Gen X women and the Australian Catholic Church: Negotiating religious identity and participation

Tracy McEwan

MTh (Dist.) (Newcastle); BAppSc (Mathematics) (UTS)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Theology

February 2022

This research was supported by an

Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship

Statement of originality

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 and any approved embargo.

Signed:

Tracy McEwan

Date: 10 February 2022

The research was primarily conducted on the traditional lands of the Gweagal people, a Tharawal speaking clan, whose enduring connection with the land and water is acknowledged and respected.

Acknowledgements

Undertaking doctoral research is a journey and I would like to acknowledge the many people who shared in my journey and encouraged me along the way. First, my grateful thanks to the women who participated in this research and generously shared their stories with me. Without their participation, this thesis would not have been possible.

A huge thank you to my supervisors Dr Kathleen McPhillips and Emeritus Prof. Terence J. Lovat for their guidance, insight, and valuable feedback. Kath, your friendship, enthusiasm, and kindness have been a highlight. Thank you to Prof. Richard Rymarz, Dr Ruth Powell, Dr Robert Dixon, Ass. Prof. Anna Halafoff, Dr Mary E. Hunt, Dr Miriam Pepper, Dr Patricia Madigan OP, and Jacinta Frawley for their thoughtful advice, encouragement, and assistance. Many thanks to Dr Amy Lovat for her work editing this thesis.

Thank you to all my friends and family who have supported me throughout my journey. Special thanks to Pamela Mcdonagh, Jacque Dinklo, Margaret McEwan, and Stephanie McKimm for always listening and believing in me. To Pamela, Margaret, and Susan Brown – thank you for our hikes and the love and laughter along the way. Many thanks to Sharyn and Scott Roberts, Michelle Iona, Natalie Banister, and Trudi Elyard for their ongoing support and encouragement.

It is often the people you meet along the way who make a journey worthwhile. A heartfelt thank you to Michelle Eastwood for the laughs, encouragement, wisdom, and reassurance. Appreciative thanks to Patricia Gemmell, Angela Marquis, Jacqui Remond, Coleen Rowe, Elizabeth Lee, Rebecca Beisler, and Cathie Lambert for the long chats, guidance, and friendship. Thank you to Andrea Dean and the women of *WATAC Inc*. for their assistance and inspiration.

This journey would not have been possible without the unconditional love and unwavering belief of all my family. Many thanks to Joy and Morris Wheeler, Katherine and Warwick McEwan, Maria Cameron, Nicki Balneaves, Lisa Wrightson, and Maria Wheeler RSC. And finally, Lachlan McEwan, Cameron McEwan, James McEwan, and Milo the dog – thank you for loving and encouraging me. I couldn't have done this without you.

Contents

Statement of originality i
Acknowledgements i
Contents iii
Abstract ix
Abbreviations x
Vatican documents xii
List of figures xiv
List of tables xv
Glossary xvi
Preface xxi
Chapter One: Introduction 1
1.1 Introduction 1
1.2 Catholicism in Australia 1
1.3 The situation of Catholic women 2
1.4 Intersectionality and *kyriarchy* 2
1.5 Gen X women and the Catholic Church 3
1.6 Feminist theologies 4
1.7 A Foucauldian genealogy 5
1.8 Research aims and objectives 6
1.9 Research questions 6
1.10 The structure of the thesis 6
1.11 Conclusion 9
Chapter Two: Identity and authority 11
2.1 Introduction 11
2.2 How are religious identities formed? 13
2.3 Categorising religious identities 16
2.4 What is a Catholic identity? 17
2.5 Researching Catholic women's identities 22
2.6 Conclusion 23
Chapter Three: Generation and formation 25
3.1 Introduction 25
3.2 The sociocultural formation of Gen X Catholics 25
3.3 Gen X feminist consciousness 28

3.4 The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) 32
3.5 Gender complementarity 37
3.6 Human sexuality 39
3.7 Women in the post conciliar Catholic Church 40
3.8 Growing polarisation 43
3.9 Crisis of child sexual abuse (CSA) 43
3.10 Same-sex marriage 45
3.11 Closure of the OPW and CACW 46
3.12 The Fifth Plenary Council of the Catholic Church in Australia 47
3.13 Conclusion 51
Chapter Four: Magisterial ecclesiology: Virgin, bride, mother 53
4.1 Introduction 53
4.2 The Marian mystery of the Church 53
4.3 Magisterial ecclesiology 59
4.4 The theology and ecclesiology of Hans Urs von Balthasar 60
4.5 Pope Francis: A new vision for the Church? 64
4.6 The ecclesiology of *Laudato Si'* 67
4.7 Magisterial Mariology 69
4.8 Popular expressions of devotion 71
4.8.1 The Rosary 72
4.8.2 Marian apparitions 72
4.8.3 Australian sainthood: Saint Mary MacKillop of the Cross 73
4.9 Marian devotion 75
4.10 The myth of the perfect mother, virgin, and bride 77
4.11 Male normativity and hierarchical-clerical power 81
4.12 Conclusion 83
Chapter Five: Theorising power/knowledge for a feminist study of women in Catholicism 85
5.1 Introduction 85
5.2 Catholicism as a "regime of truth" 86
5.3 Embodied power and subjectivity 88
5.4 Biopower and governmentality 90
5.5 The production of docile bodies and the monstrous 92
5.6 Feminism, the body and Foucault 94
5.7 Technologies of self 97
5.8 Agency in self-determination 100
5.9 Technologies of Catholicism 102

5.10 Developing self-reflexivity 103
5.11 Conclusion 108
Chapter Six: Methodology and research design 109
6.1 Introduction 109
6.2 Existing Australian research on Gen X women's Catholic identities 109
6.3 What is a Genealogy? 113
6.4 Genealogy as a methodology in a feminist theological study of Catholic women 116
6.5 Research design 120
6.5.1 Method and instruments 120
6.5.2 Participants 122
6.5.3 Ethical considerations 123
6.5.4 Data analysis 125
6.6 The cohort 128
6.7 Conclusion 129
Chapter Seven: Invented identities: Gen X women in Catholicism 131
7.1 Introduction 131
7.2 Constructing a recognisable Catholic identity 132
7.3 Negotiating recognisability 134
7.4 Interpretive adjustments 136
7.5 "Where am I in this?": Negotiating recognisability using interpretive adjustments 140
7.6 "I think I might need to change it": Popular pieties 147
7.7 "I turn to the Rosary when I need clarity": Marian pieties 153
7.8 Agency: Submission or subversion? 162
7.9 "How do I reconcile all this?": Navigating Catholic teachings around gender and sexuality 170
7.10 "What in the hell am I getting my kids involved in?": CPCSA 178
7.11 "No, I'm not going": Social justice activities as sense making and *praxis* 183
7.12 Conclusion 188
Chapter Eight: The consequences of a lack of recognisability 191
8.1 Introduction 191
8.2 Abnormal individuals 191
8.3 Establishing vulnerability 193
8.4 "I feel called to do what I do": Challenging vulnerability 195
8.5 "Please help me understand this": Negotiating vulnerability 199
8.6 Gen X women: Wilful subjects 201

8.7 The costs of vulnerability 203
8.8 Sexism, misogyny, and clericalism 207
8.9 Gaslighting 210
8.10 Workplace bullying, harassment, and discrimination 212
8.11 Harm from teachings on marriage, gender, and sexuality 215
8.12 Harm from CPCSA 219
8.13 Abuse perpetrated by nuns 221
8.14 Naming women's harm and suffering in Catholicism 223
8.15 Everyday spiritual abuse 224
8.16 Conclusion 230
Chapter Nine: A place where Gen X women might flourish 233
9.1 Introduction 233
9.2 Gen X women "being church" 233
9.3 A new ecclesial imaginary 238
9.4 Recovering the subjectivity of women 241
9.5 A chain of memory 244
9.6 Communities of change: Women-Church 247
9.7 A socio-political imaginary: The *congress/ekklēsia/kosmopolis* of wo/men 251
9.8 Women-Church movements in Australia 254
9.9 Growing division 256
9.10 New Feminism as a movement 260
9.11 Contesting *kyriarchy* 262
9.12 Emerging feminist spaces 263
9.13 Conclusion 268
Chapter Ten: Conclusion 269
10.1 Introduction 269
10.2 Summary and implications of the findings 269
10.3 Recommendations for future research 272
10.4 Conclusion 274
References 277
Appendix A: Project research flyer 314
Appendix B: Participant information statement 315
Appendix C: Participant information statement attachment 319
Appendix D: Project consent form 320
Appendix E: Identification screening questions 321

Appendix F: Interview questions 322
Appendix G: Sample snowball email 325
Appendix H: Letter to director of National Office for the Participation of Women 326
Appendix I: Letter to bishops 327
Appendix J: Replies from bishops 328
Appendix K: Human Research Ethics Committee approval 335

Abstract

Gen X were the first generation to be raised in the Catholic Church in the environment of cultural and theological change brought about by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). During the council, the Catholic Church sought to respond to societal shifts and increase its relevance in the modern world. The resultant ecclesial transformations were widely predicted to increase women's involvement in the Catholic Church in Australia. In fact, the opposite transpired. The participation of women is currently at substantially low levels. Gen X Catholic women are less likely than earlier generations to attend Mass and take part in daily devotions. Within a feminist theological framework, this thesis uses a Foucauldian genealogy as the methodological approach to analyse the identities and participation of Gen X women in the Catholic Church in Australia. It will show that magisterial formulations of Catholic identity do not accurately reflect the way Gen X women are enacting Catholicism. Instead, this thesis will argue that Gen X women are negotiating the impact of magisterial ecclesiology and its gendered archetypes. They are expressing their identities and positioning themselves in Catholicism via the performance of technologies of Catholicism and the use of interpretive adjustments. It will reveal that many Gen X women are choosing to de-identify from Catholicism, not because of a loss of faith, but owing to the abuses and harm they experience in official ecclesial spaces. As an alternative, this thesis proposes a feminist ecclesiology grounded in a theology of flourishing and an imaginary of natality. Herein, the biblical promise of wholeness and flourishing can be found in feminist ecclesial spaces, contained and produced in a genealogy of women's *herstories*. These feminist ecclesial spaces are not simply places to "be church"; they are spaces of socio-political alterity where women join together to live and advocate theologies of hope, justice, and flourishing.

Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau Statistics
ABTA	Australian Birth Trauma Association
ACBC	Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
AHRC	Australian Human Rights Commission
CACW	Council for Australian Catholic Women
CPCSA	Clergy-perpetrated child sexual abuse
CPSL	Catholic Professional Standards Limited
CRA	Catholic Religious Australia
CSA	Child sexual abuse
CWC	Catholic Women's Council
DNA	Deoxyribonucleic acid
FLTN	Feminist Liberation Theologians' Network
FUN	Feminists in the Uniting Church
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
Gen X	Generation X
IVF	In vitro fertilisation
LGBTIQA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, asexual, plus
MOW	Movement for the Ordination of Women
NCE	National Centre for Evangelisation
NCLS	National Church Life Survey
NCPR	National Centre for Pastoral Research
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version[1]

[1] All biblical references in this thesis are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard*

OCW	Ordination of Catholic Women
OPW	Office for the Participation of Women
RCIRCSA	Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
WATER	Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual
WYD	World Youth Day

Version with the Apocrypha (2010).

Vatican documents

CCC	*Catechism*	1997	The catechism of the Catholic Church
CCL	*Code of canon law*	2021	Code of canon law
DV	*Dei Verbum*	1965	Second Vatican Council: Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation
EG	*Evangelii Gaudium*	2013	Apostolic exhortation of the Holy Father Francis on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world
EV	*Evangelium Vitae*	1995	Encyclical letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the value and inviolability of human life
FT	*Fratelli Tutti*	2020	Apostolic letter of the Holy Father Francis on fraternity and social friendship
GS	*Gaudium et Spes*	1965	Second Vatican Council: Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world
HV	*Humanae Vitae*	1968	Encyclical Letter of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI on the Regulation of Birth
II	*Inter Insigniores*	1976	Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Declaration on the question of admission of women to the ministerial Priesthood
LG	*Lumen Gentium*	1964	Second Vatican Council: Dogmatic constitution on the Church
LS	*Laudato Si'*	2015	Encyclical letter of the Holy Father Francis on care for our common home

LW	*Letter to Women*	1995	Letter of John Paul II to women
MD	*Mulieris Dignitatem*	1988	Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women on the occasion of the Marian year
PT	*Pacem in terris*	1963	Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity and liberty
SF	*Sensus Fidei*	2014	International Theological Commission "Sensis Fidei in The Life of the Church"
TC	*Traditionis Custodes*	2021	Apostolic Letter issued "Motu Proprio" by Francis on the use of the Roman liturgy prior to the reform of 1970

List of figures

Figure 1: Self-identification flowchart for typology 125

List of tables

Table 1: Participant information 128

Table 2: Examples of interpretive adjustments 139

Table 3: Identity labels used by participants 167

Table 4: Types of everyday spiritual abuses 230

Glossary

Antioch — *Antioch* was a youth movement based on a peer-to-peer, parish-based, invitational ministry model that rose to prominence in the Catholic Church in Australia during the 1980s (Pirola 1998; Pirola & Pirola 1998; Ryan 2020).

Baby Boomers — The Baby Boomer generation precedes Gen X. They are the offspring of the post-World War II baby boom and are defined by the magnitude of their demographic size compared to previous and subsequent generations and the relative prosperity of their upbringing (Mackay 1998; McEwan & McPhillips 2017). For the purposes of this thesis, they are defined as the age cohort born between 1 January 1946 to 31 December 1964.

Baptism — Baptism is the first of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. It is a sacrament of Christian initiation by which a person (often an infant) receives remission of original and personal sin and begins a new life in Jesus Christ (CCC, para. 1213 ff.).

Beatified — A state of public veneration declared after death of a Catholic, which bestows the person the title 'Blessed' (Higgins 2011).

Benediction — A liturgical rite of the Catholic Church in which people gathered and are blessed with a consecrated Eucharistic host after a period of exposition (that is, the display of the host for public veneration in a monstrance) (Harrington 2002).

Brothers — The term brothers refers to men who, like nuns, undertake a public profession of vows that place them into the permanent state of consecrated life (CCC, para. 914).

Builder generation — The Builder or Silent generation are the generational cohort preceding the Baby Boomers (McEwan & McPhillips 2017). For the purposes of this thesis, they are defined as the age grouping born between 1 January 1925 to 31 December 1945.

Canonisation — Canonisation is the process by which the papacy declares that a person is a saint, to be venerated by Catholics because of their

	place in heaven and ability to intercede on behalf of the living directly with God (Bennett 2011).
Catechesis	Catechesis is the education of children, young people, and adults in the doctrine of the Christianity so that they may grow in Christian faith (CCC, para. 5).
Clericalism	Clericalism is 'the theological belief that the clergy are different to the laity' (RCIRCSA 2017b, p. 33). It is a misappropriation of male, clerical authority, and 'the idealisation of the priesthood, and by extension, the idealisation of the Catholic Church' (RCIRCSA 2017b, p. 43). Clericalism functions to set ordained clerics apart as unique, superior, and closer to God than non-clerics. It is 'linked to a sense of entitlement, superiority and exclusion, and abuse of power' (RCIRCSA 2017b, p. 43). Clericalism constructs a *kyriarchal* system of relationships that supports the dependency, ignorance, and underdevelopment of the laity (Plante 2020; Radford Ruether 2005).
Communion	Holy communion is the reception of the body and blood of Jesus Christ via the Eucharist (CCC, para. 1382). More generally, it is fellowship and union.
Confirmation	One of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. It is a sacrament of Christian initiation that completes the grace of baptism via a special outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (CCC, para. 1285).
Consecrated religious	Consecrated religious are individual persons and members of religious institutes who consecrate their life to God by making a public profession of vows (known as evangelical counsels) promising a life-long commitment to poverty, chastity, and obedience (CCC, para. 944).
Eucharist	One of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. It is a sacrament of Christian initiation and the sacramental action of thanksgiving to God that constitutes the principal liturgical

	celebration of the pascal mystery of Christ, also known as the Mass (CCC, para. 1322).
Feminine genius theology	Feminine genius theology claims that with womanhood comes the gift of "femininity" or certain qualities that represent women's "true nature". Advocates of "feminine genius" theology contend women achieve and live out their "true value" by embodying certain qualities, which include receptivity, sensitivity, generosity, and physical and spiritual maternity (Beattie 2006; MD; Schüssler Fiorenza 2016).
Gender complementarity	Gender complementarity is a theological anthropology that describes men and women as embodying contrasting human natures that correspond to distinct, biblically prescribed social roles and responsibilities (Schüssler Fiorenza 2016). It is grounded in the claim that, at creation, God created a complementary anthropology or division in human nature that corresponds with physical sexuality (Johnson 2002b). The doctrine of gender complementarity only became prominent in papal teaching during the twentieth century (Case 2016).
Generation X/ Gen X	Gen X (also known as Generation X) is the generation that follows the Baby Boomers. There are no firm agreements on dates for Gen X (Possamai 2009). For the purposes of this research, Gen X is defined as those born between 1 January 1965 and 31 December 1980.
Gen Y	Gen Y (also known as Generation Y) is the age cohort or generation that follows Gen X. For the purposes of this research, Gen Y is defined as those born between 1 January 1981 and 31 December 2000 (Possamai 2009).
Kyriarchy	Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term *kyriarchy* to mean the socio-political system of oppression that is based on the rule of the lord/master/father. (See Schüssler Fiorenza 2009.)
LGBTIQA+	Is an acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual, plus. The term is evolving,

	and the "plus" signifies other terms (for example, pansexual, non-binary) that people may or may not use to communicate their bodies, gender, sexualities, attractions, relationships, experiences, identities, actions, and/or legal and medical classifications (LGBTIQ+ Health Australia 2019).
Magisterium	The magisterium (derived from the Latin word magister or teacher) is the official teaching office of the Catholic Church, which is exercised by the pope and bishops (McBrien 2009).
Mariology	Mariology is the theological study of Mary, the mother of Jesus (Beattie 2011).
Mass	The Mass is the foremost shared ritual of the Catholic Church and Catholic adherents are obligated by Church law to attend Mass on Sundays (or Saturday evenings) and other specified holy days (CCL, canons. 1247, 1248).
National Church Life Survey (NCLS)	Since 1996, every five years, Mass attendees in Catholic parishes in Australia have participated in the National Church Life Survey (NCLS), the largest longitudinal survey of church attendees in the world (Pepper et al. 2018).
New Feminism	New Feminism rose to prominence in the mid-1990s in response to John Paul II's call for women to lead cultural transformation as a way 'to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation' (EV, para. 99). New Feminism as a discourse proposes equality for women based on the acknowledgement and acceptance of the duties and responsibilities assigned to women by gender complementarity (Case 2016).
Novena	A novena is a nine-day prayer offering (Bacchiddu 2011).
Nun	Tara Tuttle (2020) proposes that "religious sisters" refers to women in apostolic ministries, with "nuns" being women who reside in cloistered or semi-cloistered monasteries as

	contemplatives. Both religious sisters and nuns are consecrated women who take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience (CCC, para. 914). In this thesis, the terms "nun" and "religious sister" are used interchangeably.
Parish	According to Church law, a parish is a "certain community" of Catholic adherents who are "stably established" within a particular diocese, whose pastoral care is delegated (by the diocesan bishop) to a pastor, usually described as a "parish priest". As a general rule, in Australia, a parish is territorial; that is, it includes all the Catholic adherents in a certain geographic area or territory (CCL, canon 518; Dixon 2005).
Religious sister	See nun.
Rosary	The Rosary is an expression of devotion and form of prayer used by Catholic adherents to honour Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Rosary is a feature of popular Catholicism (CCC, paras. 897, 971). When praying the Rosary, a string of knots or beads is used to count component prayers.
Sacrament	A sign or instrument of grace, instituted by Jesus Christ and dispensed to humanity through the work of the Holy Spirit (CCC, para. 774).
Second Vatican Council	The Second Vatican Council was an ecumenical council of the whole Catholic Church that was held from 1962 until 1965; it is informally known as Vatican II (Haight 2005).
Silent generation	See Builder generation.
Vatican II	See Second Vatican Council.

Preface

When I began my research in 2016, I was a weekly Mass attendee, catechist, member of my parish finance committee, and casual employee of the Archdiocese of Sydney. As I write this preface in 2021, just like many of the participants in my research, I am not really sure that I identify as "Catholic" anymore. I often wonder what I might have done back in 2016, when I began researching this thesis, if I had known this would be the outcome at the end of the process.

I am a member of Generation X (hereafter referred to as Gen X). I am part of the cohort that was born and received their Catholic formation after the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II; 1962–1965) without the powerful discourse, ideology, and bond that characterised Catholic culture for earlier generations of Catholic women. I was educated by nuns, many of whom identified as feminist. They and the other women in my sphere of influence taught me that I could achieve whatever I wanted. While "being Catholic" informed how I lived my life and raised my children, it did not greatly impact my life decisions. Prior to undertaking my PhD research, I actively participated in my Catholic parish community, took part in social justice activism, and felt strongly about the rights of women and marginalised groups, but I had not really thought much about feminism or the ordination of women. This would change very quickly once I went public with my intention to study women in the Catholic Church.

Not long after I announced my intention to undertake doctoral study on Gen X women in the Catholic Church, I was taken aside by a manager in my Catholic workplace and warned not to discuss my research with "anyone". A short time later, I was approached by a priest, who knew of my intended study, at a workplace morning tea. After the usual greetings, he questioned me.

‘Tracy, do you know that God made Mary the most holy woman ever?’

‘Um, yes,’ I replied.

‘Yes,’ he persisted, ‘God made Mary the most holy person ever placed on the earth, but he put Joseph in charge of her’.

At the time I was baffled. What was so dangerous about studying Catholic women? What were they afraid I would discover?

This thesis is about Gen X women. It explores Gen X women’s identities and participation in the Catholic Church in Australia through the stories and experiences of the thirty-six participants. Yet, it also tells my story and the stories of countless other Gen X women who day-by-day negotiate lived Catholicism and live out the consequences of not being recognised as a “good Catholic woman”.