The North American Women’s Rights movement, beginning in the 1960’s, has long asserted that society and its governing institutions “have a problem with women.”¹ Throughout its three successive waves, the movement has fought for voting rights and, later, reproductive, workplace and education privileges.² The most recent third wave has brought to the forefront issues within the feminist campaign of universalizing the category of women.³ The movement’s failure to provide agency for all women has led those of color, for instance, to critique the mainstream group. Further, the women’s rights movement in North America has illustrated the complexity of female agency in contemporary society. With each wave new issues are brought to the fore and women fight for their ability to speak, act and move through traditionally male spaces, while simultaneously critiquing institutions like the Church, that have often been constructed as being in opposition to these goals. Many feminist theologians, like Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rita Gross, have sought to claim female agency by resisting dominant interpretations of biblical texts that give men status.

In examining papal documents against the work of feminists in the Catholic Church, this paper will seek to demonstrate how women’s agency is not reducible to one specific cause or issue. This paper specifically, will consider how three contentious feminist issues—the role of women in the Church, reproductive rights and the ability to be ordained—together are pertinent to empowering women. Although Ruether and Gross, among other feminist theologians, seem to

² Deborah Leslie, “Introduction to Feminist Geography and Intersectionality” (Class lecture, Geography and Gender, The University of Toronto, ON, September 19, 2016).
³ Ibid.
vigorously oppose the Church’s views on these issues, the dissonance between their ideas concerning women’s agency is not absolute. This becomes evident when analyzing Pope John Paul II’s Letter to Women and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s (CDF) Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, written in direct response to feminist criticism. Feminist thinkers, like Ruether and Gross, overlook the way that Pope John Paul II encourages women to move freely through the public realm and spaces that they have historically been barred from. Ruether’s argument against the Catholic Church and its view on reproductive rights, on the other hand, holds up against critical examination of Pope John Paul II’s writings and hits a nerve with feminists who seek to protect their reproductive freedom. Finally, the tension between the Catholic Church and female agency has pushed women to fight back and break free from oppressive structures. In their struggle to gain power and recognition through ordination, grassroots movements such as Womenpriests and Women Church, also discussed by Ruether, have formed out of dissatisfaction with the hierarchical organization of the institution.

According to Ruether, the history of the church’s oppression of women begins with two key theologians, St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. She views Augustine as an important figure in the Roman Catholic Church who understood both men and women as being created in the image of God; however, he asserted the belief that women were definitely “created... under male subjugation.”⁴ He also used biological essentialism to justify women’s inferior status.⁵ Similarly, 13th century Dominican theologian, Thomas Aquinas had a questionable perception of women. He viewed men and being male as the norm, while understanding the female sex to be deviant. Theologians such as Aquinas and Augustine have historically constructed women as immoral

⁵ Ibid.
beings, who are continuously demonized because of their biological sex. Aquinas’ and Augustine’s views acted as catalysts in the crusade against women’s agency, and their understanding that sexual relations outside of marriage are sinful is a view that continues to inform the Church today. Ruether ultimately argues that these views have become standard in contemporary society, as women continue to bear the consequences of early theological interpretations.

The subjective interpretation of religious texts is an important topic discussed by Rita Gross in her book, *Feminism and Religion*. Gross notes that, many interpretations of the Bible in Christianity are not as objective as they claim. She argues an important point concerning objectivity within the academic study of religion, as she explains that by excluding women in various biblical descriptions, scholars fail to provide an accurate historical account. She further describes the three main components of androcentric perspectives, conflating the human and male norm, using the generic masculine within writings, and finally, regarding women as passive objects. The androcentric interpretation of biblical texts plays an important role in how women are perceived and how their roles in society are defined, which dictates their ability to act freely. For example, Ruether discusses the Pauline women interpreted in the Galatians 3:28 passage, “There is no longer Jew and Greek, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ”, as an acceptance of women’s leadership in the Church, as well as consent to pursue their religious callings. However, as a disciple of Paul assures them, this passage is not to be taken

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7 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 74.
10 Ibid., 18, 19.
literally, and he dissuades them from abandoning their duties as wives and mothers. The biased interpretations of the past continue to inform the ideologies of the Church today. Ruether notes that the insistence that women only flourish in the private sphere, rather than in the public realm, has held women back from being active members of society. This refusal to regard women as whole human beings is the main premise of the feminist movement. Pope Pius XI, along with many other theologians, viewed women only in biological terms and regarded childbirth as their sole purpose in life. As both Ruether and Gross mention, women were and continue to be oppressed by the Holy See because of androcentric perceptions formed hundreds of years ago. Many females, in their quest to gain agency, refuse to accept their servile status and have demanded that their presence be acknowledged as legitimate.

As previously described, Ruether has argued that ideas of gender complementarity, whereby women flourish in domestic settings rather than in the public sphere, have stood the test of time and are continuously promoted by the Catholic Church. While Pope John Paul II does advance a form of gender complementarity, his Letter to Women, written in response to feminist thinkers, he also challenges some of their assertions. This particular work by John Paul II encourages society to respect women’s rights and dignity. In some tension with the accounts provided by Ruether and Gross, John Paul II also promotes women’s roles outside of the home and hopes to support women in their aspirations. Similarly, the CDF’s Letter to the Bishops seeks to correct some of the misconceptions around the Church and its view of women. Here, the Church tries to disprove the idea that women are in anyway subordinate to men and should

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12 Ruether, "Should Women Want Women Priests," 64.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
submit to their spouses. The CDF uses biblical passages to demonstrate how both males and females have both been created in the “image and likeness of God.” They describe how Eve was created as Adam’s helper, not to take on a passive role, but instead to be his companion and partner. Furthermore, in both documents, the Catholic Church clarifies the role of the female society and argues against the idea that motherhood is a woman’s “biological destiny.”

Remarkably, Pope John Paul II endorses feminist ideals and encourages women to become involved in politics and other male dominated sectors. Although the Pope adopts a progressive view of the role of women in the public realm, he does not advocate that women have control and agency over their body through reproductive rights nor does he approve of female ordination. This substantiates the claim that agency for women in the Catholic Church is a multifaceted issue that incorporates different issues, all of which depend on each other for women to become agents in society.

One of the most contentious issues that feminists have sought to bring to the fore in contemporary society is women’s reproductive rights. As Ruether makes clear, there continues to be a tension between reproductive freedoms and the Catholic Church. Under John Paul II’s regime (1978-2004), she states, the Church fought to limit the agency of women through their “crusade” against birth control, abortion and homosexuality. The Vatican adopted a similar medieval view of complementarity that was held in the 19th century, which further restricted women’s rights in contemporary society. Ruether continues to explain the ways that they held

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., sec. 3
20 Ibid., 188.
21 Ibid.
numerous UN events “hostage” and insisted that discussions of gender equality and “diverse forms of family” were “threatening” to the Catholic institution.\textsuperscript{22} It is worth noting that Pope John Paul II’s \textit{Letter to Women}, where he spoke openly about the importance of gender equality, was written in response to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. His more progressive views on equal pay and participation in the workforce, however, do not translate to his ideas on reproductive rights. Informed by such views, Church authorities have not only demonized those who support abortion and birth control, but also criminalized them. For example, in San Salvador abortion was regarded as equivalent to murder, and often women could face up to 50 years of jail time if the termination took place after the first three months.\textsuperscript{23} Although the Vatican continues to oppress and silence women, resistance against the Church has been building. Many Catholic organizations have started to vocalize their views against the Church and shed light on the dire situation women around the world face. For example, Catholics For Free Choice, a Washington based group has organized various initiatives such as SeeChange, which petitions to end the Vatican’s influence over UN conferences.\textsuperscript{24} They hope to rescale the Holy See’s power within the UN, arguing that it should be recognized as a religious institution rather than a state.\textsuperscript{25}

While Pope John Paul II’s writings can be read to call into question some of the assumptions made in Ruether’s work, his persistent anti-abortion stance does not hold up against the feminist critique. His disapproval of abortion and many forms of contraception is rooted in the belief that all human life is sacred and should be protected.\textsuperscript{26} Although this is a commendable value, the way that it has been interpreted in terms of women’s reproductive rights has led to the

\textsuperscript{22} Ruether, “Women, Reproductive Rights,” 189.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{26} John Paul II, \textit{Evangelium Vitae}. 
condemnation of the female body. The Pope does assert that the blame for abortion should be placed on both the man and the women, rather than solely on the latter.\textsuperscript{27} The man is responsible if he forces the woman to get an abortion directly or if he abandons her while she is pregnant, leaving her with limited options and threatening the sanctity of the family.\textsuperscript{28} Nevertheless, the Pope’s more liberal writings and teachings on these points seem to contradict some of the actions of the Church during his papacy. Ruether, for instance, describes the way Pope John Paul II praised women who decided to keep their child after being raped.\textsuperscript{29} His decision here reflects his adherence to his ethical belief that all human life is sacred, but at the same time seems to be complicit with violence against the female body. In his writings, the Pope encourages women to steer away from imitating male modes of domination through contraceptive technology and urges them to remain brave in the face of fear even after assault by carrying the pregnancy to term.\textsuperscript{30} Although Pope John Paul II has defended the rights of working women and helped to propel them into the private sphere, his lack of respect for women’s reproductive rights has given rise to a tension between the Church and feminists, who are leading resistance movements.

As the feminist movement picked up, women demanded the right to be ordained along with an acknowledgement of equality from the Church. The St. Joan’s Alliance appealed to the Vatican several times regarding the issue of women’s ordination and was met with resistance.\textsuperscript{31} In 1976 the Vatican released the “Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women into Ministerial Priesthood.”\textsuperscript{32} According to Ruether, this Declaration stated that women were to be barred from ordination for three reasons: the fact that Jesus did not ordain women, that it was not

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} John Paul II, \textit{Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women}.
\item \textsuperscript{28} John Paul II, \textit{Evangelium Vitae}.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ruether, “Women, Reproductive Rights,” 190.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ruether, “Should Women Want Womenpriests,” 66.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 67.
\end{itemize}
the tradition to ordain women and that maleness is intrinsic to Christ. While the Declaration does state that ordination cannot be “validly conferred onto women,” given that the Church strives to continue to act in the ways that Christ did, Pope John Paul II does recognize the role that women have played as the carriers of culture. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, for example, he explains how they have been important in the “domestic church” by bringing together the community. The Catholic institution, he says, recognizes that there is a spousal relationship between the Church also known as the Bride and Christ, characterized as the Bridegroom. The Bride takes on feminine characteristics, while the Bridegroom is presumed to be masculine, illustrating a traditional relationship between man and woman. Therefore, priests, acting “in persona Christi” must be male, not female.

Such statements provoked criticism from many, including theologian Karl Rahner, who explicitly stated that the Vatican’s response was “literal essentialism.” It is important to note that while the Catholic Church rejects female ordination, many other Christian denominations welcomed women into priesthood. For example, Antoinette Brown was ordained by the Congregationalist denomination in 1853, paving the way for the ordination of Methodist, American Lutheran and Anglican women. The issue of female ordination leads to some tension between the Church and feminist theologians about what agency is in this context. The Church understands that women have been able to carry out their agency by fulfilling important roles,

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33 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 65-66.
such as being mothers and martyrs.\textsuperscript{40} The CDF further states that women are able to live a full Christian life and are not barred from exemplifying the values of Christ.\textsuperscript{41} For feminists, the Catholic Church’s’ refusal to accept women and fully include them in all aspects of religious practice has led some to rebel and form groups outside of the institution.

The Women-Church and Womenpriest movements were created out of dissatisfaction with the clerical hierarchy of the Church, and out of the desire to be included as full, participating members of the community. While Pope John Paul II does acknowledge the hierarchical structure of this institution, he also explains that, “in the hierarchy of holiness it is precisely the "woman," Mary of Nazareth, who is the "figure" of the Church.”\textsuperscript{42} This is known as the Marian Dimension of the Church, which seeks to model itself after Mary. On the other hand, the masculine Petrine dimension aims to fulfill the role of Peter and the Apostles.\textsuperscript{43} The Marian dimension, as an antecedent to the Petrine dimension, proves the importance of women and their roles in serving Christ today.\textsuperscript{44} This, however, is not enough for feminist theologians who would like to be ordained as priests and has led some to create organizations outside of the Church where this is possible. For instance, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Hunt founded the Women Church group, which can be defined as a “global, ecumenical movement made up of local feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in sacrament and solidarity.”\textsuperscript{45} A similar movement founded by seven women ordained on the Danube River is known as the Womenpriests.\textsuperscript{46} While the Womenpriest group ordains women, the Women-Church group does not, which limits their ability to create an inclusive community made up of

\textsuperscript{40} John Paul II, \textit{Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem}, sec. 8.
\textsuperscript{41} Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, \textit{Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World}, sec. 4.
\textsuperscript{42} John Paul II, \textit{Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem}, sec. 8.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ruether, “Should Women Want Womenpriests,” 68.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 67.
men and children, rather than just women. Additionally, they are better able to fulfill administrative and sacramental functions, which gives their group more legitimacy. Both groups, however, allow women to exercise power over their bodies. These movements have formed as a response to the Vatican’s oppression of women and work to empower rather than deny female agency.

Pope John Paul II, along with other theologians, continues to take a firm stance against female ordination. Movements such as the Women-Church and Womenpriests, as well as groups like Catholics For Free Choice, work to encourage women’s participation in the Church and fight for the dignity of all to be respected by the Holy institution. These types of reformist groups respond to the Vatican’s oppression of women’s rights and allow them to continue practicing their faith, while also asserting their agency. The existence of these various organizations reveals that women’s agency can be exercised in diverse ways. Further research could examine the ways that women of color experience discrimination in the Catholic Church and critique the ways that more mainstream feminist movements have excluded these women and their unique voices from the discourse, as well as denied them agency. However, one can still conclude that female agency in the Catholic Church is not reducible to one central issue, but instead is made up of many causes. For women to be truly freed from oppressive structures, they must take a holistic approach, recognizing the interdependence of these different structures and their mutual relations.

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48 Ibid.
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