

Catholic Bloggers: The Role of Blogs in Constructing Catholic Feminism, Identity and Community Among Women

By Kristen Akey¹
Barnard College, Columbia University

In an age where nearly every American is online, the internet provides individuals with an autonomy unlike that offline. The ability for individuals to express their own opinions on social media and create blogs based on their own ideas and interests with the internet counters that of the hierarchical authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This sense of autonomy the internet gives individuals applies particularly to Catholic women, who are often perceived as under the institutional patriarchy of the Church. In this paper, I explore how Catholic women today understand Catholic feminism, reconceive their identities as Catholic women, and engage in an online community through blogging.

First, I present an overview of digital religion and address why blogs,² specifically the three I will be analyzing—The Catholic Woman, FemCatholic, and Blessed Is She—act as an important medium for Catholic women today. Next, I contextualize Catholic feminism by providing a brief synopsis of the movement’s history. I then examine specific posts from each of the three blogs in order to understand how Catholic women make sense of feminism and their role in the Church. Despite the distinct differences among the three blogs, I also analyze how all three of these websites facilitate an online community for these women. The internet plays a large part in most people’s lives today, and thus, it is both interesting and

¹ Kristen Akey, Barnard College class of 2020, is a double major in Religion and Political Science. She is interested in studying the intersections of religion and media, popular culture, and politics.

² I use Angela Meyer’s definition of a blog, which is a channel to share personal stories, news, links, pictures and can take form in a multitude of genres, such a personal journal. See Angela Meyer, “Embracing the Medium: What Makes a Successful Cultural Blog?” *Literary Minded*, June 12, 2009, <https://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/>.

necessary to understand the role of internet blogs in constructing Catholic women's own narratives and ideas of Catholic womanhood and feminism.

The presence of Catholic women online and their engagement with blogs—or websites—is not separate from that of their offline religious experiences.³ Rather, these online spaces for religious groups are part of what Heidi Campbell calls “digital religion.” Digital religion is the integration of online and offline religious spheres in technological and cultural spaces; it can be thought of as “a bride that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa.”⁴ When Catholic women—or any religious group more broadly—use the internet, their online experience is informed by their offline practices. But by engaging online, these online experiences inversely reshape their offline perspectives and experiences. An individual's online experience is therefore not independent from their offline practices, but an extension of them. Digital religion is not an isolated entity or concept, instead, it is deeply connected to one's everyday lived experiences and practices.

The internet in itself is distinct in the experiences it provides individuals online compared to those of individuals' offline practices. Online, authority shifts from being solely in the hands of traditional authority structures—such as the structural hierarchy of the Catholic Church—to that of individual laypeople.⁵ Anyone, regardless of their position within the Catholic Church, has the ability to create a social media account or website, post articles, add comments and share their life in pictures. Individuals have the power to choose how they spend their time online, and how, where, and with whom

³ I use blog and website interchangeably due to the general consensus that blogs are a type of website. Cf. Mary Garden, “Defining Blog: A Fool's Errand or a Necessary Undertaking,” *Journalism* 13, no.4 (September 2011): 487.

⁴ Heidi A. Campbell, “Introduction. The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion” in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3-4.

⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” *Journal of American Academy of Religion* 80, no.1 (March 2012): 74.

they engage. The Catholic Church, which I will call the Church or institutional church,⁶ maintains a strict hierarchical authority offline; online however, this structural authority somewhat dissipates due to the individual authority the internet provides people.

Knowledge online becomes decentralized: the institutional church is no longer the only authoritative source of knowledge. Forum moderators, webmasters, and bloggers acclaim power online through recognition and popularity of their websites or posts and consequently by being framed as sources of religious knowledge.⁷ Laypeople have the ability to vocalize their thoughts on the Church's teachings and theology—whether that be supporting or disagreeing with these teachings—and potentially gain the approval and respect of others online. The internet becomes a prime place for individuals—such as Catholic women—without strong voices in the hierarchical structure to gain an authority they do not have offline. The Catholic Church has been and continues to be patriarchal, and “the people and practices that embody the essence of Catholicism”—or what Henold calls “the church”—do not acknowledge its perpetuation of sexism against women.⁸ As individuals, Catholic women are thus able to gain authority through the internet to affirm Catholic teachings, explore other interpretations and find or create spaces specifically for Catholic women.

Catholic blogs—such as FemCatholic, The Catholic Woman, and Blessed Is She—are designed specifically for Catholic women, and place greater authority directly in the hands of these women. FemCatholic describes itself as both a place “Where Feminism + Catholicism meet” and “a campaign for

⁶ I use Mary Henold's definition of institutional church which is “the global or national structure of the Roman Catholic Church, including the governing hierarchy.” See: Mary Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 7.

⁷ Campbell, “Religion Online and Offline,” 74.

⁸ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 2-7.

the promotion of women.”⁹ The website’s homepage features the most recent published blog post, and as the website visitors scroll down, they see the entries immediately preceding it. Each entry includes the tags—or categories for which the post belongs in such as motherhood, vocation, feminism, lessons in faith, among forty others—the title of the post, and a professional stock picture, usually of women. Published posts often include in-text links to previous blog posts that relate to or may answer a specific line in the entry. At the end of the full-length article, readers learn about the author in a short, italicized paragraph. They also receive the titles and links to other similar posts and the ability to reply to the blog post with a comment. All the posts published on the website are entries that are submitted by Catholic women from all over the county. Catholic women can submit posts that are either Catholic feminist commentary on women’s issues, reflections on Catholic teachings, or a “Dear Edith” question and answer style columns with the intention to “Educate, Encourage, or Empower” other women.¹⁰

Similar but distinct from FemCatholic is The Catholic Woman, a platform where Catholic women over nineteen years old can submit short, hand-written letters—no more than fifteen-hundred words—on a “transformative moment” in their lives.¹¹ The letters accepted for the website are typed out into Roman text, titled and posted as individual entries. So, while FemCatholic is strictly online in that women digitally type and submit their post to the blog moderators, The Catholic Woman requires submissions to be in the form of a physical, hand-written letter. The original letters themselves are then photographed as images and uploaded to go along with the post published to the website. As one reads an entry, quotes selected as

⁹ “Our Mission,” Mission Statement, FemCatholic, <http://www.femcatholic.com/about/our-mission/>.

¹⁰ “Submissions,” Blog Submissions, FemCatholic, <http://www.femcatholic.com/about/submissions/>.

¹¹ “Letter to Women,” Letter Submissions, The Catholic Woman, <https://thecatholicwoman.co/write-a-letter-to-women/>.

being memorable are enlarged again for emphasis and also act as paragraph breaks.

The author of the letter, her picture, and a biographical paragraph about her is included at the bottom of the letter. The biographical paragraph provides readers with background information on the author such as her age, where she is from, if she is a mother, her profession, and what her passions and hobbies are. The information on the author is much more detailed and informative on *The Catholic Woman* compared to the few sentences provided in *FemCatholic* posts. The emphasis on spotlighting the author of *The Catholic Woman* letter acts to remind readers that these are everyday Catholic women. Their experiences and moments of struggle are ones that the blog readers can learn from and relate to precisely because these are ordinary women. As readers scroll down further, they are introduced to four new letters that are recommended based off of the one they are currently reading. After being presented with the ability to sign-up for *The Catholic Woman* newsletter—which notifies recipients about new letters—there is a comment box where guests or those with an account can add replies to the letter.

FemCatholic and *The Catholic Woman*, as blogs, give Catholic women an authority they do not normally have to craft and express their own narratives through blogging. Elizabeth Bucar examines the role of print media in the lives of U.S Catholic women. She states “the women’s press creates new public spaces for women’s political engagement through the writings. It also thereby shifts the production of ethical knowledge from exclusively religious institutions to a wider lay community.”¹² The internet and these two blog websites, similar to the effect of press, allow women to engage in a space separate from the institutional church. These blog posts

¹² Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi’i Women* (New York: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 153.

from women and their engagement with these websites transfer an offline authority that is typically only in the hands of the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church into the hands of Catholic women. FemCatholic and The Catholic Woman allow for women to produce what Bucar calls “ethical knowledge,” or a legitimate source of religious knowledge, by using these blog sites as their medium of sharing. The digital space of the internet therefore allows Catholic women's voices to hold greater weight than they would under the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church offline.

Blessed Is She is “a Catholic women’s community committed to deepening a life of prayer starting with daily Scripture devotionals and supportive sisterhood.”¹³ The website includes a newsletter that will send subscribers daily prayer and scripture readings, links to regional Blessed Is She Facebook groups, a shop with liturgical planners and study series, and a blog. The blog webpage presents three postcard-like boxes, similar to that of a pinned Pinterest object, with the title of the post. These rectangular blocks act as links to the full blog post, which itself often includes links to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ bible chapters and quotes. Similar to FemCatholic, a short-italicized blurb on the author’s age, residence, and hobbies and interests is included below the post.

Unlike the other two blogs that allow women to submit their own entries, Blessed Is She has a team of approximately thirty-five writers who create and publish blog posts for the website. Blessed Is She emphasizes that the blog creators “are women, just like you. We are single, married, mamas, and grandmamas too.”¹⁴ This indicates to the blog’s readership that the everyday experiences and voices of women are still being reflected in the posts and content of the website, despite the inability of readers to submit their own

¹³ “About,” Mission Statement, Blessed Is She, <https://blessedisshenet/about/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

personal entries. Visitors of the blog are able to add comments to a blog post that, once approved by the site's moderators, are posted for everyone to see.

This distinction between who is able to submit an entry—anyone or only a select group—is a critical difference between these blogs. It highlights that while individuals are given an authority online that they do not have offline, there remains an unsettled line between individual authority and structured authority online. All three of the websites' moderators—but in particular, the team of Blessed Is She blog writers—function as an authority structure online. They have more control than the average individual in deciding what is posted and when, the topic, and the particular narratives presented. It is thus the moderators of the websites, and specifically the writers and team of Blessed Is She, who have control over their blog's agenda.¹⁵ So while Catholic women do gain an authority to write and create their own narratives—particularly on websites that allow them to submit posts like FemCatholic and The Catholic Woman—there remains a structural authority above them that controls what is actually published to these websites.

With that, there remains important similarities between all three blogs. All of these blogs were created between 2014 and 2017, have the overarching theme of dignifying and promoting the identities and roles of Catholic women in the Church, and also hold a relatively strong and active following. FemCatholic and The Catholic Woman have approximately five thousand and seven thousand followers on Facebook respectively; Blessed Is She, the oldest of the three websites, has approximately fifty-five thousand followers.¹⁶

¹⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, "Making Space for Religion in Internet Studies" *The Information Society* 21, no. 4 (2005): 312.

¹⁶ As of June 2019.

While FemCatholic is the only explicitly Catholic and feminist blog, all three of the blogs address either feminism or women's roles in the Church. The newness of these blogs may suggest Catholic feminism is only just becoming popular now, however, this is not the case. Similar to the larger feminist movement,¹⁷ Catholic feminism goes back many decades in American history. The presidency of John Kennedy finalized Catholics mainstream presence in American cultural and political life. This period allowed for one to both critique one's country and Church but still be a 'good American' and 'good Catholic.'¹⁸ From this, it became possible for Catholics to identify as both Catholic and feminist.

It was not until the first half of the seventies, however, that the majority of Catholic feminist organizations—those who identify with an integrated commitment to the struggle for women's liberation and to their Catholic faith—formed. Their formation occurred in conjunction with the larger second-wave feminist movement.¹⁹ Catholic feminists remained relatively isolated from the larger feminist movement due to liberal and radical feminists opposition to institutional religion and its teachings—particularly the Catholic Church's position on abortion and contraception—during this time.²⁰ In contrast to liberal or radical feminists, Catholic feminists' identities as feminists were intrinsic to their identities and beliefs as Catholics. Henold notes for “these activists, feminism itself was founded in their faith, not just applied to it...many feminists asserted a causal relationship between their faith and feminism.”²¹ These women were feminists because they were Catholic, and their feminism was grounded in the Catholic teachings of the Church. These Catholic feminists used their

¹⁷ I use Henold's terminology of “larger feminist movement” to mean America's national feminist movement. See Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 7.

¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “American Catholic Feminism: A History” in *Reconciling Catholicism Feminism? Personal Reflections on Tradition and Change*, eds. Salle Barr Ebest and Ron Ebest (Notre Dame: University Press, 2003), 8.

¹⁹ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 1-14.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

²¹ *Ibid*, 6.

commitment to gospel to mandate liberation, social justice, and radical equality, and would point to scripture, rituals, the sacraments, and social teaching as means to explain their feminism because it was a Christian principle to them.²² Catholicism and feminism were thus seen as entirely compatible from the beginning of the feminist movement, and for Catholic feminists, it was something motivated by and inherent to their faith. Like the larger feminist movement, the Catholic feminist movement carries on today. These three blogs provide an important avenue into seeing how Catholic women and self-identifying Catholic feminists understand Catholic feminism and their role in the Church today.

I begin my analysis of the content of these blogs by examining a post on FemCatholic titled “Catholics: Don’t Be Afraid of the Word ‘Feminist.’” Founder of FemCatholic, Samantha Povlock, explains to women why it is okay, and necessary, for Catholics to be both Catholics and feminists. She starts her post by stating:

Don’t worry: nothing that follows will be anti-Catholic, un-orthodox, or contrary to Church teaching. In fact, I’m going to use only support from Pope’s, Saints, or official Church documents to make my point. Promise.²³

Povlock feels she must convince Catholics that being a Catholic and a feminist is okay, prefacing with “Don’t worry.” Before diving into what she means exactly by Catholic feminist, Povlock begins with a disclaimer that what she is going to say will not go against anything the Church teaches; her post will only be supported by official Church proclamations and documents. Povlock does not want anyone to question the sources she uses as her base for Catholic feminism. This is not only for this blog post but for the entire ideology behind the FemCatholic website. She then elaborates on

²² Ibid.

²³ Samantha Povlock, “Catholics: Don’t Be Afraid of the Word ‘Feminist,’” *FemCatholic*, November 20, 2017, <http://www.femcatholic.com/>.

why she feels the need to begin her post on Catholic feminism in this manner. She says:

I understand why “Feminist” is a frightening word to most Catholics. Because most of the time when we hear that particular “F-word” it’s describing women who are advocating for things like abortion or contraception – which yes, the Church opposes... Catholics have our own version of feminism – yes, feminism – that we are called to promote. The Pope said so...Don’t let modern secular feminists, or ill-advising Catholics prevent you from advocating for Catholic Feminism. The Pope is calling us to action – it’s time to answer the call!

Povlock notes Catholics general aversion to feminism is due to the larger feminist movement’s rejection of Catholic theology surrounding abortion and birth control. This difference in position on abortion causes Povlock to distinguish between Catholic feminists and what she calls “modern secular feminists.” This distinction between feminists, however, is not something original to Povlock’s description of Catholic feminism. This reflects the greater separation between Catholic feminists and the larger feminist movement that has been in place since the 1960’s.²⁴ Tracing Catholic feminism back to its origins, it is not entirely surprising for Povlock to draw a clear line in this introductory post between the two categories of feminists she describes.

Further, she does not only advise against “modern secular feminists” but also “ill-advising Catholics” when it comes to understanding Catholic feminism. By ill-advising, Povlock suggests Catholics who identify as Catholics but do not follow Church teachings. In other words, individuals who identify as Catholic but also support abortion are not part of her definition of Catholic feminism. In order for feminism to be Catholic feminism according to Povlock, it must ultimately be rooted in Catholic teaching. Therefore, Catholic identification is not enough, but rather, feminism is part of the institutional teachings of the Church.

²⁴ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*,14.

This explains Povlock's emphasis on grounding feminism in the word of the Pope. She highlights Catholic feminism as something that should be advocated for precisely because of the institutional authority supporting it. If the Pope is encouraging of Catholic feminism, then Catholics too should be a part of this movement. Povlock's attention to Church authority and teaching similarly relates back to the origins of Catholic feminism; like earlier activists, Povlock regards feminism as an extension of Catholic teachings and beliefs. In all, church teachings and the proclamations of Church authority are essential parts of the Catholic feminism described by Povlock.

Emily Archer takes a similar perspective on Catholic feminism in her post "Catholic Feminism: Both / And" on FemCatholic. She states:

Catholicism is often described as "both/and." For instance, Jesus is both human and divine. Mary is both virgin and mother.... Feminism is a matter of love and truth. It's a matter of social justice... Properly integrated with my faith, however, feminism is a particular perspective on injustice that isn't just about me – it's about other women, it's about men, and it's about following God's will and loving my neighbor.²⁵

Feminism is intrinsic to Archer being Catholic. She offers the examples of Mary as both mother and virgin and Jesus as both human and divine to showcase that concepts that seem to contradict each other can simultaneously be true. This applies also to Catholic feminism: two concepts that do not seem compatible, but Archer argues ultimately are. Catholic teaching calls for people to help and care for others,²⁶ and Archer explains feminism as being part of her Catholic beliefs in social justice and addressing the injustices others face. In all, Archer understands feminism

²⁵ Emily Archer, "Catholic Feminism: Both / And," *FemCatholic*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.femcatholic.com/>.

²⁶ "Social Justice" in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a3.htm.

as being inherent to Catholicism, despite the initial incompatibility the two may present.

It is important to recognize this consistency in the ways Povlock, Archer, and early Catholic activists understand their identities as feminist. Povlock and Archer still advocate for a traditional definition and lifestyle of Catholic feminism despite the platform and authority they gain from the internet. The medium of the blog does not change how these particular women understand Catholic feminism. Rather, for Povlock, Archer, and others on FemCatholic, this blog acts as a tool to allow for a greater dispersion of this understanding of Catholic feminism. Further, FemCatholic provides women with an accompanying sense of agency in accepting this ideology of Catholic feminism. The women who engage with FemCatholic are choosing by their own desire to visit the website. The internet and the autonomy it gives these women allows readers the choice to legitimize Povlock and Archer's definition of Catholic feminism. In other words, the internet allows the women engaging with FemCatholic to choose in an agentic fashion to validate Catholic feminism as being rooted in Catholic teachings. The institutional authority of the Church does not have control over the messaging of Catholic feminism these women produce in these internet spaces, instead, it is Catholic women who choose to promote and legitimize this traditional conception of Catholic feminism.

Writer of *Blessed Is She*, Kendra Tierney, approaches feminism in a somewhat different way than Povlock and Archer in her post titled, "Don't Label Me, Bro." She begins with two passages from the Gospel of Mark, which she uses to tie into her larger argument on what labels, or defining someone by a particular title, does to one's relationship with others and with God. She states:

It was true then, and it is true now: labels get in the way of relationships. And that is what Jesus wants from us: a relationship with Him, and a relationship with each other. Conservative, progressive, racist, feminist, anarchist . . . whatever. All of these

labels can serve to remove a person's humanity and replace it with a set of assumptions.²⁷

For Tierney, labels act as barriers to relationships. She pushes back against the need to be titled in a particular way because these labels are a hindrance; identifying as a feminist comes with a set of assumptions that do not allow individuals to connect with everyone to their fullest abilities. These labels, whether given or self-identified, come with baggage. If one says they are a feminist, people have a preconceived notion of what a feminist is. Tierney is not necessarily advocating against the ideals backing any of the titles she names, but she does not think the labels themselves are useful in facilitating relationships. Feminism, or identifying as a Catholic feminist, in this sense is an impediment to living out a Catholic lifestyle of focusing on cultivating relationships with others. It does not matter what title an individual has or has been given, but by being a person, one deserves a relationship and connection with others. Tierney does not want individuals to base their treatment of others on their labels. Rather, individuals, just by being human, should be respected regardless of the labels they hold.

The Blessed Is She blog does not directly address Catholic feminism in the way Povlock and Archer of FemCatholic do, but Tierney's discussion showcases the other ways in which feminism is considered by Catholic women. Neither Tierney nor the Blessed Is She blog explicitly support Catholic feminism. Instead, the label of being any kind of feminist—whether that be a Catholic, liberal, or radical feminist—is not of real importance. For Tierney and Blessed Is She, the feminist movement creates titles that get in the way of “what Jesus wants from us: a relationship with Him, and a relationship with each other.”

²⁷ Kendra Tierney, “Don't Label Me, Bro,” *Blessed Is She*, January 19, 2017, <https://blessedishe.net/devotion/>.

In contrast to both *Blessed Is She* and *FemCatholic*, the letters posted on *The Catholic Woman* blog do not explicitly address feminism at all. However, the site includes a category specifically on the identities of women in the Church. The post “The Strength That Comes from Knowing the Truth About Who We Are - Letter from Katie Hollcraft” explores this question of what it means to be a woman in the Catholic Church. Hollcraft explains to the blog’s readers—whom she addresses as “sisters”—how being told “you are dangerous” during prayer has impacted her outlook of women’s roles in the Catholic Church. She says:

We, as women, are dangerous to the kingdom of this world, the strongholds and principalities of the enemy. Who we are in the Lord is dangerous because when we know the Truth of our identity, God can do marvelous things to advance His Kingdom through us...Your identity is dangerous...Your femininity is dangerous... Being a woman is powerful. In the face of our strength and dignity as Daughters of God, the enemy can only shrink and flee.²⁸

She emphasizes to the Catholic women reading her letter that their role in the Church and advancement of God’s kingdom is one that is “dangerous”—or active and impactful. Her letter not only acts to inform women of the power in their identities as women in the Church, but it is also motivational. She tells women “Your identity is dangerous...Your femininity is dangerous.” She wants these women to know being a Catholic woman is not something to be looked down upon or diminished. Rather, there is a dangerous power in being a woman. She is encouraging other women to own their “dangerous” identities because they are dynamic, influential, and play a critical role in the kingdom of God.

Hollcraft uses this letter to reconcile, change, and relate her idea of womanhood in the Church to that of other women. She understands her identity within the Church using Angela Coco’s concept of “self-relating-to-

²⁸ Katie Hollcraft, “The Strength That Comes from Knowing the Truth About Who We Are - Letter from Katie Hollcraft,” *The Catholic Woman*, November 9, 2018, <https://thecatholicwoman.co/letterstowomen/>.

others;” this is the process of discovering one’s needs, roles, and behaviors in relation to the Church by connecting with a “like-minded group,” strengthening “an existing sense of autonomy...within the parameters available in their immediate community.”²⁹ For Hollcraft, this like-minded group is other Catholic women. She is able to share and connect her own revelation in understanding her role within the institutional Church to that of other women through The Catholic Woman website. Hollcraft is not limited to relating to only the women in her immediate, local parish, instead, the internet and The Catholic Woman blog act as mechanisms that allow Hollcraft to reach more women all across the country and potentially the world.

By sharing her letter in the digital space of the internet, Hollcraft is empowered also with a greater sense of autonomy. Not only is Hollcraft able to articulate her story, relate and motivate others with her narrative, but due to the internet, she can become seen as a source of what Bucar describes as “ethical knowledge;” Hollcraft’s narrative has the potential to be viewed by other women as a source of legitimate knowledge that should be respected. In all, Hollcraft’s ability to connect with other women by using the platform of the blog amplifies her voice and empowers her with a greater authority than if she had not shared her narrative online.

While the posts from these three websites all take a slightly different approach in understanding feminism and womanhood in the Catholic Church, due to their medium as blogs, they all manage to facilitate a sense of community among Catholic women. This community is not solely a feeling accompanying the platform of a personal blog website, but rather, it is what Heidi Campbell calls an online community. She defines online communities as those that “involve people gathering around a specific topic

²⁹ Angela Coco, *Conflicts and Choices: An Exploration of Power Relations in the Catholic Church* (London: Routledge, 2014), 216.

or purpose, with some level of commitment to that topic or purpose and each other” on the internet and “is appealing because it creates behaviors that allow members to identify with others, both on an individual and a group level.”³⁰ The internet provides spaces that allow people to center around a common interest as well as connect and identify with people from this commonality. In the case of these blogs, Catholic women are able to relate and create an online community centered around being Catholic women.

In the FemCatholoic post “Dear Edith: Do I Have A Place in the Catholic Church?” the author, Jena, exemplifies this sense of an online community that Campbell describes. She begins her post by stating:

When I first came upon this website, I was happy to see that there was a forum of women who were dedicated to supporting, deepening, and inspiring the lives of other women called to a life filled with Spirit. A feminist Catholic Blog? Yes! *We need these spaces.*³¹

Jena highlights the need of having a space specifically for Catholic women. Not only is FemCatholic a Catholic feminist blog, but it is a site in which engaged members are “dedicated to supporting, deepening, and inspiring the lives of other women.” The website facilitates an environment centered around feminism and is specifically for Catholic women. These women do not know each other from meeting in-person, but through these blog posts and replying and engaging with comments, the people and the blog content come to be personal to members. The connectedness the women feel from sharing the same identities as Catholic women trying to navigate what it means to be a feminist and the role of women in the Church bonds them. This sense of community is the result of the blogs being online and having specific missions dedicated to Catholic women.

³⁰ Heidi A. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005): 44, 146.

³¹ Jena, “Dear Edith: Do I Have A Place in the Catholic Church?” *FemCatholic*, March 18, 2018, <http://www.femcatholic.com/>.

Similar sentiments are shared by writer Christie Peters of *The Catholic Woman*. She explains:

In some ways I'm writing the letter that I always wanted to read. I've had the sweetest moments when wonderful and brave women have gone before me and shared those hidden stories and thinking "oh praise Jesus I'm not the only one." Isn't that an incredible feeling? Hearing others speak their truth has enabled me to deal with mine.³²

She experiences an exhilarating feeling from being able to hear from and relate to other women through *The Catholic Woman* blog. The blog has created a community so inviting and encouraging that she feels she is able to share her own story, the letter she has "always wanted to read." While Peters ultimately praises Jesus as the source for this sense of community, the medium of the blog itself plays a critical role. In all, members from both *FemCatholic* and *The Catholic Woman* express sentiments of gratefulness for the ways in which the blogs construct a community where Catholic women have a space to connect and relate to others like them.

As noted earlier, *Blessed Is She's* mission is explicitly to create a community for Catholic women. Not only does the blog do this in similar ways to that as *FemCatholic* and *The Catholic Woman*, but the website promotes offline meet-ups through *Blessed Brunches*, *Community Groups*, and retreats. *Blessed Brunches* "turn online relationships into real life friendships" through members willingness to open their homes to host a potluck gathering for other *Blessed Is She* members.³³ After members host one of these lunches, they are encouraged to begin a *Community Group* by downloading a free study guide and submitting a form online for assistance from a *Blessed Is She* team coordinator to lead an offline bible study group. The final way in which *Blessed Is She* offers members the opportunity to take their online community offline is through regional retreats in

³² Christie Peters, "Who I Am When I'm Alone - Letter from Christie Peters," *The Catholic Woman*, November 30, 2018, <https://thecatholicwoman.co/letterstowomen/>.

³³ "Connect," *Blessed Is She*, accessed December 2018, <https://blessedishe.net/community/>.

Washington D.C. and Dublin, Ireland, which occur annually in the fall. The community Blessed Is She builds both online and offline showcases the need to analyze religious agents in both online and offline spaces. The women's practices do not end when they go on the internet or when they close out of Blessed Is She for the day. Their experiences transfer from offline to online and vice versa.³⁴

In all, Catholic women use the internet—and specifically blogs—as outlets to articulate, reformulate, and understand Catholic feminism and what it means to be a woman in the Catholic Church. The internet provides these women a greater authority that they do not necessarily have offline within the institutional hierarchy of the Catholic Church. They have the autonomy to write posts based on their own questions and interests, and through the decentralized nature of the internet, their blog entries have the potential to be seen by others as legitimate sources of religious knowledge. The institutional hierarchical authority of the Church has no direct control over these women or what they present in these online spaces. While individuals are granted greater authority online, the women are also ultimately limited by the agenda of each of the site's moderators. Thus, even the narratives constructed by these women on each of these sites must be understood within the context of the limitations of each website. Further, the writers of FemCatholic, The Catholic Woman, and Blessed Is She—all websites that focus on promoting and dignifying Catholic women—highlight the multitude of ways in which women approach the role of women in the Church and feminism. While there are apparent differences in both the focus of discussions and the perspectives presented on each of the three blogs, they all foster a sense of community among Catholic women. The internet and blogs play a crucial role in giving Catholic women voices, space, and community. Thus, these digital sites should continue to be examined in

³⁴ Campbell, "Introduction," 3-4.

order to have a greater understanding of the perspectives of Catholic women and other laypeople without institutional authority.

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