

Vatican censures nun's book on sexual ethics

by [Alessandro Speciale](#) in the [June 27, 2012](#) issue

A long-simmering conflict between the Vatican and American nuns has erupted again with the Vatican's doctrinal office issuing a scathing critique of a popular book on sexual ethics by Sister Margaret A. Farley, one of the first Catholics to teach at Yale Divinity School.

After two years of study, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published on June 4 a "notification" on Farley's *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, saying it contradicts Catholic doctrine on key issues such as gay marriage, homosexuality and divorce.

Farley, who retired from YDS in 2007 as a professor emerita, had maintained that her book was not intended to state official Catholic teaching but rather to give readers her personal ideas that might help them "think through their questions about human sexuality." Past president of both the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society, Farley won the prestigious Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion in 2008 for *Just Love*.

Coming just days after U.S. nuns rejected the Vatican's reasoning for a wholesale makeover of female religious orders and a year after American bishops sanctioned another nun theologian, the condemnation of Farley is the latest example of what critics see as a top-down attempt to muzzle women's voices and an obsession with sexual ethics.

Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain—appointed by the Vatican to oversee the reform of the largest umbrella organization of Catholic sisters in the U.S.—had extended what appeared to be an olive branch to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious "in an atmosphere of openness, honesty, integrity and fidelity to the church's faith." But his conciliatory tone was quickly overshadowed by the new condemnation issued by Rome of yet another American nun.

The notification says Farley's book "ignores" or "contradicts" Catholic teaching, presenting it as "one opinion among others," and warns that it should not be "used as a valid expression of Catholic teaching, either in counseling and formation, or in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue."

The notification was approved by Pope Benedict XVI on March 16. The Vatican's doctrinal office singled out masturbation, homosexuality and marriage as specific areas of concern in *Just Love*.

For example, Farley writes that "masturbation . . . usually does not raise any moral questions at all," and that homosexual acts "can be justified" following the same ethics as heterosexual ones. The Vatican statement retorts that "masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action" and that homosexual acts are "intrinsically disordered" and "contrary to natural law."

Farley also voices doubts over the "indissolubility" of marriage and argues that laws recognizing gay marriage can play an important part in reversing widespread "hatred . . . and stigmatization of gays and lesbians," a position that is "opposed to the teaching of the magisterium," according to the Vatican.

Farley, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, taught at Yale from 1971 to 2007. In a statement, Farley stressed that her book's intent was to present a modern "framework for sexual ethics" drawing on the input of current experience and different religious traditions. She says she is convinced that her positions "reflect a deep coherence with the central aims and insights" of Christian theology and tradition and contends that the Vatican ignored the reasons and context that led to her conclusions.

Other Catholic theologians seem to agree. M. Shawn Copeland, a theology professor at Boston College, called the Vatican notification "deeply disappointing and most disturbing," saying that Farley's research is "notable" for its "distinguishing of practical and speculative questions from magisterial or official teaching."

Paul Lakeland, director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, called Farley a "careful and caring" theologian, adding that "it is the vocation of Catholic theologians and ethicists to work on the boundaries" of current doctrine.

The notification on Farley's book comes in the wake of last year's controversial condemnation of feminist theologian Sister Elizabeth Johnson by the U.S. Conference

of Catholic Bishops and seems to be part of an effort to rein in theologians who stray too far from the path of Catholic orthodoxy.

In March, a Vatican panel stated that while “investigation and questioning” by theologians are “justified and even necessary,” the final word on the “authentic interpretation” of the Catholic faith ultimately belongs to bishops. —RNS