Unconventional Sisterhood
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The Woman Question

I have been arguing that the sisters’ involvement with the Siyudad represents in part a bid to legitimate their feminist activism, but in what sense(s) are the nuns in fact “feminists”? To begin with, we might examine Sister Justine’s apparently significant role in catalyzing Missionary Benedictine (as well as public Filipino) awareness of gender issues. Although the sister is hardly solely responsible for the congregation’s feminist leanings, she has attained a certain reputation as a prototypical feminist activist both within and outside the convent. Indeed, my interest in the Missionary Benedictines was initially sparked in part by Sister Justine’s public face: I was intrigued by her simultaneous identification as Missionary Benedictine sister, director of the Institute of Women’s Studies, and editor of and contributing author to several IWS-sponsored texts on women in the Philippines. Moreover, however diverse their personal understandings of feminism, my interviewees unanimously credited her for their relatively newfound commitment to the cause of women in the Philippines. When I asked my informants how and when they first began critically attending to gender issues, all mentioned their colleague by name.

Sister Micha, for example, claimed to have first begun consciously identifying as feminist after having been assigned to St. Scholastica’s College as a junior sister. Although Sister Micha had already been exposed to feminist theology during formation, Sister Justine had really been the one to sensitize her to the full importance of gender issues. After all, Sister Justine talked about gender all the time. She would challenge the Missionary Benedictines to use inclusive language, for instance—making for some interesting prayer sessions. What’s more, she had enrolled many of the nuns, including Sister Micha, in the pilot course for SSC’s women’s studies program, which had had a major impact on the congregation.
Likewise, Sister Josephine attributed her understanding of gender dynamics to Sister Justine—who, she told me “has had the widest involvement of all the religious and priests or lay in the country” with women’s issues. After listening to Sister Justine’s comments during communal sharing sessions, Sister Josephine had signed up for a one-month intensive Trainor’s Training session at the IWS. Nor was she the only one. Others of my informants related similar stories: “Sister Justine persuaded me to enroll in one of the IWS classes”; “Sister Justine gave seminars to us during some of our nightly recreation sessions”; “Sister Justine asked me to accompany her to one of GABRIELA’s rallies for women.”

The Making of a Missionary Benedictine Myth

If the nuns I talked with universally agreed that Sister Justine played a critical role in encouraging their developing feminism, though, what are we to make of the sister’s seemingly legendary status? Without minimizing Sister Justine’s actual influence, it is important to consider the probability that she is as much a modern-day myth as a woman. While my interviewees spoke of Sister Justine on separate occasions during private sessions, hopefully permitting some freedom from concerns about congregational watchdogs, our discussions hardly afforded me access to unadulterated truth. I do not suspect anyone of lying to me—these were women committed to honesty by virtue of their faith—but it remains important to take account of the ways in which community ideologies can influence member understandings. In other words, the consistency with which the nuns credited Sister Justine for sparking their interest in women’s issues may reflect a priory mythos concerning the sister’s role as much as anything else.

Nor should it be forgotten that we are talking about interview sessions here. My informants’ narratives cannot be divorced from their presumed intentions to present themselves to me in a positive light, particularly given their knowledge that I was writing about them—an endeavor extending their potential audience far beyond the relative privacy of our daily interactions, as they all knew. Moreover, the nuns knew I was interested specifically in investigating gender within the context of their own lives, religion, and nationality. Likewise, my interviewees were cognizant of my affiliation with the IWS. And, while I never explicitly identified myself as feminist unless asked, most of my interviewees simply presumed me such.
On the positive side, this meant they weren’t shy about expressing their feminist opinions around me, much less about criticizing sexism in the Church, Philippine society, and even their own families. On the other hand, this may have rendered the nuns less likely to openly acknowledge possible reservations about policies implemented by the congregation—and Sister Justine—to forward a feminist agenda. At least some of my informants appeared a bit insecure talking with me about Filipina feminism on a more theoretical level, too. When I asked about gender dynamics in the Philippines, the usually effusive Sister Micha, for example, surprised me by repeatedly protesting that she wasn’t an expert but was “new at it.” And she was not the only one to respond this way to such queries: on the relatively rare occasions when I directly questioned my interviewees about their understandings of Filipina womanhood, most prefaced their answers with warnings that they were just learning about “all this” and that I should really be talking with Sister Justine.

Sister Justine herself, in contrast, appeared quite comfortable identifying herself as an expert on gender, displaying significant confidence in her ability to talk with other feminists about feminism. Moreover, she appeared quite comfortable openly discussing her public role as a political activist. Indeed, she told me that she had been reprimanded for her radicalism by the Manila archbishop, thereby effectively underscoring the point that she has made herself very much a rabble-rouser with respect to a politics far left of the official Catholic Church. She talked with evident pride of a European scholar working on a thesis about her, too, and she presents herself as having held primary responsibility not only for establishing the first center for women’s studies in the Philippines but also for cofounding both what she claims to have been the first explicitly Philippine feminist organization, Pilipina, and a well-known umbrella feminist collective, GABRIELA.

In addition, biographers like Almanzor emphasize the sister’s self-confidence and readiness to take on leadership positions, characterizing Sister Justine as “committed to blazing new trails and breaking new ground. . . . [The sister] says, ‘All through life, I always wanted to do something new, something different.’ . . . She has charisma, a pleasing personality and an engaging ability to make people work together” (Almanzor 1990, 340). Nor are descriptions intended to be anything but laudatory. Nonetheless, Sister Justine’s ambitions and self-assurance alike notably contrast with both traditional cultural understandings of appropriate womanhood and traditional Church conceptions of appropriate sisterhood. This is not to say that other Filipinas haven’t success-
fully managed very public political roles (Imelda Marcos and Cory Aquino most immediately come to mind), but most Philippine women in such positions acquire their power through politically powerful men or family dynasties with which they are associated. In an admittedly clichéd and overly generalized sense, although it is considered appropriate for women like Imelda and Cory to get involved in their husbands’ work, it is considered much less appropriate for single women outside the bounds of familial protection and endorsement to agitate for potentially unpopular causes. While male Popes, priests, and bishops are expected to communicate God’s will to the public, then, modesty of both demeanor and character is more typically expected of sisters.²

Most of my informants were modest about their work, too, if not about their opinions and desires. Sister Mary Peter neglected to mention that she was the subprioress until our fourth or fifth otherwise intensive and intimate interview; Sister Virginia constantly played down the significance of her role as vocation directress; Sister Josephine worried at length about whether or not she was a good enough teacher; Sister Micha fretted about the possibility that people might not like her. Sister Justine’s readiness to place herself in the public eye and take individual responsibility for her feminist activities and opinions, in contrast, has doubtless not only effectively forwarded her activist agenda but also rendered her a particularly likely candidate for mythologization on the part of the larger congregation. Her willingness to openly advocate radical gender reform has presumably contributed to the growth of Benedictine tales concerning the primacy of her feminist initiative, irrespective of the actualities of the other sisters’ involvement in their congregation’s radicalization. What’s more, the fact that she has been featured in at least two collections about “extraordinary” women in the Philippines (Almanzor 1990; Ancheta-Sabilano 1995) testifies to the extent to which she has already become a legend. In fact, with repetition, her biography has become a rather slick narrative of critical moments of revelation and action; it not only carries clear inspirational potential, but is also highly self-conscious, patterned, and formalized.

A Cultural Catalyst

On the other hand, while it would clearly be a mistake to search for the histories of social movements in the mythologized histories of their most vocal and visible members alone, it would also be a mistake to ignore the role particularly charismatic and inspired individuals play in
the genesis of such movements. Certain cultural and environmental conditions—of crisis or even of long-repressed dissatisfaction—undeniably lend themselves to rebellion or revolution. Yet in the absence of some sort of compelling incitement to change, serious transformational challenges to the status quo may simply never gain much footing. In short, the impetus of either particularly motivated leaders or collective moments of trauma may well be necessary to catalyze the reconfiguration of traditional patterns of thought and behavior on a socially significant level. And Sister Justine has arguably served as just such a cultural catalyst for the Missionary Benedictines. Although hardly the only feminist in the community, and although feminist partly precisely because of her training and experiences as a nun, the sister does appear to have been largely responsible for the adoption of larger congregation policies mandating a concern for women’s rights in the 1980s.

Nor should Sister Justine’s readiness to assume an unpopular stance in pressing for the revision of Philippine gender norms be downplayed. Within the Philippine context, simply identifying as feminist and explicitly promoting feminism represent potentially subversive activities in their own right. While feminism is in actuality an ambiguous, unstable, and variable tag, the term is loaded with negative connotations for many Filipinos. The popular image of the feminist in the Philippines is that of an aggressive, masculine, lesbian, and, again, Westernized woman harboring unreasonable hate for and resentment toward males. Although such characterizations obviously sorely misrepresent the real diversity of women and men who consider themselves feminist, such misconceptions—all highly threatening to existing ideologies of gender and sexuality in the Philippine context—continue to generate widespread social aversion to feminism. Indeed, Filipino wariness of feminism is arguably more a matter of insecurity about the perceived vulnerability of culturally entrenched conceptions of person, role, and family than a matter of actual objections to specific policy changes.

Simply by openly, unabashedly, embracing and defending feminism, then, Sister Justine already represents a challenge to traditional mass Philippine values. The example she is setting by proclaiming herself feminist might in fact be understood as constituting a form of rabble-rousing. And her radical rhetoric is all the more significant given the respect historically granted nuns as moral exemplars. As intimated earlier, Church affiliation renders revolutionary activity and the expression of what otherwise might be unpopular reformist ideologies more admissible in the Philippine context—one has only to think of the involvement of monastics in, for instance, the Philippine rebellion.
against Spain, the People Power movement against the corrupt Marcos administration, and the formation of Basic Christian Communities in cooperation with the Philippine Communist Party. Again, the religious habit both affords Catholic sisters a certain freedom to engage in and lends an aura of legitimacy to what might normally be far more quickly socially prohibited political activity.

Indeed, nuns, in particular, are in a prime position to influence gender norms in the Philippines precisely because, to many Filipinos, religious sisterhood still represents traditional feminine virtue. As already noted, Catholic sisters are typically—almost stereotypically—imagined to be the best of wardens and role models alike for young Filipinas. Admittedly, such characterizations derive more from the circulation of stories about Catholic-school rigidity with respect to rules and regulations than any real comprehension of anything modern-day nuns do beyond praying and slapping students’ wrists. On the other hand, the representation of nuns as rigorous guardians of female purity may well reflect the historical realities of more orthodox and more cloistered forms of convent life. Many of the older lay Catholic-educated Filipinas with whom I talked clearly recalled getting reprimanded by strict—and often foreign—sisters for speaking indigenous tongues in school or running late in rainy season floods or any number of other decidedly petty infractions.

Unfortunately, the very triviality of such disciplinary activity seems to have obscured any real understanding on the part of the general populace—and, quite probably, on the part of at least some of the disciplinarians themselves—of deeper congregational commitment to a moral mission. At the same time, however, such stereotyping seems to have been the very thing to convince Filipino parents that their daughters are in good hands at convent schools. Recalling Sister Placid’s parents’ rationale for sending her to SSC, the assumption here seems to be that nuns’ supervision represents some sort of guarantee that girls will not date too early, get pregnant before marriage, or fail in some sense to maintain a ladylike decorum at all times, all in accord with the Marian virtues initially introduced into the archipelago by the Catholic Church itself.

Nor is the supposition that nuns are generally committed to their wards’ welfare unfounded, notwithstanding widespread misconceptions concerning the nature of that commitment. Most monastics are deeply involved with questions of morality and integrity. More specifically, whatever disparities exist between current convent ideologies and parental/public understandings of femininity, the sisters running St. Scholastica’s have always attempted to shape their pupils...
according to their own, if not society’s, conceptions of ideal womanhood. In the past—even the recent past, up until the 1960s and 1970s—this meant encouraging the skills and demeanor deemed appropriate to responsible wifehood and motherhood. Now, however, the Missionary Benedictines are educating their charges to be independent, self-confident, activist, and concerned with women’s rights in the Philippine context—largely due to Sister Justine’s influence. And, ironically, SSC’s current efficacy in promoting such new possibilities for being Filipina may be at least partly due to a reputation built on previous conformity to cultural models of womanhood: the convent’s past has garnered the trust of the Philippine elite, affording the now increasingly feminist Missionary Benedictines significant power.

FANNING THE FLAMES OF A FILIPINA FEMINISM

Before further considering the more tangible effects of Sister Justine’s legacy as a catalyst for congregational change, however, we might do well to examine the previously mentioned (if, again, already highly mythologized) history of her interest in creating a feminism fit for the Philippines—an aspiration grounded in personal experiences of clear subjective and affective significance, if neither strictly determinative of nor necessary to such radicalization. Like many of my informants, she began her story with the national-crisis situation in the Philippines in the 1970s, during which time, she observed, she first became politicized. It all started with her “baptism of fire”:

In 1975, [the] situation of crisis, oppression and injustice . . . made me respond to a telephone brigade asking nuns, seminarians and priests to come to the rescue of 600 striking workers from La Tondeña, a wine factory. It was the first attempted strike after the strike ban was issued following the declaration of Martial Law in September, 1972 . . . . There I had my first encounter with military brutality and I experienced helplessness, having to face the reality of force and institutional violence. (Mananzan 1992, 64–65)

In other words, while convent life may have prepared Sister Justine for an activist career, the physical experience of oppression appears to have been important in catalyzing her commitment to social action outside the Church. Nor was the revelation short term; rather, it radi-
calized the sister in a more universal sense, both sensitizing her more generally to situations of exploitation and domination and rendering an activist response to such situations more imperative.

On the other hand, if critical to Sister Justine’s biography as a form of baptism into social action, the sister’s support of the La Tondeña strikers effectively meant recruitment into an already existing leftist/nationalist effort in the Philippines. In contrast, her involvement in Philippine feminism appears to have been more a matter of her own initiative. Sister Justine claims to have first gained real insight into women’s rights issues when invited to a World Council of Churches–sponsored women’s conference in Venice, during which she was assigned a paper on female political detainees. Significantly, the conference provided a relatively safe, personally (and nationally) non-threatening context within which she could begin exploring gender issues, first in terms of problems elsewhere, then as a matter of possible national concern:

I interviewed two women in [a] detention camp, and really I was so shocked by what they have experienced, you know, gang rape by the military, tortured. . . . I felt that, my goodness, why are they not crazy? You know, they should be crazy. . . . And when I gave the paper in Venice, I still had the political-activist point of view [that] this is military oppression . . . but then there also I listened to women talking about incest, about wife-beating. . . . Then I began to think, oh yes, but all these are in the Philippines too, you know, and the political prisoners had Amnesty International that documents everything, but who documents violence against women, you know, who makes a tribunal to try these violations of women’s rights? So I thought, . . . when I come home I really have to do something about this.

For the first time, then, the sister began to reconsider traditional wisdom concerning the situation of women in the Philippines. Nor was this inconsequential. The republic is often represented as an egalitarian nation—a matter of pride for at least some Filipinos, who talk of how well educated Filipinas are, observe that Filipinas often control household finances, and heap praise upon Corazon Aquino as an example of Filipina political power. The myth of a matriarchal society is commonly invoked by Filipinos resistant to feminism, too, the argument being that there is no need for feminism in the Philippines because Filipinas are happy as is. In Venice, though, Sister Justine
appears to have realized that mythologizing the comparative power and privilege of Filipinas means obscuring the ways in which Philippine women are in fact exploited and subjugated by virtue of their gender.

The sister isn’t alone in having benefited from such revelatory distance, either. The story of Sister Justine’s feminist radicalization recalls the lives of nineteenth-century Filipino *ilustrados* (including José Rizal) inspired to work toward the possibility of an independent Philippine republic at least partly due to an education abroad in Western liberal thought. As creative agents of change, the *ilustrados* appropriated much of what they learned, applying it to their home situation as justification for a revolution against colonial Spain, just as Sister Justine began campaigning for reform in the Philippines, inspired by her experiences in Venice: “When I came home, that was in 1977 . . . I met three other women who felt the same way, so we started the first really manifestly feminist organization in the Philippines, . . . Pilipina.”

Unlike many Philippine women’s organizations associated with and derived from leftist and nationalist groups, Pilipina was unique, according to Sister Justine, in identifying women’s concerns as the primary focus rather than simply as a secondary issue. At the same time, Pilipina’s efforts remained clearly situated within the Philippine context. The idea was not to map foreign forms of feminism onto the Philippines but rather to quite specifically attend to the sorts of difficulties Filipinas themselves face in the modern day. Sister Justine “believes that a feminist movement in the Third World must have a Third World orientation. She sees women’s liberation as an essential aspect of total societal liberation . . . contextualized in the economic, political, and socio-cultural transformation of society” (Almanzor 1990, 348–49).

The sister has carried such concerns over into the General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Liberty, and Action (GABRIELA), too—a much better known Philippine feminist collective explicitly committed to the struggle against the “subordination, discrimination, and oppression of women as women” (Almanzor 1990, 345). The acronym was taken from a recently reclaimed nineteenth-century revolutionary heroine of the Spanish colonial era, signaling a desire to ground modern Filipina feminism in past Filipinas’ resistance, contradicting the assumption that Third World feminism is necessarily rooted in First World feminism. And while Sister Justine emphasizes Pilipina’s importance to the history of Philippine feminism, she is probably better known for her leadership of GABRIELA. She was elected GABRIELA’s national chairperson in 1986 and 1987. Chairing the organization is no small thing, either: the position affords
considerable influence over the definition of the proper concerns of Philippine feminism as a whole. GABRIELA represents the largest coalition of feminists in the country, providing a forum for common action and discussion alike. Although a mere decade old, the collective boasted 420 member organizations, institutions, desks, and programs as of the mid-1990s, proclaiming itself “an alliance of women whose base can be found among grassroots women—peasants, workers, urban poor, indigenous women, fisher folks, vendors—those who are the most oppressed and marginalized. Together with housewives, women students, religious and professionals, more than 50,000 women fall under [GABRIELA’s] mantle.”5 More specifically, the group opposes the Philippine sex trade, the mail-order-bride industry, and the abuse of female EPZ employees, while advocating for gender equity legislation, sexual-harassment laws, the formation of crisis centers for victims of rape and domestic violence, the establishment of day-care centers and primary health care projects for urban poor women, and education concerning the benefits of breast-feeding instead of baby formula.6

Engendering a New Mission Thrust

While Sister Justine’s involvement in Pilipina and GABRIELA has obvious public significance, however, the sister has also agitated for reform within the congregation, as intimated previously. Indeed, Sister Placid observed that the majority of the Missionary Benedictines are now expressly committed to women’s rights, and Sister Micha told me none of the newer sisters would outright condemn feminism because, given current congregational feeling, “it would look funny.” More tangible changes in structure and policy have been made, too. The convent formators now explicitly teach gender awareness to the postulants and novices, focusing on biblical women such as Judith, Esther, Ruth, and Deborah in their readings and taking entrants to seminars on women’s issues. In addition, the Missionary Benedictines are by now well versed in the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, using inclusive language. The nuns have also changed their Liturgy of Hours to make the language inclusive, with the sole exception of references to God as “Father.” Even here there was progress, however; Sister Placid informed me that many of the nuns no longer think of God as “he” but rather more as “yin and yang.” She now often says “she” in her own prayers—because, she explained, not only is “he” already in “she” but the femi-
nine seems more appropriate for the Creator given the female role in birthing.

Such changes have made inroads in the morning services offered at St. Scholastica’s chapel, too. Early every Sunday, the well-guarded gates and the heavy church doors are thrown open to the public. And English-language missalettes, published by the Philippine Church as a guide to the Mass, are normally set for the taking atop a table underneath the holy water. Notably, the daily guides not only provide a means of distraction while waiting for the presiding father but also serve a critical and—if the speed with which they disappear can be taken as any indication—much appreciated role in the audience’s experience of the services themselves. As I realized after watching a neighbor of mine murmuring in tandem with the priest even when the priest was supposed to be speaking alone, the missalettes afford participants an opportunity to follow along with, better comprehend, and practice English, thereby simultaneously gaining and displaying status.

If the use of English attracts a certain number of worshipers, however, I am primarily concerned here with the studied attention with which my fellow churchgoers perused their missalettes. Because many of the faithful read the publications in time with the speakers up front, many undoubtedly noticed occasions on which the spoken word clashed with the printed word. Certainly, I noticed—although no one ever pointed the matter out to me in explicit fashion. Whenever and wherever the missalettes read “he” or “him” or “fathers” or “brothers,” the oblates recruited by the Missionary Benedictines would invariably substitute “he and she” or “them” or “ancestors” or “brothers and sisters.” While the sisters couldn’t do much about the attendant priests’ homilies, they could and did go over the upcoming Sunday gospel readings with their liturgists every Friday or Saturday to insure the replacement of sex-biased terms with inclusive language. In fact, ironically, the very sexism of the Philippine Church’s official publications has provided the sisters with a particularly effective means of raising their flock’s awareness of the significance of their terminological choices. It was hard to overlook the discrepancies between the texts and the testimonials when reading along during Mass.

The altar girls recruited by the nuns also represented a deviation from long-standing Catholic tradition. Prior to Vatican II, only boys were deemed suitable assistants to the priests; nor has there been much change in most Philippine Masses since. Of all the services I attended—and I patronized many different Manila chapels while in the field—the
ones organized by the Missionary Benedictines were the only ones at which I witnessed girls serving at the altar.

If unorthodox, though, SSC’s services still attracted a good number of chapel regulars. The elderly man who habitually sat at the side by the back door, shuffling out to allow others in and rising and sitting before the rest of us in anticipation of all formal requests, seemed quite unperturbed by the girls at the altar. The lady in white with the traditional cloth over her graying hair and a faith strong enough to give her the shakes before communion didn’t seem fazed by the addition of “sisters” to the “brothers” of the Gospel. The teenage boys wearing T-shirts and jeans and hiding in the back of the chapel, as if slightly embarrassed by their devotion, seemed accepting of the sisters’ implicit critiques of biblical sexism. What’s more, if constancy of attendance can be taken as an indication, most of the other worshipers must have been relatively satisfied with Mass at St. Scholastica’s. Notwithstanding the proximity of another church within easy walking distance, the priory chapel was usually quite crowded on Sundays, enough so that I had to plan an early arrival in order to insure myself of a copy of one of the missalettes. To all appearances, in other words, SSC’s services effectively provided a forum within which the public could be sensitized to gender without explicit preaching about that frightening and off-putting term, feminism.

St. Scholastica’s College

Institutional changes have been made within the college itself, too. As earlier noted, the Missionary Benedictines’ schools haven’t always forwarded feminist education. The first German sisters who came to the Philippines in the early 1900s in response to a call for religious assistance on the part of socially active congregations still adhered to rather essentialist assumptions about proper womanhood and instructed their young Filipina pupils in the Marian virtues in quite traditional fashion. In other words, they trained their students to be demure, to be passive, to defer to male authorities, to focus on social and domestic graces, to aspire to loving maternity, and to be good and faithful and forgiving spouses—in short, to define themselves in terms of smooth relationships with others rather than in terms of intellectual abilities or career ambitions in potential conflict with more proper familial commitments.

Things have changed a good deal since then, however; the Missionary Benedictine schools are now known within Philippine academic cir-
icles for their women’s studies courses. In fact, a lay friend who taught at De La Salle University told me that, unlike most nuns, the Missionary Benedictines weren’t sedate and conservative, and had given St. Scholastica’s a reputation as a feminist stronghold. Another lay acquaintance observed that SSC was the place to send your daughter if you wanted her to be strong, self-confident, and socially aware.

And all of this is due, again, largely to Sister Justine’s influence. As SSC’s vice president and college dean in 1982, the sister began designing the school’s women’s studies program, purportedly the first such separate program in the Philippines. Furthermore, given the success of a pilot class organized in 1985 to test out an experimental curriculum compiled from recommendations made by local Filipina activists, introductory courses on gender issues have now been made a requirement for graduation. Interested students can also now pursue a cognate in women’s studies focused on four core classes: The Development of Women’s Thoughts and Feminism, Gender Issues in Development and Modernization, Woman and Religion, and Current Issues on Women.10

The college’s women’s studies instructors make efforts to combine classroom work and outside activity in their courses, too. Carmen, for instance, regularly assigns interviews with women workers; takes her students to women-focused concerts, poetry readings, and art exhibits; and ultimately asks her pupils to develop feminist agendas for either personal or group renewal. Moreover, she distributes the addresses and phone numbers of existing networks of Filipinas involved in social-reform efforts at the end of every term in hopes of encouraging at least some Scholasticans to pursue activist careers on behalf of women in the Philippines. Many of SSC’s students are also taken on field trips to visit peasant or urban poor women who are organized and articulate about their problems. In addition, efforts are made to openly discuss female sexuality and biology: while SSC now accepts single mothers (and is the only Catholic school in the country to do so), Carmen explained, the sisters hardly want to see more teenage pregnancies due to ignorance about birth control.

The Institute of Women’s Studies

The Institute of Women’s Studies, established in 1990, represents an important milestone, too, as both an educational and an activist foundation. Officially, the IWS is associated with but not in fact controlled by SSC: while SSC students and faculty are encouraged to take advan-
tage of its resources, it maintains links with other women’s organizations, and many of the women it serves are outside academe. More specifically, the institute advertises a Curricular and Training Program encompassing the women’s studies program at St. Scholastica’s College, an Intercultural Course for Women and Society designed for women from Asia and the Pacific, and Trainor’s Training for Filipina organization leaders and educators. In addition, the IWS offers short-term classes on gender and personal development, sponsors and publishes research on women, houses a small but wide-ranging library of women’s studies books, and manages various outreach programs designed to publicize women’s rights issues.11

Moreover, the institute is now housed in a building named Nursia after the birthplace of the sibling saints Benedict and Scholastica in a rather suggestive symbolic statement concerning possible parallels between the original home of Benedictinism and its Manileño incarnation as a sort of nursery for the development of feminist Missionary Benedictinism in the present Philippine situation. Indeed, the name underscores the fact that Sister Justine’s understanding of what she calls the “woman question” is intricately connected with her understanding of spirituality.12 Likewise, Nursia’s rather prominent stained-glass windows, bearing the Benedictine Pax, attest to the existence of some link beyond the mere financial or institutional between the convent mission and that of the IWS. After all, neither the name nor the pax nor much else about the building is accidental. Nursia is very much Sister Justine’s conscious creation: she designed it and decorated it in lavender and showed me around with much the same enthusiasm one might expect of a stereotypical Filipina housewife showing off her home.

Nursia’s uniqueness does not reside in the purple hue of its furnishings alone, however. I spent my first month in Manila substituting for the center’s librarian (a simple matter of shelving books and insuring that those taken out were returned, with proper ID requisitioned as a guarantee). And the library notably contrasts with other Philippine academic libraries—St. Scholastica’s college library, the library at De La Salle University down the road, and the libraries at the University of the Philippines and at Ateneo de Manila. For one thing, it is small, and comfortably homey because of it. But, more importantly, with the exception of those used by the librarian herself, it is not a library full of desks and straight-backed wooden chairs designed to force occupants to pay attention to their work on the debatable assumption that physical discomfort somehow facilitates research. Rather, it is a casual place in which to quite literally kick off one’s shoes and put up one’s feet.
Extra *tsinelas* are stacked on a rack to one side for persons unwilling to remain barefoot or sock-footed after obeying the sign on the door requesting, in friendly fashion, the removal of more traditional footwear—a not insignificantly dehierarchizing request in a country in which *tsinelas*, the typical choice of the poor, are widely considered inappropriate in public (and thus in school) and of which the infamously well-heeled Imelda Marcos served as longtime first lady. Browsing and reading in the room are encouraged by the big handwoven red, purple, and black cushions spread about for comfortable seating, too, as well as the low wooden fold-up lap desks available for those desirous of a hard writing surface. A fan and rarely used air conditioner complete the picture—along with large windows allowing light in from the back wall and glass panes allowing smiles across the way to the IWS waiting room.

Nor is this sort of relaxed design in an official institutional context common in the Philippines, as Sister Justine is well aware. Nursia represents a deliberate alternative to the highly formalized sort of learning environment typified by Philippine academies, including St. Scholastica’s College. St. Scholastica’s teachers still command authority in somewhat military fashion, as students stand up before answering; rise when spoken to; always address their teachers as “Sister,” “Ma’am,” or “Sir”; dutifully recite prayers before and after class; and, perhaps most startling to someone from an American liberal arts tradition such as myself, rarely argue or question their instructors beyond pleading an inability to do an assignment for some good reason. Moreover, SSC’s classrooms feature hard floors, stark walls, and chair-desk combinations that tend to make for sore rear ends, all designed to discipline the student body in a very physical sense.

Nursia’s library, in contrast, appears designed not only to encourage physical comfort but also to encourage the exploration of new understandings of physicality. As observed earlier, women in the Philippines are very much judged in terms of their appearance. Although many women, particularly those in the lower classes and those going about everyday neighborhood business, do not dress up within the *barangay* setting, women are generally expected to be ladylike in demeanor. But Nursia affords an alternative to such culturally dictated and highly gendered body consciousness.13 Here, a certain degree of distance from expectations of womanhood, both corporeal and otherwise, can be attained; here, female bodies are given space within which to relax while female minds are encouraged to reconfigure prior conceptions of personal possibility, challenging previously maintained assumptions.
about what being a woman means or should mean. The deemphasis on bodily propriety in the library complements the surroundings—the shelves of books analyzing how gender and womanhood are understood and differently valued and enacted within the Philippines. Some of these works are about female corporeality, too: the IWS collection includes texts about traditionally taboo issues of female sexuality, written not only from a conservative Catholic perspective, but also from lesbian, prochoice, and pro–birth control perspectives. Such books are radical within the very devoutly Catholic Philippine context; the fact that they form part of Nursia’s environment, in concert with the cushions and tsinelas and lavender decorations, goes far, I think, in explaining how the building might well indeed represent a place within which women can reconceive themselves as whole persons in the image of God, recalling St. Benedict’s birthplace with a definitely modern twist.

It is also notable that Nursia exists outside the walls of St. Scholastica proper. Admittedly, it is close—just out the main gate, down the street, and across to the other side. But it still isn’t within the complex. And this makes a difference in several ways. While its location may render IWS facilities and resources less accessible to lazier or more harried college students and faculty, it also marks an arguably radical distance from SSC, rendering the experimental character of the place more possible because not physically encompassed by an already rigidly disciplined environment. Moreover, Nursia’s very marginality vis-à-vis the college proper at least theoretically renders it more accessible to others. After all, as previously discussed, the college walls very concretely serve to maintain societal barriers between the relatively privileged few allowed inside and those lacking the requisite shoes, identification, and reason to pass the guards at the gates. Nursia, in contrast, is intended as a public facility open to all who wish to enter. True, the building looks a bit foreboding from the street perspective. Its lack of welcome signs, much less a clear proclamation of identity and intent may make it appear unapproachable to those not in the know. Its three stories of comparative orderliness stand out from the more mundane fuss of the street homes—bare feet might be allowed in, but what completely shoeless bare feet would make the attempt? Nevertheless, despite perhaps unrecognized problems of self-selection (or deselection) on the part of women normally denied entry to such official looking buildings, it is significant that no guard watches Nursia’s gate during the daylight hours—there is only a heavy door, a doorbell, and a wait for one of the employees to answer the call. In theory at least, anyone can walk in, a notable departure from the college’s stricter monitoring and an appar-
It is significant, too, that the institute directs many of its recruitment efforts, such as they are, toward women outside of St. Scholastica’s—women in labor groups, women living in urban poverty, women desirous of organizing other women. In other words, while nominally and legally associated with an exclusive educational institution, the IWS represents, to some extent, an attempt to offer education—specifically about gender issues, with a particular leftist political slant—to persons deprived of such opportunities in the ordinary course of life. The institute signifies the potential, at least, to bridge gaps between the well-educated elite and the undereducated poor. Here, efforts are made to further communication across diversity, marking a broadening of the congregation’s mission with a new consciousness of the need to serve and be in solidarity with the underprivileged. Indeed, Carmen told me that she considers the IWS particularly important precisely because, while still associated with SSC, it takes women’s studies outside the academy and into the community. What’s more, recall, Sister Placid sees Nursia as a model for the Subiaco she envisions exactly for this reason.

**Making Feminism an Everyday Event**

Of course, the IWS also serves as an important facility for the sisters themselves, Sister Placid, a two-year member of IWS board of trustees, explicitly identified Nursia as a critical resource for the congregation. Many of the sisters not only take classes at Nursia, she observed, but also regularly attend IWS functions such as the final presentation of 1994’s fall Trainor’s Training class, where revised feminist fairy tales were enacted before the board of directors. And the insights gained on such occasions are shared with those who can’t make it in person, whether privately or during communal recreation.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume the Missionary Benedictines’ feminist radicalization a function of Sister Justine’s efforts and Nursia’s existence alone. My informants are embracing feminism not as passive imitators but because Sister Justine’s arguments make sense in light of their own prior concerns and experiences. And they are enacting their feminism through everyday, small-scale, local intervention just as effectively as Sister Justine engages in more visible public political action.
For example, Sister Josephine told me her Trainor’s Training has made a big difference in helping her speak up, particularly in the face of sexist comments:

Some of my friends after I took the course would say, “You have become very aggressive.” I would say, “I beg your pardon. No, I’m just more assertive. Because I’m a woman, before I just let you [say what you wanted].” They would say, “Now you really fight.” . . . Especially my priest friends who are very vocal would tell me I’m very aggressive. No, I’m assertive—something new to them. . . . Before I would just let them be. I wouldn’t talk. I said, “No more.”

If the sister’s male friends are threatened by her new assertiveness, however, many of her female compatriots appear to have found it inspiring: “The women I think like it, actually. . . . Two or three of my friends told me some of my students or some of my friends have more or less adopted, copied, how I would relate or how I would deal with people, how I talk. ‘You’re kidding,’ I said. . . . Anyway, it’s highest time. The Philippines are very, very, patriarchal.”

Nor is Sister Josephine’s popularity surprising. As intimated earlier, the sisters are in a prime position to serve as role models for women in the Philippines by virtue of their profession. Although religious sisterhood may not be a profession of parental choice, the fact that nuns are generally deemed moral exemplars in Philippine society renders them both particularly apt to be idolized, and—again—free to be more openly opinionated and politically active than might otherwise be possible. Indeed, many of my informants, including Sister Justine and Sister Placid, spoke of nuns who had inspired them when young as paragons of humanity and intelligence. In and of their very persons, then, the Missionary Benedictines are conveying the message that standing fast by personal principles rather than bowing down to male authority is both possible and even morally admirable in women, however suspect others may find such behavior.

**Talking Gender in the Classroom**

If speaking out in the first place was already an arguably feminist act for Sister Josephine, however, she was also committed to more explicitly educating her students, their parents, and other teachers about women’s issues. In Mindanao, for example, she introduced the instruc-
tors she supervised to gender analysis, and during a rotation as the principal of an all-girl high school she invited a local feminist activist to speak with the seniors:

They were irritated, they were angry, and they realized, ah, this is what the boys do to us! . . . You could just say that in a class of forty, there are only five of them who are not for it, but the rest are for it. When I saw that the fourth-year high school [students] were OK . . . I gave it to third-year. And then . . . I gave it to the first-year students. [The activist showed them] cartoons so they could see what a woman does from the beginning from the time she wakes up to the time that she sleeps. . . . It’s really the girl and the mother who are working so hard all the time. So that’s the starter. And they exchange [ideas], and there’s a little input. Three hours. And they asked for it again. . . . When I found out, I gave it to the teachers.

Moreover, in Bacolod, the sister herself chaired two seminars on women and religion at De La Salle University, both of which she felt had been successful. One of the women in attendance had questioned Christ’s choice of only male apostles, for example. So they discussed it, and came up with the answer that it was simply a matter of the conditions of the time—not an indication that men are somehow more godly. After all, one only had to think of Mary Magdalene, who kept faith when none of the apostles did, Sister Josephine observed. Christ recognized the spirituality of such women, she assured me; Christ himself was egalitarian, and Catholicism’s patriarchal structure mere historical circumstance.

Indeed, the sister further emphasized this point during the theology courses she taught at SSC. Following the requisite prayer one morning, for example, she asked everyone to team up and devise versions of the Apostles’ Creed, this being the “heart of the Catholic faith.” In general, the outcome was predictable, too; pretty much everyone mentioned love, justice, and equality. Nor was Sister Josephine unhappy with these results, all representing values she had been emphasizing throughout the course. But something was missing, she said. Heads turned in confusion: most groups had followed the original fairly closely; what could they have missed, and would it affect their grades? “Well,” the sister explained, “None of you mentioned sisters as well as brothers or included women.” We were all women here; we should think about it.
Mankind—how about womankind, too, or simply humanity? At least, she whispered to me afterward, one of her other class teams had actually incorporated a feminist sensibility into their statement of convictions, referring to themselves as the “daughters of God,” for example, instead of using noninclusive language that all too ironically would cut them out of what was supposed to be a personal statement of belief. She had already shown their creed to the rest of the sisters, who were happy about it—although it was a pity they represented only one of thirty teams in total.

That wasn’t the end of the lesson, however. Sister Josephine went on to encourage us all to be more conscious of our rights and choices as women. Each one of us was a whole human being, she said, and we should not be fooled into thinking our bodies distinct from our souls. God loved all of us unconditionally, whether male or female. And each of us had a mandate from God to try to build a better world, beginning in the Philippines. This meant looking at gender, too. Many Philippine men were spoiled and allowed to get away with more than women, even when it came to religion. Her brothers had been allowed to skip Mass or to stand outside the door during the homily and smoke cigarettes and talk, for example, while she and her sisters were expected to regularly attend church services, sitting inside quietly even when they had Sunday duties at home.

What’s more, such double standards were particularly disturbing given the fact that Roman Catholicism acknowledges only male fitness for the priesthood. Women, Sister Josephine observed, can preach, baptize, and anoint the sick, but only priests—and thus only men—can currently serve as celebrants at Mass, confessors, or officiators at the sacrament of matrimony. This made it hard for the sisters, too. They often had difficulty finding priests for their liturgies, particularly on short notice, such as when they rather suddenly decided to hold a Thanksgiving Eucharist for World Youth Day. In the absence of suitable celebrants on such occasions, the Missionary Benedictines had to resort to “dry Masses” without the consecration. In fact, most female religious congregations keep already consecrated hosts on hand in the event of such crises. There was no guarantee of satisfaction even when priests were found to preside over their services, either. The fathers who came were sometimes objectionable, preaching hellfire and brimstone or espousing conservative views antithetical to congregation values. So why weren’t there female priests?

“Because of Jesus Christ,” responded one of the students, confident
in her answer. But Sister Josephine countered that there was nothing about this in the Bible. “Tradition?” the girl tried again. “OK,” the sister replied, “but why can’t tradition change?” Personally, she thought the time was coming—not for a while maybe, perhaps not in her lifetime, but in the future—when the Church would ordain women as priests. If Catholicism was to survive in the modern world, it would probably be necessary to grant women and men equal spiritual authority within the Church hierarchy, however radical this suggestion was within the Philippine context. After all, men weren’t such perfect examples of priesthood. Filipino men—even priests, the sister noted—could often get away with “extracurricular activities,” while women were supposed to remain faithful. In the Philippines, priests often aren’t as good about keeping their vows to celibacy as nuns; many priests enact their fatherhood in an all too literal sense. In fact, Sister Josephine said, her lola converted to the Iglesia ni Kristo two years before her death because scandalized at the discovery that her longtime Catholic priest had had children.

The sister wasn’t just gossiping, either. For Sister Josephine, the classroom represents an arena within which students can be encouraged to begin rethinking Catholic orthodoxy in general and the gendering of Catholicism in particular. As she put it, “I told myself I could do something here . . . in my classes. . . . I could put in something about women studies. . . . I introduce it the way I do my classes and my lessons.” Indeed, she claimed to prefer teaching to administrative work precisely because, as a teacher, she could get closer to and thus have more of an impact on Philippine youth. Such small-scale intervention was more satisfactory, for her, than organizational work at a higher level and, while most of her students doubtless forgot her remarks as soon as the end bell rang, the very incidence of even one team in thirty attentive to inclusive language in its creed testifies to the efficacy of her efforts.

Bringing Feminism into the Mass Movements

Likewise, Sister Placid made efforts to incorporate her feminism into her work—in this case with the already politicized but nevertheless arguably sexist Philippine Left. Notwithstanding their radicalism, she observed that many Filipinos involved in nationalist organizing remain blind to gender inequities:
In the mass movements, even among the most radical organizations, where I found a lot that is praiseworthy . . . the woman question is very much neglected. And you will find people who are radicals, who want to work for a social transformation that strikes at the social problem at the roots, and yet there are many males who are oppressive of the females, and they don’t even know it. And women also who don’t even know it that they’re in an oppressed position . . . For example, just last week I was listening to two political activists from the 1970s . . . two people I admire very much—I mean, who are really serious revolutionaries. And yet just watching them discuss—these are husband and wife—watching them discuss their daughter, also a political activist, who married before she reached . . . legal adulthood. . . . Both did not want her to get married this early, but the mother was much more accepting, because this is her daughter’s decision. . . . Even with regard to what you should do for the couple, what we should advise them, how we should help them for their own responsible nurturing of their own relationship—that was the mother’s position. And her husband was talking only about “should should should ought ought ought.” And then the woman says, “I don’t want her to go through what I have gone through,” and she was saying a lot. And then the man was saying, “No, you shouldn’t think of not going through what you went through—you should always be able to look back and learn from your experience.” You see, he was teaching, but that was not what the woman was saying . . . . They kept going back and forth, and he couldn’t see what she really meant. And he was all the time lecturing, lecturing. And she was discussing.

The point, of course, is that the man in question was attempting to impose his own moral system on both his wife and daughter rather than listening to their needs, desires, and understandings of the situation. And his failure to recognize his daughter’s decision-making abilities, much less respond to her life choices in a positive and supportive yet advisory and cautionary manner, was typical, in Sister Placid’s opinion, of Filipino male attitudes toward women—patronizing, protective, judgmental, and prohibitive of female independence and integrity. Likewise, his refusal to acknowledge his wife’s assertion that she did not want their daughter to go through what she had gone through was problematic. As an expression of personal feeling, the statement was not open to question: his wife was simply indexing the fact that it had been difficult for her to deal with a recalcitrant father herself, Sister
Placid explained. Yet although lacking any immediate experiential knowledge of what it might mean to be a woman (and a woman subject to male authority, including rigid paternal authority), he did not even think to ask what exactly she meant. Notwithstanding his commitment to helping the Philippine poor gain a voice in the government, he was too invested in his paternity to hear what his wife and daughter were trying to say. Although well aware of the systems of power and privilege silencing and subjugating his working-class compatriots, he was unable to recognize the ways in which he was using his own positional power and privilege within the household to silence and subjugate women he undoubtedly loved very much.

Sister Placid talked of her experiences on a committee overseeing another case concerning a couple active in the mass movements, too. While the man at issue in this instance was clearly both a womanizer and a batterer, and his wife had already pursued legal separation four times because of it, he seemed to have a hold over her. Just as the proceedings were nearing completion, he yet again persuaded his wife to return to him. Despite her independent political involvement and obvious capability as the head of a major leftist organization, she simply didn’t seem to believe herself able to make it without him—notwithstanding Sister Placid’s efforts to bolster her self-confidence.

It wasn’t just that there were problematic gender dynamics operating in many of the marriages the sister came across in her work with the mass movements, though. Her compatriots also often made sexist remarks. For example, she’d been on a central administrative committee responsible for mapping out a six-month regional plan of action. Among other things, the group had decided to arrange a demonstration in celebration of International Women’s Day. This itself, of course, was a good thing—but part of the planning process entailed determining a possible course of action in the case of police harassment. Usually, when confronted by the military in such situations, especially when the military is armed, rally leaders issue the command “Dapa” to get everyone on the ground. This time, however, one of the men suggested that the leaders instead shout “Hilata,” which essentially translates as “lie down in a seductive pose.” If the women in front did this, he joked, the soldiers would be distracted and the demonstrators would be safe.

But he was wrong: that would hardly be safe for the women! The joke indexed a failure to respect their capacity to contribute to the struggle in ways other than as sexual decoys, too—a suggestion demeaning to their intelligence. And the reference to such battle tactics was a perversion of Ifugao culture. Traditionally, Ifugao women would raise their
skirts to expose themselves as a signal to war, the idea being that no one would be allowed to survive such a forbidden sight. The act signified the intent to kill, a threat taken very seriously by enemies. In this case, however, the use of women’s bodies was essentially being suggested as a disposable means of protecting the men involved from harm. So, after the laughter died down, Sister Placid spoke up, “Is this how you men think of the women?” The men had all immediately apologized, but there was clearly a need for greater sensitivity to gender issues within the mass movements, and she, for one, was determined to do her best to bring the woman question to the forefront in such situations.

**Politicking the Private Sphere**

Likewise, Sister Micha said she made efforts to discuss problematic gender dynamics whenever necessary, whatever her duties. She felt she herself made the most difference as a counselor, too. People often sought her out for informal guidance, she confessed, as people often do with sisters—“That’s what we are for!” For example, a woman had recently come to Sister Micha in frustration about a married man who wanted her for his *querida*. She said she didn’t want to be his girl, but she was having trouble saying no, which, Sister Micha added, was something very Filipina, and something many Filipino men take advantage of. Women in the Philippines, she explained, are trained to be subservient and to measure their value in terms of male attention, so much so that the woman felt pressured to succumb to her suitor not only despite her own wishes but also despite strong cultural and religious pressures to remain virginal. It’s a double bind for Filipinas, the sister added: if a man sexually harasses or rapes you, it is your own fault. If you lose your virginity, you are the sinner. Yet you are supposed to look up to men as patrons, protectors, and advisers. In this case, however, Sister Micha strongly encouraged the woman to stand up for herself, emphasizing her personal rights and telling her to let the man know she’d told a nun about him.

Likewise, the sister had done her best to dissuade another woman from marrying against her will. The woman was pregnant, though, and, as a good Catholic, she felt morally obliged to make her child legitimate and her loss of virginity admissible by marrying the baby’s father. That wasn’t all, either. At length, she had confided to Sister Micha that she had actually been raped by her suitor, although she perversely believed herself somehow at fault for it. It had happened at a party;
she’d been introduced to him, he’d given her what must have been a drugged drink, and the next thing she knew, she was lying flat on her back with her skirt up and her hymen broken. What’s more, she now thought herself too polluted for anyone else, while he thought himself entitled to sleep with her whenever desirous of doing so.

So Sister Micha spent a good deal of time talking about rape in an attempt to get the woman to stop blaming herself for the incident and to start taking control of her own life. The sister thought she had been able to convince her not to let people force her to do things she didn’t want to do, too. But it was sad that Philippine culture was so backward when it came to female sexuality. Sister Micha admitted that she could understand all too well why her advisee would fault herself for such sexual violation, as rape wasn’t really widely considered a crime in the absence of strong evidence of a struggle. Too many people were responding to recent media reports about a woman raped in the hills by condemning her for having worn shorts that were too short, for example. Indeed, in the Philippines, rape has only recently begun to be recognized and prosecuted as a serious form of physical assault, its longtime failure to be understood as such evidenced by a newspaper article detailing famous actresses’ answers to the outlandish question, “Who would you choose as your rapist?” The respondents replied as if simply asked who they’d want to sleep with, obscuring the violent and coercive nature of rape and underlining the extent to which rape and heterosexual intercourse are conflated in Filipino society.

Mainstream, urban, middle-class Filipino attitudes toward female sexuality could make for other difficulties, too, Sister Micha observed. While in Negros, she had been approached by a novice from another congregation, then on leave. The woman confessed that she had begun to masturbate when she was five years old. “Yes, so . . . ?” the sister had replied. Personally, she told me, she was inclined to be liberal about such things. But she understood the woman’s shame; she herself remembered having been told by the nuns in charge of her schooling to be very careful washing “down there.” It wasn’t supposed to be pleasurable to touch onself; in fact, Filipino Catholics still widely claim that masturbation is a personality disorder, and female masturbation, in particular—inescapably indexing the reality of female sexual desire—should not happen according to popular Philippine moral belief.

Given the prevalence of such attitudes, Sister Micha thought that telling the novice that touching herself was OK would only confuse the woman. So the sister suggested she try to avoid masturbating, not
because it was bad but because it made her feel badly about herself. The woman couldn’t stop, though. And when the sister tried to get the novice to think about why she felt compelled to masturbate, it became clear that she did it as a form of self-abasement. She masturbated when unhappy with herself, and it reaffirmed her feelings of inadequacy and sinfulness. In the end, then, the woman’s real problem wasn’t masturbating as such but a lack of self-esteem, a point Sister Micha discussed at length with her.

The rigidity of Filipino Catholic conceptions of appropriate and admissible sexuality also makes same-sex desire difficult to manage, of course. Indeed, a lesbian friend of the sister’s had approached her in consternation over just this issue. Although on the rebound from a “devastating” experience with a prior partner, she had found a new companion, a female doctor whom she’d invited to move in. But Sister Micha’s friend was worried that they would be committing a sin in sleeping together. So Sister Micha had asked, “If I tell you it’s a sin, will you stop doing it?” “No,” her friend answered. And that, the sister told me, meant there was really no point in spouting Catholic dogma. She had said as much, too—why call it a sin when calling it a sin wasn’t going to have any positive effects? She was only really concerned about their respective motivations: she wanted to make sure they weren’t going to exploit or hurt one another.

Because a nun, though, people often imagined she would agree with the Pope and Cardinal Sin. Indeed, one of the lay school administrators had once asked how the sister could reconcile her beliefs with being Missionary Benedictine—how could she say things contradicting John Paul II? It could be difficult to get past such expectations; lengthy explanations were often required in order to clarify her position when at odds with church dogma, and she couldn’t always express her true opinions outright. For instance, talking about condom use was tricky. Her students were apt to be scandalized at the thought that a sister might consider condoms admissible, the shock obscuring the substance of her views. So, in class, she would usually tackle the issue in class in the context of a historical exploration of the church’s attitudes toward contraceptives in order to push home the point that current prohibitions derive from human theological hang-ups, not from God. After all, how could a piece of plastic be inherently sinful, no matter what its use? What’s more, how natural was the “natural” family planning method when female sexual desire is often at its height during those times of greatest female fertility?
The Power of the Everyday

Sister Micha’s willingness to challenge popular assumptions about Catholicism as a visibly professed monastic is significant not only in underlining the point that Catholic practice is not the same as church dogma, then, but also as an effective means of engendering cultural change with respect to issues of sexual morality in particular. Again, a good deal of the cultural guilt produced around the issue of female sexuality in the Philippines is due to the influence of the Catholic Church, which has defined sexuality as a matter of moral concern instead of simply social or personal concern. If the women Sister Micha was counseling were somewhat ironically seeking solace at the symbolic source of their pain, she was indeed in a position to help, rendering the church a site of radicalization as well as oppression through the revision of relevant cultural scripts.

But Sister Micha’s counseling and mentoring work also highlight the importance of local-level action on the most intimate scale. Perhaps because so much guilt and shame surround female sexuality in the Philippines, Philippine feminist organizations have tended to ignore the sorts of problems indexed above. While many Filipina feminists talk at length in public about related issues such as prostitution, the mail-order-bride industry, and beauty contests, much less attention has been granted incest, rape, homophobia, and even birth control methods. Such topics are not readily amenable to public action given a cultural reluctance to even recognize sexual aggression as problematic and given the degree to which limitations placed on women’s control of their own bodies are taken for granted. Thus, Sister Micha’s private consultations represent a significant form of feminist action where large-scale political or legal intervention is unlikely anytime soon.

Such local-level work has other advantages, too. When I asked Sister Micha if she had ever run into trouble because of her unorthodox views, she told me that she “wasn’t important enough” to cause a stir, unlike Sister Justine. But it is precisely because Sister Micha, Sister Placid, and Sister Josephine are insignificant from a larger institutional perspective that they have been able to take advantage of opportunities for subversive action outside the reach of disciplinary policing. While making a public outcry can certainly go a long way to effecting cultural change, the possibilities inherent in working to empower women in subtle ways from the margins should not be ignored.

After all, even the most spontaneous, private, seemingly minor everyday activity may be as critical to social reform as planned, public,
large-scale feminist activity. Both sorts of what is in fact a rather arbitrary descriptive distinction between possible behavioral modes are doubtless necessary to real cultural transformation: the difference between the two simply resides in style and scale. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the individual, meaningful interactions with respected figures may have greater impact and may lead to more permanent behavioral changes than more generalized participation within or contact with large political movements. Indeed, Missionary Benedictines such as Sister Josephine, Sister Placid, and Sister Micha may have greater political influence in many situations precisely because opportunistically acting on a local and situationally contingent level rather than acting as representatives of particular group interests. While explicitly identifying as feminist remains controversial and even suspicious within the Philippines, simply speaking as a sister in this or that setting is less likely to evoke such defensive reactions and is therefore perhaps more likely to make a difference.

That aside, it is also important to recognize the ways in which the sisters’ feminism relates to the broader picture, as one aspect of my informants’ more general congregational and personal politics. While the congregation’s constitution explicitly designates empowering women part of the Missionary Benedictine mission thrust, the document also specifically mandates solidarity with the poor and a commitment to ecologically friendly practices. No single one of these political and religious concerns is primary, although individual sisters have focused their efforts on particular aspects of the congregation’s mission. All of my informants indexed a commitment to acting on behalf of all disempowered groups wherever and whenever possible, regardless of the specific nature of their assignments. In short, the nuns understand their mission as a generalized religious imperative to serve as advocates for the underprivileged and exploited. Their faith underlies their determination and dedication as radical agents of both feminist reform and other forms of culture change, a point I will take up in greater depth in the following chapter.