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Catholic social teaching and the peripheries: the case for addressing prostitution

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ABSTRACT

Catholic social teaching (CST) has shown little interest in structural and social forces that impact negatively on the dignity and flourishing of women. Such inattention diminishes CST's credibility and neglects its liberative potential. This article examines an area of structural violence against women, the social reality of prostitution, to illuminate the imperative to expand normative CST to address specific experiences of women. Given the inadequacy of the *Catechism's* treatment of prostitution as an area of personal moral failing, a reading which fails to understand how cultural and legislative structures bear down on women's freedom and agency, a task for CST emerges. When CST principles are brought into dialogue with empirical attention to women's experience of prostitution, the tradition stands in solidarity with those who inhabit an existential and social periphery. The article argues that CST perspectives should nudge the Catholic Church towards proposing an abolitionist ethic in relation to prostitution.

KEYWORDS

Catholic social teaching;
violence against women;
prostitution; abolition;
structures of sin; dignity;
freedom; survival; agency;
common goods

Introduction

There is a troubling absence of serious attention to forms of violence against women and girls in the papal texts which comprise modern Catholic social teaching (CST). This is part of a broader disinclination within CST to adopt a gendered analysis or lens when examining social realities, a reluctance which results in a limited and partial account of what is involved in the full flourishing of all women and girls and restricts imagination of the common good. Pope Benedict XVI describes the Church's social doctrine as 'a service to the truth which sets us free', and affirms the tradition's openness to learn from other sources of knowledge,¹ but this rarely extends to recognition that social structures frequently impact differently on women and that their distinctive responses and experience could broaden Catholic social vision.

This limit to normative perspectives undermines CST's credibility and reach. In some of the tradition's areas of strength such as papal teaching on the meaning of human work and on the ecological crisis, the gap is stark. As long ago as 1991, Amata Miller discussed how papal CST on issues of work and poverty might have been different if the concerns and voices of women had not been marginal from the perspective of the hierarchy.²

¹*Caritas in Veritate*, para. 9.

²Amata Miller, 'Catholic Social Teaching'.

Miller narrates the ways women in the USA agitated for and achieved greater economic equality and points to the common ground between CST principles and feminist themes which could have been explored, posing the question of what might have happened ‘if the women struggling for justice had found consistent support in the official teaching of the Church’.³ In a more recent example, Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si*, omits to recognise the greater impact of environmental damage on women or the leadership and activism of women in fighting for ecological justice.⁴ It is widely documented that women are more vulnerable to climate change but also often have knowledge and expertise that help to mitigate its impact.⁵

One of the frustrations here is that CST texts sometimes start to indicate awareness of a gendered analysis, but then fail to develop it. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Francis sets out a compelling account of social peace, linking it to truth and justice and noting that ‘truth means recognising the pain of women who are victims of violence and abuse’ but this does not lead to deeper analysis of the forms this violence takes or the social structures that are implicated.⁶ The fullest papal comment on aspects of violence against women is found in Pope John Paul II’s 1995 *Letter to Women*, where he condemns sexual violence and calls for laws to defend women from such violence, as well as recognising and apologising for cultural conditioning which has prevented their flourishing – but the *Letter* is not treated as part of the CST corpus and the theme is not developed in its political dimensions.⁷ In *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis mentions domestic violence in a list of ‘unacceptable customs’, and cites ‘reprehensible situations’ in which people are ‘forced into prostitution’ but again the text fails to pursue a structural analysis.⁸

If CST is to achieve what Francis describes as the task of drawing practical conclusions on concrete matters, there is a need for rapprochement between its current methodology and worldview, and the insights and questions that a gendered lens can provide.⁹ Francis recognises that CST as a tradition develops, as all doctrine does, and must remain open to debate, but this openness sits alongside a wariness and suspicion in relation to what other documents of the magisterium frequently name as ‘gender ideology’.¹⁰ The gender essentialism to which many papal teaching documents adhere is not the concern of this article, but may be implicated in the tendency of CST, whether intentional or not, towards a gender-blind social analysis.

The focus in this article is the global reality of prostitution interpreted as a form of social and structural violence against women and as a proper concern for the development of CST through a gendered awareness and sensitivity. Although prostitution also involves men and boys, the vast majority of those bought for sexual purposes are girls and women, and their purchasers are men.¹¹ The specificity of how prostitution exploits the

³Ibid., 67.

⁴Lisa Sowle Cahill discusses this in detail in ‘Realistic Hope’.

⁵For a summary, see United Nations WomenWatch Fact Sheet on Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change at WomenWatch: Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change (un.org)

⁶Para. 227.

⁷Paras. 3,5.

⁸Paras. 41, 54. See also Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, para. 14 referring to modern slavery as affecting women in particular.

⁹*Evangelii Gaudium*, para.182.

¹⁰See, for example, *Amoris Laetitia*, para 56.

¹¹Gutierrez, ‘Prostitution and Gender-based Violence’, 97, cites studies showing that globally 90% of those who are prostituted are women; 3% are men; 7% are transgender.

vulnerability of women and depends on social tolerance of the damage done to them matters. Papal preaching and pontifical bodies have discussed human trafficking, including trafficking for sexual exploitation, but this has largely focused on trafficking across national borders and has paid little attention to gender-based impacts or to the trafficking of girls and women into prostitution in our own neighbourhoods and cities. The structures and legal frameworks that allow the resulting trade in women's bodies remain largely absent from the concerns of normative CST. Whilst there are brief mentions of prostitution in less formal papal texts, judging prostitution to be 'torture of women', and calling for laws which defend women from sexual violence and exploitation and a useful if problematic section in a document of pastoral guidelines from a Pontifical Council, these do not amount to a full analysis and nor do they place this concern within a wider account of what the dignity and agency of women and girls require in a society and political community focussed on the common good of all.¹² They do, however, indicate a baseline recognition of prostitution as a form of social and sexual violence, a recognition that begins to align the Catholic Church with the abolitionist stance regarding prostitution. Those committed to abolition argue that legislative arrangements should deter and work towards ending prostitution by criminalising those who buy sexual access to other people's bodies and those who control and operate the trade in women's bodies and providing support services so that women trapped in prostitution can safely exit. The stance is contested by those who argue that prostitution should be either legalised or at least decriminalised and regarded as a choice that women may freely make.

This weakness in CST is related to both content and methodology. Francis speaks frequently about the peripheries of society as the places that call the baptised to solidarity. He proposes that the Church should listen to and learn from those who live in both geographical and existential peripheries as 'they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centres of power where weighty decisions are made'.¹³ This valuable principle opens new pathways for the development of CST by taking seriously the task of listening to voices of lived experience and making this visible in formal texts. Mary Carlson uses Miranda Fricker's theory of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice to investigate the modalities and impact of the institutional Church's difficulties in listening to women, arguing that the absence of women's voices affects us all and asks us to develop a habit of 'virtuous hearing', both personally and institutionally.¹⁴ Whereas testimonial injustice is largely inter-personal, occurring when one person disbelieves another through prejudice, hermeneutical injustice is structural, occurring when tight power structures do not allow input from marginalised groups. The resulting gap in collective interpretative resources means that marginalised groups struggle to be heard or recognised and those in power are less able to understand their experience, a reciprocal cognitive disablement.¹⁵ It is difficult to find evidence in formal

¹²Francis <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/03/19/pope-says-prostitution-tortures-women-apologises-for-catholic-clients/> See also *Fratelli Tutti* para.188, where prostitution is included in situations that threaten human rights, and *Amoris Laetitia* para. 41; and Benedict XVI: Global Sisters Report <https://www.ncronline.org/news/global-sisters-report/pope-prostitution-pornography-threaten-human-dignity-women> (2011); John Paul II, *Letter to Women* para 5; Pontifical Council, *Pastoral Care of the Road*: Hille Haker points out that the text assumes that women trapped in prostitution are passive victims who must be liberated and assumes knowledge of what they need. 'Catholic Feminist Ethics Reconsidered'. 221–2.

¹³*Fratelli Tutti*, para.215.

¹⁴Mary Carlson, 'Can the Church'.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p.13

CST texts that their authors have listened to and understood women's experience of social realities that disproportionately affect them or to the perspectives of those living in various social peripheries.

The failure to see and attend to social forces that disproportionately affect and diminish women's lives undermines the potential of CST to describe what is required in a society pursuing the flourishing of all its members without exception. Yet CST has the resources to address a periphery such as prostitution and offer an expanded ethical understanding that illuminates significant structural and social dimensions of the common good. If the papal tradition moved in this direction, it would both re-balance CST's positioning vis-à-vis the specific concerns and experience of women, and constitute an act of solidarity in itself. This essay uses some core principles from CST to discuss the social reality of prostitution and demonstrates how CST itself is also enriched and validated by such discussion.

To illustrate the value of testimonial and hermeneutic inclusion, and following Francis' proposal that we should listen to voices from peripheries, I draw on qualitative research with women who are either still caught up in prostitution or who have managed to exit and with professional staff who support them in faith-inspired charities. The research took place during 2019–20 and involved 14 interviews, nine with women involved in or who had exited from prostitution, and five with professional support staff in faith-connected voluntary organisations working in this field. It was sponsored by Durham University and commissioned and facilitated by one of the organisations, women@thewell.¹⁶

Listening to those who live in social and existential peripheries is complex. Each voice comes from a certain context and each woman interprets her life and experience according to her needs and hopes. The research on which this article draws took place in the UK, and reflects the particularity of that context, but many of the themes that emerged resonate with the experience of women from other global contexts as evidenced by the voices heard in international survivor networks and narratives.

Harm, dignity and survival

The foundational principle of human dignity provides a primary frame for interpreting and understanding what women experience in prostitution. In my research, they explained how it fractures the relationship between body, self and moral conscience, even if many struggle to find language for the latter. An older woman who had exited said 'I hated myself; a survivor who had become an activist said 'It destroys your soul . . . it smashed me into smithereens. I felt so disgusting'.¹⁷ A younger woman still involved described how she felt after meeting a purchaser of her body for sex; 'It just kind of makes you cold, it's like, you feel like you can't really touch the real world as it were. I'll be walking down the road, or sitting on a train and there will be people moving around me, and there will be children around and I just feel so removed, because of what I've just done, I feel like I'm not there.'

¹⁶The primary research outcomes and the methodology are described in detail in the first research report. See the appendix in *Invisible: Prostitution and the lives of Women* <https://gnb-user-uploads.s3.amazonaws.com/cnb/website/watw/1257799f872451c723003884e3657ce1.pdf>

¹⁷All the quotations from empirical voices throughout this text are from anonymised interviews within the research.

These and similar comments from other women disclose what is deeply harmful about prostitution and what justifies describing it as a form of social violence even without the additional ingredients of physical or sexual violence. It is *a woman's integral self* that is violated when access to her body for non-consensual sex is demanded. The women's comments expressed their moral as well as physical and affective reactions. They also explained their coping strategies, either consciously dissociating or detaching, or denying what is happening, or in the words of an older woman who spoke of herself as 'a warrior', 'brush it off, don't wallow'. Prostitution is unlike other forms of social exclusion and poverty. It reaches into dignity and selfhood in a uniquely damaging way. Rachel Moran, a survivor and activist, describes this powerfully:

On leaving prostitution, I swapped the daily living of it for the daily reeling from it. Both were uniquely painful, and the latter had its own flavours of fragmentation, new ones to contend with. It took me a long time to accept that what was good about me had survived prostitution; that the more basic elements of my 14 year old self still existed, and that they still existed inside me.¹⁸

The women who spoke in my research live with the damage done to their self-constitution as well as to their health and their chances of normal social participation. Despite this, they continue to struggle towards exit and the chance of a different life. They were surprisingly free of blame directed at any of those controlling their circumstances and their aspirations are modest; most of all, they long to be safe, to be 'somewhere people can't get in'.

There is a significant dynamic in the women's instinctive moral response to the harm they experience. They find strategies to resist what prostitution represents, the invasion and commodification of their bodies, in which they are treated not as subjects but as objects, as disposable flesh. They assert that they are still human persons with dignity and with generative potential. Edward Schillebeeckx describes how our experience of suffering, oppression or other evils work as negative contrast experiences, events to which, at some level, we say 'no' and react with indignation and resistance.¹⁹ For Schillebeeckx,

the fundamental human 'no' to evil therefore discloses an unfulfilled and thus 'open yes' which is as intractable as the human 'no', indeed even stronger, because the 'open yes' is the basis of that opposition and makes it possible'.²⁰

This is why the experience of woman in prostitution matters as an ethical source. They have experienced 'negative contrast' reaching deeply into their integral personhood, and in response they long for whatever version of well-being or restored wholeness they can imagine. This is a strategy for moral as well as physical survival.

Admittedly, their survival is often ambiguous or incomplete. Many women carry the memory of the compromises they have made and the impact of the trauma they have experienced, inscribed on their bodies and in their minds. In the women who spoke to me, there were complex personality disorders, drug dependencies, visible signs of self-harm and sometimes a paralysing fear. But there was also laughter, solidarity with each other, hopefulness, generosity and the courage to move towards change. One fragile and

¹⁸Moran, *Paid For*, 237.

¹⁹Church: *The Human Story*, 5–6.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 5–6.

fearful woman who had a profound desire for her own freedom described the impact of receiving the safe touch of an older religious sister in complementary therapies:

No-one's allowed to touch me, all touch for me was work related, and someone persuaded me, and I was so scared to come and do reflexology. That was a whole lightbulb moment, because no-one had ever touched me in a way that wasn't sexually related. It was really a very big deal for me. And I didn't know that until it happened. It was really one of the best experiences of my life.

The women told other stories about being brought back to life through small gestures and activities: going to an art exhibition with a support worker; a gift of flowers for a deceased mother's grave; choosing your own tattoo rather than having pimps impose them. Schillebeeckx describes how 'from time to time, there are fragmentary but real experiences of meaning and happiness on both a smaller and a larger scale, which constantly keep nurturing, establishing and sustaining the 'open yes'.²¹ This is, he notes, 'a rational basis for solidarity'.²² All the women described such fragments. They also spoke about the impact of the care they had received from the supporting charities. 'They saved my life', one woman said. Others described the importance of a safe space and non-judgemental relationships.

There are insights here which bring fresh illumination to CST principles. The women's voices describe the practical and moral challenge of sustaining your own dignity in the face of experiences that deny it. Their affirmation of moral selfhood, expressed in the desire to survive and in their openness to the relational care given by support workers and practiced among themselves, connects to an understanding of dignity as a continuing and communal task. As Anna Rowlands explains, dignity 'is both something we become and also something we are called to help others realize, including something we might be required to hold *in trust* for others through specific practices of care'.²³ In the integral vision of CST, human dignity is deeply relational, arising from the call to communion which is intrinsic to our personhood. It calls us to solidarity whenever the dignity of an individual or a group is denied or harmed. The experience of solidarity then reveals us to ourselves; it reveals that we gain, as well, as give, in whatever practical or relational goods are shared.

CST becomes more significant when we understand dimensions of human dignity *in practice*. Rowlands notes that it is the concrete conditions of daily life which beg the question of what dignity means, not as an abstract principle, but as a task and a commitment. Listening to women who have experienced the existential periphery of prostitution enables the discovery of common ground and the dismantling of prejudices and tendencies towards 'othering' which feed into the stigma and exclusion the women experience. Francis' call to attend to the peripheries carries an inherent risk of 'othering' people and situations as separate from whoever is speaking or trying to listen in a place that is not in the peripheries. The practices of encounter and listening reveal our mutual and reciprocal dignity and enable us to see that what matters about a periphery is its structural and contextual power and the harm that follows, not the limited description it implies about the people found there.

²¹*Ibid.*, 6.

²²*Ibid.*, 6.

²³*Towards a Politics*, 55.

There is a further insight into dignity that emerges from listening to women describe experience of prostitution. It is clear that dignity is expressed in and through our bodies. Our bodies are constitutive of our personhood and crucial to our flourishing and involved in our salvation. Bodies are not possessions to be used or exploited, and should not be bought or sold, because they ground our dignity and enable us to discover our true origin and destiny. The harm of prostitution is moral harm in how it diminishes and damages women's *embodied* dignity. Attention to the experience of prostitution in the light of this foundational principle illustrates how CST's social analysis and ethical reflection needs to listen to what happens to human bodies and the women's bodies in particular. CST frequently argues against social ills on the ground that they diminish human dignity; prostitution is such a profound and particular diminishment of women's dignity that it merits its own treatment.

Freedom, agency and structures of sin

When the women pondered how they first became involved in prostitution, they noticed how little freedom they had and how little agency they had exercised. They had variously experienced neglect or abuse as children; had been groomed by older men as young teenagers and then controlled by pimps; had found themselves in coercive relationships, often involving addiction and crime; or had been driven by financial need and social isolation into a life which they could not then escape. 'It just happened', one woman said. For another, 'I was 16, and I didn't think there was anything wrong with it'. Another assumed she had made a choice, but had come to realise that 'actually I was pretty desperate'. 'I don't think things are choices if they're two bad options', she continued. Most sensed the difference between the thin ideas of freedom and choice associated with liberal individualism, and the deeper reality of real freedom.

Within prostitution, they had suffered violence, rape and physical captivity; several had acquired severe mental and physical health problems. Some had given up children or had them removed from their care. They had been – and some still were – homeless and/or addicted to drugs. They do not trust the policing and justice systems to protect them, because their experience proves otherwise, so they do not report severe violence. Some live in the grip of criminal networks, forced to do things they know to be wrong. Those still caught up in prostitution lived in palpable fear for their own safety, which they guard with acutely accurate skills. They described a state of social exclusion that is different from the situation of poverty, an exclusion in which they sense that they are judged as 'dirty and dangerous'. Several spoke of feeling unable to touch the real world or to access normal life. 'There's a bit of a wall between me and everyone else, and I'm a bit invisible, I guess', one young woman still involved explained.

There is much here for social teaching principles to explore. The women who spoke in this research did not freely and knowingly choose prostitution so much as capitulate to forces and structures that were bearing down on their lives and which they were relatively powerless to resist. The circumstances of their lives left them vulnerable to coercion and exploitation and there was little to protect them. They use what agency they have to manage the risks and violence they experience and to inch towards safety and exit. Untangling the structures at work here is complex and involves cultural and social norms as well as legal and ethical boundaries. At a fundamental level, the women's

narratives reflect a continuing power imbalance between women and men and a cultural tolerance of male behaviours which assume a right of sexual access to women's bodies and to control over their lives. These power dynamics are *structures*, not simply aggregations of individual experiences, and they call for systemic as well as cultural change. In recent years, the #me too movement and other initiatives in wider society have done much to name and dismantle both disorders, but normative CST has yet to respond.²⁴

There is a further specificity about prostitution which compounds the impact of cultural norms and attitudes. Where a country's legal framework is permissive or indifferent in relation to prostitution, or treats it as a regulated economic sector, a social signal is given that men have a right to buy sexual access to women's bodies. The power of the male buyer is a social and economic force made possible by the social institution of prostitution embedded in the economic sector termed the sex trade. The market for women's bodies exists because there are buyers and there is profit to be made. The legal regime a country adopts in relation to prostitution communicates both a legal boundary and a social and cultural norm. It is instructive that the adoption of an abolitionist legal regime in countries such as Norway, Sweden and Ireland is seen both as a deterrent and 'a normative mechanism that seeks to give young men and women the message that buying a woman for sexual gratification is not acceptable or harmless behaviour'.²⁵ When the Swedish Government reviewed whether its law was working in 2010, they found that it was deterring the purchase of sex and that there had been 'a marked change of attitude to the purchase of sexual services with strong support for the law'.²⁶ In the UK, research into the attitudes of men who buy sexual access to woman's bodies found that their decision-making processes about buying sex reflect 'dominant discourses of gendered sexual mores' as well as the reality of a local sex trade market.²⁷ Strategies to reduce demand therefore need to tackle not just the market but also the socially sanctioned sense of entitlement that some men have. The research noted that whilst some men feel shame and guilt after paying for sex, for many others, buying sex is normal, a form of mainstream consumerism.²⁸

Here, the specificities of a gendered analysis interact with an aspect of market economics as well as questions about how far and on what basis legal systems should intervene to prevent and/or penalise a prostitution market. CST has an established critique of free markets, arguing that markets should have a social as well as an economic purpose, an obligation to work in an ethical way towards the common good. The critique includes a crucial principle of relevance here; that 'there are goods which of their nature cannot and must not be bought or sold'.²⁹ The adoption of laws against slavery and trafficking of persons reflect a wider social and political recognition of this principle, but in many countries the law stumbles in the area of prostitution. Whilst some countries have adopted an abolitionist legal model, others have chosen either a permissive stance which does not intervene in the market for sex or a regulatory approach of treating prostitution as normal employment although in need of extra protective measures for

²⁴ #MeToo is a loosely networked movement of women deciding to speak out in public about their experiences of sexual harassment and sexual violence which expanded rapidly around the world from 2017 onwards.

²⁵ O'Connor, *The Sex Economy*, 82.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁷ Coy, Horvath, Kelly, *Men buying Sex*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, para.40.

those involved. Where the statutory legal regime is partially permissive, as in the UK, or where prostitution is formally illegal but widespread and unhindered in practice as in many Asian and African countries, both women and men are given mixed and incoherent messages about whose rights matter and which harms should be prevented. In decriminalised or regulated prostitution regimes such as those in Germany, Australia and the Netherlands, the message given is that purchase of a woman's body for sexual purposes is socially acceptable.

The structural, social and legal dynamics operating in the prostitution trade can be examined using the CST principle of *structures of sin*, the idea that social systems and institutions can embed and operate as unjust or dehumanising forces. When sinful structures bear down on individual lives, they limit personal freedom and moral agency, revealing the inequalities of power which enabled their construction. Although the principle is well established in the corpus of papal CST texts, the tradition is wary about which social realities can reliably be judged as structures of sin, both because of the complexity of human motivation and action within social structures and from a concern not to lose the principle of personal moral responsibility. Despite this caution, papal and episcopal teaching does sometimes judge that particular situations merit such description. Where human life is directly threatened, for example, the teaching voice is ready to denounce and appeal for change. In an adjacent area to prostitution, the United States Conference of Bishops have set out a reasoned reflection on pornography as a pervasive structure of sin which is 'difficult to avoid, challenging to remove, and has negative effects that go beyond one person's actions'.³⁰ Reflecting the caution of the tradition, the bishops note that the prevalence of pornography is 'rooted in the personal sins of individuals who make, disseminate and view it, and by doing so, further perpetuate it as a structure of sin'.³¹

Attention to the experience of women who become trapped in prostitution and the societies which tolerate this points to other dimensions of structural sin. Conor Kelly explores the concept using insights from moral psychology and virtue ethics to understand the ways that social structures operate on people's wills by such means as incentivising self-interested actions or obfuscating the immoral consequences.³² He notes that evolution pre-disposes us to agree with our social group, and that our intuitions are socially pliable, influenced by people around us. When a society tolerates prostitution, when the sex trade operates in legitimate sectors and prostitution 'earnings' are counted in the country's GDP (as they are in the UK), and when the legal regime in place permits the purchase of women's bodies for sexual purposes, the social context tends to ignore what happens to the women involved and a disordered model of male sexual entitlement is normalised.

Prostitution reveals the intimacy of how people are affected by structural sin and the stranglehold through which it can operate. The multiple layers which accrete in the combination of economic, social and cultural factors which construct personal and social vulnerability and deny freedom for women delivered into prostitution are not simply external conditions. They operate inside women's *selves*, and in some circumstances,

³⁰*Create in Me*, 8.

³¹*Ibid.*, 8.

³²*Nature and Operation*.

their impact is overwhelming. There is a rebuke here to debates about whether structural sin takes sufficient account of individual agency or any calculus about degrees of mitigation or attenuation of responsibility. Prostitution stands as a textbook example of the interpenetration of calcified wrong social assumptions about male sexuality, historical patterns of dominance and ownership over women's bodies and the incentives created by economic markets which turn human goods and human persons into commodities. This is about the pervasiveness of sin, and the need for a radical differentiation between the conditions of those who suffer its consequences and those implicated in sustaining how it operates or who profit from it, and both should be connected to the wider societal failure to see the violence taking place. At the heart of this pervasiveness, a clear-eyed assessment of how sex and gender determine both intra-personal and interpersonal freedom is essential, required by the empirical facts.

A wider understanding of how structural sin operates enables recognition of how we are all complicit in the embedded structural sin which tolerates and does not adequately protest against the cultural objectification of women's bodies. John Paul II pointed out that that social sin includes the failure to oppose evils through 'secret complicity or indifference' or because they suppose it is impossible to change realities or sidestep the effort involved.³³ When the voices of those whose lives are fractured by the structures that enable prostitution are heard, the practical task for social mission of advocating for legislative reform emerges as an imperative. Rowlands proposes that 'narration from the *locus theologicus* of the dispossessed' is a crucial missing element in CST's development of the principle of structural sin.³⁴ The concept of structures of sin helps us understand what we need to look for when observing our social systems and cultures; the voices of those who suffer the evils thus identified help us to realise our personal and ecclesial responsibility to act.

Agency and Responsibility: Contesting the Catechism

Analysing prostitution with both a sensitivity to gender and the principle of structures of sin illuminates the problematic treatment found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). Prostitution is discussed in the category of offences against chastity:

Prostitution does injury to the dignity of the person who engages in it, reducing the person to an instrument of sexual pleasure. The one who pays sins gravely against himself: he violates the chastity to which his Baptism pledged him and defiles his body, the temple of the Holy Spirit. Prostitution is a social scourge. It usually involves women, but also men, children and adolescents (The latter two cases involve the added sin of scandal.) Whilst it is always gravely sinful to engage in prostitution, the imputability of the offence can be attenuated by destitution, blackmail or social pressure.³⁵

This treatment fails to distinguish adequately between the person who purchases sexual access and the situation of the person whose body is bought. It does scant justice to the impact of the personal and structural realities involved and the complicity of social institutions in the gendered inequality within which women become vulnerable to

³³*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, para 16.

³⁴*Towards a Politics*, 108.

³⁵Para. 2355.

prostitution and find themselves trapped in a life they never freely chose or desired. Neither does it take adequate account of the intra-personal fear and the psychological constraints in some women's circumstances and the ideologies which operate deep within our cultural conditioning. These are compounded by the enormous hurdles women face when they try to exit. They lack a normal employment history and often have criminal records related to prostitution law. Many still struggle with addictions or mental or physical health conditions. Some cannot escape the pimps or violent partners that control their lives. It is difficult to conclude that their involvement in prostitution reflected a real personal freedom or that they fully consented to what happens to them. Hille Haker, in a discussion of consent in relation to trafficking, comments that the impact of coercion is complex and should caution judgements about the authenticity of consent. Consent, she suggests, does not prevent an act such as exchanging money for sexual access from violating someone's human rights.³⁶

This does not mean that women's agency is completely eroded. As noted earlier, they make choices within overwhelming circumstances in order to manage risk and to survive. The *Catechism's* treatment of prostitution needs to be brought into dialogue with a CST-based analysis of the personal and structural factors and forces at work. Such a reading would be consonant with the work of moral theologians seeking a renewed moral theology based less on individual acts and more on what Joseph Selling terms 'the person integrally and adequately considered'.³⁷ Lisa Sowle Cahill expands this to include the social communities and relations that shape personal identity and agency in each context.³⁸ Prostitution is a case which reveals how the corpus of CST texts and the teaching of the magisterium on moral issues can fail to connect.

Prostitution and the Common Good

Francis has significantly expanded CST's sensitivity to themes of social violence. In *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*, he discusses the dimensions of social peace, which he explains as 'the stability and security provided by a certain order', called for by the common good.³⁹ These include the need to end conflict and pursue justice, the need to build a culture of authentic dialogue and processes of encounter and recognition, as well as harder edged matters such as distributive justice. He speaks sensitively of the need for remembering and for forgiveness and reconciliation in order to break cycles of violence. All these tasks are brought into the scope of what it means to work towards the common good, the full mutual and reciprocal flourishing of all. These themes are challenged by attention to women's experience of the social violence inherent in prostitution. The freshness and relevance of Francis' teaching on these themes could have been more powerful if he had paid more attention to forms of social violence which particularly affect women and their perspectives on what is needed to reach for social peace.

It is immediately apparent from listening to women affected by prostitution that they do not have access to either stability or security. Their lives are often precarious, with limited access to whatever social welfare arrangements a society has. The cycle of social

³⁶*Catholic Feminist Ethics Reconsidered*, 228.

³⁷Selling, *Reframing Catholic Theological Ethics*, Chapter 5.

³⁸Cahill, 'Reframing Catholic Ethics', 4.

³⁹*Laudato Si*, para. 157, *Fratelli Tutti*, para 226–254.

violence in which they become trapped combines multiple factors and is not resolved by dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation, nor by processes of encounter. As Francis himself recognises earlier in *Fratelli Tutti*, their primary need is for institutions that are effective in protecting their dignity and rights.⁴⁰ In the case of prostitution, this further points to the need for legal arrangements that deter and reduce prostitution by making the buying of sexual access an offence and penalising those who operate and profit from the prostitution trade. It matters too that when such laws exist, they are enforced. Stability and security are not possible when legal systems become irrelevant through lack of enforcement. It is among the most fundamental duties of a political system to ensure security and safety for all its citizens; the trade in sexual access to women's bodies for profit cannot be reconciled with this duty.

As noted above, Francis includes distributive justice as a necessary dimension of social peace. When viewed in relation to prostitution, it raises questions. Many women become involved in prostitution from dire economic necessity, particularly in countries with higher rates of poverty, but also in richer countries with high levels of inequality. One woman who had managed to exit prostitution described how it started for her, aged 16, having grown up in institutional care:

I come out of care, they just bunged me in this flat, nothing in it, no nothing and I thought well, how am I gonna furnish my place, and then someone showed me the ropes, and that was me, I was making money.

In a powerful essay on prostitution, Martha Nussbaum argues that the true answer to the problematic of prostitution is to increase economic autonomy for women who are poor and to ensure that their work treats them with dignity.⁴¹ Whilst Catholic teaching would contest her account of why prostitution in itself, which she terms 'taking money for the use of one's body', is not wrong, her diagnosis of the need for better economic options for women is relevant. The ethics of human work related to dignity and to justice are an area of strength for CST and apply significantly to the questions raised by prostitution.

The human processes of dialogue, encounter and reconciliation for which Francis calls require more translation in regard to prostitution. Most women do not want to remember what has happened to them. The memories are often traumatic. Many use drugs precisely in order to escape the memories. Nor is it clear how reconciliation is to be effected, or with whom. Part of the paradox is that whilst women have been harmed in multiple dimensions of their personhood by the men who buy access to their bodies and/or the men who control their lives, there are other men, partners or family members or friends, who are important positive figures in their lives. Yet they also need and value safe spaces that are women-only, such as the charities and mutual support networks that provide services. Specific reconciliation between men implicated in the sex trade and women who have suffered from its violence seems unlikely, but there could be elements of reconciliation in cultural moves to recognise the impact of forms of violence against women including prostitution. One of the hungers I encountered in the women who spoke to this research was a desire to feel socially included and to escape the stigma they

⁴⁰Para. 188

⁴¹Nussbaum, *Whether from Reason or Prejudice*.

feel attaches to their situation. There is potential here to challenge social attitudes and language relating to prostitution as a step towards recognition.

The healing of social violence involves more dimensions and social realities than CST has yet considered, and more understanding of the relational care and support that enables women to take faltering steps towards exit from prostitution. This is partly institutional and structural. When a new legal framework regarding prostitution was adopted in France in 2016, it abolished the offence of solicitation and prohibited the purchase of sex, signalling a crucial shift of liability from the victims of sexual exploitation to the perpetrators as well as requiring every local government region to set up an agency to create and support exit pathways out of prostitution by measures such as priority access to housing and financial aid. But other actors are needed as well. Faith-based organisations working in this field have created spaces that enable healing and restoration, supporting women to re-discover their own agency and freedom. Women who have survived and exited from prostitution are leading networks and projects that both advocate for change and seek to prevent other women and girls from exposure to risk. If the teaching voices of the Church could listen to their experience and understand more fully this particular existential and social periphery, the tradition would be enriched and expanded and able to speak more powerfully to a fractured social world.

Prostitution contradicts all that makes for social peace and for the common good. The task for CST is to dig into the specific contours of this contradiction, to bring to light the structures, attitudes and assumptions that need to be changed. 'Such is the magnitude of these situations, and their toll in innocent lives, that we must avoid every temptation to fall into a declarationist nominalism that would assuage our consciences', Francis remarks after listing forms of social exclusion including prostitution.⁴² Yet too often, the brief mentions in CST texts seem to be no more than this.

Conclusion

When a dialogue is engaged between the principles and perspectives central to CST and the experience and voices of women in the particular social periphery of prostitution, the potential for the tradition to explore and expand in new directions emerges. Concepts such as human dignity, structures of sin and the common good take on new and practical resonances which both validate and interrogate their meaning and point to work that the teaching tradition has still to do. These discoveries are made possible by attention to the specific experience of women in a process of both testimonial and hermeneutic inclusion. This requires courage in the teaching voices who author and authorise teaching texts. The subject matter of prostitution policy is highly contested in both ethics and politics and the Church in its social teaching treads warily in areas of law internal to countries, professing that it does not seek to propose 'technical solutions' to social problems. Yet in other areas such as human trafficking, capital punishment and environmental protections, all of which are also highly contested, CST texts as well as shorter papal messages have advocated for principles and values and even for specific legal arrangements. CST at both papal and local episcopal level could reason towards and support an abolitionist

⁴²*Fratelli Tutti*, para 188.

political ethic as a matter of protection of women and girls and as a necessary step towards enabling the mutual flourishing of all.

It is, as Francis remarks, often a weakness of CST that it remains stranded at the level of ‘mere generalities’.⁴³ It is also undoubtedly a weakness that CST does not seem to have listened to specific experiences of women even when these are intimately implicated in core themes it is discussing, such as social peace and social violence. An answer to both weaknesses is to tackle a specific periphery such as prostitution and engage the kind of dialogue attempted here. In Francis’ texts, the methodological principles as well as the conceptual frameworks are in place to enable such a development to happen. Such development would locate the social teaching voice of the Church in solidarity with one of the most neglected peripheries, an area that most societies and communities prefer to avoid. If anything is close to the heart of CST, it is the places and people that are most excluded and least recognised.

In this arena, the male teaching authority of the Church is disadvantaged, yet also has an opportunity to recognise this and seek the mediating people and spaces through which they can listen to women affected. Here too, in his invitation to the whole Church to become synodal in its way of living and working, Francis has opened a new and relevant path.⁴⁴ The case of prostitution, considered through a gendered lens and in the light of CST principles, is a suitable place for development of an even wider synodality which serves both the internal life and the social mission of the Church.

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Patricia Jones received her PhD from the University of Durham. Her doctoral research was an empirical study of how Catholic faith-inspired homelessness charities understand their work in relation to Catholic social teaching (CST). Her first post-doctoral project was research into the experience of women affected by prostitution in the light of CST. She is now a research associate in the Centre for Catholic Studies in Durham University, part of the Boundary Breaking project team, researching cultural and systemic aspects of the clerical child abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.

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⁴³*Evangelii Gaudium* para. 182

⁴⁴In 2020, Francis invited the entire Catholic Church to engage in a three year process of listening and discernment at every level to explore how the Church might become more faithful to its calling. This practice of synodality is understood both as a process leading to an event, the 2023–24 Synod of Bishops in Rome, and as a new style of pastoral life for the Church. See Approaches to the Synodal Pathway – Catholic Bishops’ Conference (cbcew.org.uk)

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