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UCLA Women's Law Journal

Title

No Turning Back: Two Nuns' Battle with the Vatican Over Women's Right to Choose. By Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey with Jane O-Reilly. New York: Poseidon Press, 1990. Pp. 332

Permalink

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Journal

UCLA Women's Law Journal, 1(0)

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Publication Date

1991

DOI

10.5070/L311017554

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BOOK REVIEW

NO TURNING BACK: TWO NUNS' BATTLE WITH THE VATICAN OVER WOMEN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE. By Barbara Ferraro and Patricia Hussey with Jane O'Reilly. New York: Poseidon Press, 1990. Pp. 332.

*Reviewed by Debra G. Hochman**

During the 1984 presidential campaign, Catholic bishops criticized vice-presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro's pro-choice stance, and declared it incomprehensible that any good Catholic could vote for someone who favored a woman's right to an abortion.¹ In defense of Ferraro, a full-page advertisement entitled "A Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists Among Committed Catholics" appeared in *The New York Times* on October 7, 1984.² The advertisement called for greater dialogue within the Catholic Church on the subject of abortion and proclaimed that the "official" Catholic view that abortion is morally wrong in all instances is not the only legitimate Catholic position. Twenty-four nuns, four priests, and sixty-nine Catholic lay people signed the statement.

Rome responded quickly to the nuns and priests who signed with an ultimatum: recant or give up your religious calling. After two years of pressure from the Vatican, only two nuns refused to retract their statement — Barbara Ferraro (no relation to Geraldine) and Patricia Hussey. *No Turning Back* tells the story of these two women: how they entered the order, fought for equality both inside and outside the Catholic Church, and ultimately resigned

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1. B. FERRARO & P. HUSSEY, *NO TURNING BACK: TWO NUNS' BATTLE WITH THE VATICAN OVER WOMEN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE* 217 (1990) [hereinafter *NO TURNING BACK*].

2. N.Y. Times, Oct. 7, 1984, at E7, col. 1.

from the order. Barbara and Pat, who alternate in telling their story, write in a conversational style that is straightforward, blunt, and provocative.³

The book opens with the climactic meeting of Barbara and Pat with Vatican officials sent to receive the two nuns' expected retraction. Arriving earlier than the Vatican delegation, the two women rearranged the furniture. Pat explains, "It is much harder to maintain hierarchy in a circle. So we moved the chairs and one unyielding couch into a ring. We would not have to sit before and beholden to the Vatican delegation. We would sit facing one another, equally."⁴ This quest for women and their experiences to be included in the circle forms the essence of *No Turning Back*.

The narrative itself takes the form of a circle, turning from the end of the tale — the meeting with Vatican officials — to the beginning, when each woman entered the order. As a young woman, Barbara's only role models were nuns and women who married and became mothers.⁵ Barbara believed that the most independent women became nuns. In 1962, Barbara entered the Sisters of Notre Dame at the age of eighteen.

Barbara entered the order under the "old" training: habits, sustained silence, shaved heads, and self-flagellation. Radios and television were forbidden. Even the women who taught current events classes were not permitted to read newspapers. Barbara lost her birth name to an assumed religious name, Sister Charles Marie.⁶ As a nun, she would be allowed to attend only one parent's funeral. (Happily, her parents outlived this rule and she never had to choose whose funeral to attend.) "Postulancy," Barbara writes, "was like boot camp . . . a program designed to break [one's] will, destroy [one's] sense of self, and cut off all [one's] loyalties to anyone or anything in the outside world."⁷ Against this process of "sister formation," Barbara's body rebelled. Boils covered her skin, ulcers developed, and her menstruation ceased. Despite these external manifestations of anxiety, Barbara remained in the order and after

3. Each author refers to herself by her first name. In keeping with this personal writing style, this Book Review also refers to the book's authors by their first names.

4. *NO TURNING BACK*, *supra* note 1, at 9.

5. Barbara's own mother had eleven children. After the ninth child was born, Barbara's mother won a prize for "Most Children" at Emmanuel College's Family Day. *Id.* at 11, 14.

6. Barbara chose "Charles," her father's name. The practice of nuns assuming male names was not uncommon. Though Barbara neglects to explain this phenomenon, she notes, "It is interesting how many of us chose male names." *Id.* at 33.

7. *Id.* at 25.

two and one-half years took her vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

When Pat entered the order five years later, religious life had changed tremendously. Pat observes, "Meat on Fridays, mass on Saturday night, nuns in short skirts! It was all very startling."⁸ Nuns were encouraged to ask questions, compose their own vows, and interact with people in the world. Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council ("Vatican II") provoked these tumultuous changes. Vatican II called for an *aggiornamento*: a renewal, revitalization, and reexamination of the meaning of Catholicism in the modern world. Nuns were instructed to educate themselves, to go out into the world.

Factions developed based on how eagerly nuns welcomed the changes of Vatican II. Groups formed comprised of "no-no's," "so-so's," and "go-go's." Barbara and Pat were definitely "go-go's." Accepting Pope John XXIII's challenge for women to educate themselves, Barbara earned a doctorate in ministry, Pat a master of divinity. Exploding archaic images of nuns, Barbara became a parish pastoral minister and Pat worked in a factory. Together the women established a shelter for the homeless, traveled to Nicaragua, marched in protests, discussed the new feminist theologians,⁹ and contemplated the existence of a female deity.

But vestiges of the "old order" remained. The Church continued to bar women from becoming priests. To Barbara, ordaining female priests seemed inevitable. She reasoned that nuns outnumber priests, outperform them in higher education,¹⁰ and are in closer contact with the people in the parish. Barbara herself hoped to enter the priesthood.

Barbara's hopes for ordainment, however, were destroyed with the election of Pope John Paul II.¹¹ Pope John XXIII's "renewal" became Pope John Paul II's "restoration." Under Pope John Paul II, the Church returned to pre-Vatican II ideology and traditional

8. *Id.* at 61.

9. See, e.g., M. DALY, *BEYOND GOD THE FATHER: TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION* (1973).

10. According to Barbara, 65% of American nuns hold masters degrees and 25% doctoral degrees, while 24% of American bishops have masters and 10% doctorates. *NO TURNING BACK*, *supra* note 1, at 62. Barbara fails to provide what percentage of priests hold masters and doctorates. However, she implies that, because priests are subordinate to bishops in the Catholic hierarchy, the percentage of priests holding advanced degrees would be less than the percentage of bishops holding such degrees.

11. Pope John Paul II was elected on October 16, 1978. J. KELLY, *OXFORD DICTIONARY OF POPES* 326 (1986).

values. Pope John Paul II, Pat writes, is a man "firm in his No's: no birth control, no married priests, no abortions, and definitely no women priests."¹²

Echoing the notion that "biology is destiny," Barbara acknowledges that she "was completely qualified for the priesthood in every respect except that [she] had been born with different body parts"¹³ To protest the exclusion of women from the priesthood, Barbara and Pat joined a group of nuns who infiltrated and disrupted priest ordination ceremonies. In the ceremony, when the bishop calls an ordinate to be ordained, the ordinate responds "I am ready and willing." Instead, at the appropriate moment in the solemn ceremony, Barbara, Pat, and other nun protesters would stand and proclaim: "I am ready and willing!"

According to Barbara and Pat, the Church expects women — especially nuns — to obey, not challenge, the Church hierarchy. When women challenged the Church's male hierarchy, the hierarchy responded with sexist statements. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, believed that American nuns' contact with the outside world had damaged them; they had been "contaminated by the 'feminist mentality.'"¹⁴ Trying a "softer" approach, Pope Paul VI stated that "'equality makes woman virile and depersonalized: it does violence to that which is profound in her.'"¹⁵

"[T]he institutional church and its practices," Barbara realized, "had become as strangers to women's experiences."¹⁶ When a woman consults a priest because her husband prevents her from taking night classes to obtain her high school equivalency degree, the priest instructs the woman that her first duty is to her husband. Priests similarly dismiss women who try to speak to them about abortion.

But Barbara and Pat listen. Through their work with poor and abused women, they hear the personal stories of girls and women who sometimes decide to have abortions: daughters forced to have sex with their fathers, daughters forced into prostitution by mothers who need money to support drug habits, women who have been

12. NO TURNING BACK, *supra* note 1, at 140.

13. *Id.* at 154.

14. *Id.* at 233.

15. *Id.* at 259.

16. *Id.* at 156. The authors refer to the Catholic Church as "the church," not as "the Church." This spelling is not an error, but rather a statement of belief. In keeping with the authors' views, this Book Review retains their version when quoting passages from their book.

raped, and mothers who are so poor and overburdened that they simply lack the resources to support even one more child. Barbara and Pat came to realize that, despite what the institutional church teaches, abortion is not always an unspeakable sin. Sometimes abortion is a moral decision. And, they proclaim, "no one except each individual woman is ultimately capable of deciding what she should do."¹⁷

By signing the *New York Times* advertisement, Barbara and Pat hoped to spark a dialogue within the Church on the issue of abortion. Instead, they ignited a scandal. As Pat observes, "causing scandal and confusion is the worst thing you can do in the Catholic church. The only thing worse is having sex."¹⁸ While Barbara and Pat viewed themselves as "faithful dissenters," Monsignor William Smith, a moral theologian from New York, denounced them as "'two girls who are pimping for Planned Parenthood . . .'"¹⁹ "In challenging the church's adamant opposition to abortion," Pat explains, "we were championing women as responsible moral agents and as full participants in the life of the church."²⁰ In its meeting with the nuns, however, the Vatican delegation denied them the very dignity and respect for which they were fighting. Barbara and Pat told the Vatican officials about their combined forty-three years in the order, their advanced theological degrees, their work in the shelter, and their conviction that abortion may sometimes be a moral decision for a Catholic to make. But the Vatican officials stroked Pat's arm, pinched Barbara's cheeks, and asked in Italian, "'What would your mommies and daddies think if you were no longer nuns?'"²¹ The Vatican officials reduced two women who had devoted their lives to the Church to naughty little girls.

Though Barbara and Pat were informed that they would not be dismissed from the order "at this point," they recognized that they would be threatened with dismissal whenever they publicly expressed views that diverged from an approved Church position. Realizing that they could no longer remain as nuns, Barbara and Pat resigned from the order. Today they still work in the homeless shelter they founded and continue to minister to the "invisible people — the homeless, women, minorities, people with AIDS — with-

17. *Id.* at 214.

18. *Id.* at 276.

19. *Id.* at 317.

20. *Id.* at 10.

21. *Id.* at 298 (quoting Archbishop Fagiolo, secretary of the Congregation for Religious and Sacred Institutes).

out fighting or supporting a male hierarchy that made those people invisible in the first place.'"²²

No Turning Back tells a story of profound courage and determination. It inspires the reader to imagine a Church that acknowledges the real lives of its parish, a Church which treats women as equals. While Barbara and Pat may have failed to create a dialogue within the Church, they have succeeded in stimulating the reader to ask the questions: Why can't responsible dissent exist within the Catholic Church? Why can't women be ordained? And why is abortion the most divisive issue within American Catholicism today? As Elizabeth Cady Stanton observed, "The first step in the elevation of women under all systems of religion is to convince them that the great Spirit of the Universe is in no way responsible for any of these absurdities."²³

22. San Francisco Chron., Oct. 14, 1990, Sunday Review, at 1, col. 1, 11, col. 2.

23. M. DALY, *supra* note 9, at 13 (quoting Elizabeth Cady Stanton).