religious context that associates it at least in part with the pursuit of a more intimate relationship with an unconditionally loving and transcendent God, a faster *may* subvert the social norms that associate food abstinence with the pursuit of

⁶⁸ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 27.

⁶⁹ Some feminist scholars argue that Foucault's conception of power is insufficiently attentive to the possibilities of resistance and subversive agency. As such, they might question Bordo's more optimistic account of the possibility of resistance within Foucauldian power. Yet even many of these critics build upon Foucault's work to develop this dimension of his theory, not unlike Bordo. This lends to the creditability of Bordo's proposal here, I think. See for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990); Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999); Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in *The Politics of Women's Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, Second Edition, ed. Rose Weitz (New York, NY: Oxford, 2003), 25–45.

male approval or with the problem of the body, even as the faster also *may also* reinscribe these social norms.⁷⁰ Why? Because fasting does resist the absolute reduction of the body to a means for external social affirmation. As such, not only sexist oppression but also subversion and empowerment are possible results of Catholic fasting. Indeed, they can simultaneously result from the very same exercise of fasting.

In fact, Ross's treatment of metaphysical ambiguity gives us reason to speak with hope about the subversive potentiality of fasting practices. A theology of fasting predicated on metaphysical ambiguity begins with a recognition of the possibility that fasting can be a graced and socially subversive practice in the lives of women whose socialized body hatred confuses the intentions they bring to fasting or the results they garner from it. Metaphysical ambiguity requires Catholics to consider God's work in a setting where fasting and body hatred inextricably intertwine. As such, increased holiness and just resistance are potential results of fasting in a context of body hatred; they are not its exclusive or guaranteed results, however.

Recognizing the subversive possibilities of fasting, though, does not shield Christians from the struggle against the unjust dynamics of body hatred that burden some people more than others. Ross's commentary on the moral ambiguity of sacramental practice shines a light on the social complexities that shape the contexts where fasting takes place and reminds Catholics that such injustices do affect and often impinge upon the work of grace in the world. Therefore, a clear-eyed account of how body hatred constrains the possible results of fasting should also compel Christians to social justice actions that resist the dynamics of body hatred beyond the sanctuary. Dismantling the multiple and intersecting structures that stigmatize nonconforming bodies—including sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, heteronormativity, and capitalism—is vital to curbing the unjust body hatred in our midst. Until Catholics shift their discourse about fasting to reflect these realities of moral ambiguity, the entanglement of fasting with this reality of injustice as well as its effects on fasting's outcomes will remain overlooked or oversimplified.

⁷⁰ Some of the highly influential feminist *historical* analyses of women's fasting (e.g., R. Bell, Walker Bynum) acknowledge that fasting has not merely been a vehicle of oppression in Christian women's lives but also an empowering or subversive practice at times. And yet, this complex portrait of women's agency, sexist oppression, and religious practice are not evident in the Catholic fasting literature examined in this essay. Bordo invites us to see that the contemporary relationship of fasting and body hatred is not so different than it once was, and in turn, contemporary theological assessments of fasting ought to consider the enduring pertinence of these historical studies. The work of Michelle LeLwica, beginning with *Starving for Salvation* on through *Shameful Bodies*, also illustrates this historical continuity well.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that if representations of embodiment do in fact shape possibilities for lived experiences of embodiment as Bordo and so many other feminists and feminist theologians have shown, then representations of fasting in Catholic fasting literature shape the lived possibilities of this embodied practice. Accordingly, Catholics ought to move beyond theologies of fasting that bolster the anthropological and sacramental dualisms that serve the discursive structures of body hatred. These are theologically inadequate and also complicit in the perpetuation of body hatred in the US context. Yet because of the potent interconnection of discourse and embodiment, changing the way Catholics think and talk about fasting in academic theology and in church communities has the potential to enrich the subversive symbolic associations that are uniquely available to the faster in her religious context. It can inform the way Catholics experience embodiment, in general, and thus fasting in particular. Better theologies of fasting may help to open fasters to greater participation in the transformative grace of God at work in their communities, constituted as they are by body hatred; that grace may aid Catholics in resisting body hatred in new and creative ways, within and beyond practices of food abstinence. Indeed, changing the way Catholics theologize fasting may also awaken them to the realities of body hatred as a social injustice, which may in turn spur Catholic communities to participate in social justice movements to address the ill effects of this reality on so many. In a context of body hatred, participation in such movements may birth new experiences of embodiment and thus new possibilities of fasting too.