



CONGREGAZIONE  
PER LA DOTTRINA  
DELLA FEDE

00120 Città del Vaticano,  
Palazzo del S. Uffizio

May 21, 2012

PROT. N. 60/2010 – 38756

Dear Sister McDermott,

In a letter dated October 3, 2011, you forwarded to this Congregation the response of Sr. Margaret Farley, RSM, to the list of erroneous propositions contained in her book *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006). This response was accompanied by your own opinion in the matter, as well as an opinion of Sr. Mary Waskowiak, RSM, your immediate predecessor as President of the *Sisters of Mercy of the Americas*.

This response was examined by the Ordinary Session of this Dicastery. On that occasion and in light of the fact that Sr. Farley's response did not adequately clarify the grave doctrinal problems contained in her book, the Members of the Congregation decided to proceed to the publication of a *Notification*, the text of which is enclosed with this letter (cf. enclosure).

I would ask you to forward the text of this *Notification* to Sr. Farley. The *Notification* will be published on June 4, 2012, at 12:00 Noon in Rome.

In closing, I call attention to the important responsibility of a Major Superior of Religious to oversee the publications of the members of the Institute, so as to ensure that these publications are in conformity with the Magisterium of the Church (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 832).

Entrusting your ministry to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

William Cardinal Levada  
Prefect

(with enclosure)

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Sr. Patricia McDermott, RSM  
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# CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH

## NOTIFICATION

### Regarding the Book *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* by Sister Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M.

#### Introduction

Having completed an initial examination of the book *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006) by Sr. Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith wrote to the author on March 29, 2010, through the good offices of Sr. Mary Waskowiak – the then President of the *Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* – enclosing a preliminary evaluation of the book and indicating the doctrinal problems present in the text. The response of Sr. Farley, dated October 28, 2010, did not clarify these problems in a satisfactory manner. Because the matter concerned doctrinal errors present in a book whose publication has been a cause of confusion among the faithful, the Congregation decided to undertake an examination following the procedure for “*Examination in cases of urgency*” contained in the Congregation’s *Regulations for Doctrinal Examinations* (cf. Chap. IV, art. 23-27).

Following an evaluation by a Commission of experts (cf. art. 24), the *Ordinary Session* of the Congregation confirmed on June 8, 2011, that the above-mentioned book contained erroneous propositions, the dissemination of which risks grave harm to the faithful. On July 5, 2011, a letter was sent to Sr. Waskowiak containing a list of these erroneous propositions and asking her to invite Sr. Farley to correct the unacceptable theses contained in her book (cf. art. 25-26).

On October 3, 2011, Sr. Patricia McDermott, who in the meantime had succeeded Sr. Mary Waskowiak as President of the *Sisters of Mercy of the Americas*, forwarded to the Congregation – in accordance with art. 27 of the above cited *Regulations* – the response of Sr. Farley, together with her own opinion and that of Sr. Waskowiak. This response, having been examined by the Commission of experts, was submitted to the *Ordinary Session* for judgement on December 14, 2011. On this occasion, the Members of the Congregation, considering that Sr. Farley’s response did not adequately clarify the grave problems contained in her book, decided to proceed with the publication of this Notification.

#### 1. General problems

The author does not present a correct understanding of the role of the Church’s Magisterium as the teaching authority of the Bishops united with the Successor of Peter, which guides the Church’s ever deeper understanding of the Word of God as found in Holy Scripture and handed on faithfully in the Church’s living tradition. In addressing various moral issues, Sr. Farley either ignores the constant teaching of the Magisterium or, where it is occasionally mentioned, treats it as one opinion among others. Such an attitude is in no way justified, even within the ecumenical perspective that she wishes to promote. Sr. Farley also manifests a defective understanding of the objective nature of the natural moral law, choosing instead to argue on the basis of conclusions selected from certain philosophical currents or from her own understanding of “contemporary experience”. This approach is not consistent with authentic Catholic theology.

## 2. Specific problems

Among the many errors and ambiguities of this book are its positions on masturbation, homosexual acts, homosexual unions, the indissolubility of marriage and the problem of divorce and remarriage.

### Masturbation

Sr. Farley writes: “Masturbation... usually does not raise any moral questions at all. ... It is surely the case that many women... have found great good in self-pleasuring – perhaps especially in the discovery of their own possibilities for pleasure – something many had not experienced or even known about in their ordinary sexual relations with husbands or lovers. In this way, it could be said that masturbation actually serves relationships rather than hindering them. My final observation is, then, that the norms of justice as I have presented them would seem to apply to the choice of sexual self-pleasuring only insofar as this activity may help or harm, only insofar as it supports or limits, well-being and liberty of spirit. This remains largely an empirical question, not a moral one” (p. 236).

This statement does not conform to Catholic teaching: “Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action. The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside of marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose. For here sexual pleasure is sought outside of the sexual relationship which is demanded by the moral order and in which the total meaning of mutual self-giving and human procreation in the context of true love is achieved. To form an equitable judgment about the subject’s moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability”.<sup>1</sup>

### Homosexual acts

Sr. Farley writes: “My own view... is that same-sex relationships and activities can be justified according to the same sexual ethic as heterosexual relationships and activities. Therefore, same-sex oriented persons as well as their activities can and should be respected whether or not they have a choice to be otherwise” (p. 295).

This opinion is not acceptable. The Catholic Church, in fact, distinguishes between persons with homosexual tendencies and homosexual acts. Concerning persons with homosexual tendencies, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “they must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided”.<sup>2</sup> Concerning homosexual acts, however, the Catechism affirms: “Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2352; cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Persona humana* on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics (December 29, 1975), n. 9: *AAS* 68 (1976), 85-87.

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2358.

sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved”.<sup>3</sup>

## Homosexual unions

Sr. Farley writes: “Legislation for nondiscrimination against homosexuals, but also for domestic partnerships, civil unions, and gay marriage, can also be important in transforming the hatred, rejection, and stigmatization of gays and lesbians that is still being reinforced by teachings of ‘unnatural’ sex, disordered desire, and dangerous love. ... Presently one of the most urgent issues before the U.S. public is marriage for same-sex partners – that is, the granting of social recognition and legal standing to unions between lesbians and gays comparable to unions between heterosexuals” (p. 293).

This position is opposed to the teaching of the Magisterium: “The Church teaches that the respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions. The common good requires that laws recognize, promote and protect marriage as the basis of the family, the primary unit of society. Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval of deviant behavior, with the consequence of making it a model in present-day society, but would also obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity. The Church cannot fail to defend these values, for the good of men and women and for the good of society itself”.<sup>4</sup> “The principles of respect and non-discrimination cannot be invoked to support legal recognition of homosexual unions. Differentiating between persons or refusing social recognition or benefits is unacceptable only when it is contrary to justice. The denial of the social and legal status of marriage to forms of cohabitation that are not and cannot be marital is not opposed to justice; on the contrary, justice requires it”.<sup>5</sup>

## Indissolubility of marriage

Sr. Farley writes: “My own position is that a marriage commitment is subject to release on the same ultimate grounds that any extremely serious, nearly unconditional, permanent commitment may cease to bind. This implies that there can indeed be situations in which too much has changed – one or both partners have changed, the relationship has changed, the original reason for commitment seems altogether gone. The point of a permanent commitment, of course, is to bind those who make it in spite of any changes that may come. But can it always hold? Can it hold absolutely, in the face of radical and unexpected change? My answer: sometimes it cannot. Sometimes the obligation must be released, and the commitment can be justifiably changed” (pp. 304-305).

This opinion is in contradiction to Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage: “By its very nature conjugal love requires the inviolable fidelity of the spouses. This is the consequence of the gift of themselves which they make to each other. Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2357; cf. *Gn* 19:1-29; *Rm* 1:24-27; *1 Cor* 6:10; *1 Tm* 1:10; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Persona humana*, n. 8: AAS 68 (1976), 84-85; ID., Letter *Homosexualitatis problema* on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons (October 1, 1986): AAS 79 (1987), 543-554.

<sup>4</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to unions between homosexual persons* (June 3, 2003), n. 11: AAS 96 (2004), 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 8: AAS 96 (2004), 46-47.

arrangement ‘until further notice’. The intimate union of marriage, as a mutual giving of two persons, and the good of the children, demand total fidelity from the spouses and require an unbreakable union between them. The deepest reason is found in the fidelity of God to his covenant, in that of Christ to his Church. Through the sacrament of Matrimony the spouses are enabled to represent this fidelity and witness to it. Through the sacrament, the indissolubility of marriage receives a new and deeper meaning. The Lord Jesus insisted on the original intention of the Creator who willed that marriage be indissoluble. He abrogates the accommodations that had slipped into the old Law. Between the baptized, a ratified and consummated marriage cannot be dissolved by any human power or for any reason other than death”.<sup>6</sup>

## Divorce and remarriage

Sr. Farley writes: “If the marriage resulted in children, former spouses will be held together for years, perhaps a lifetime, in the ongoing project of parenting. In any case, the lives of two persons once married to one another are forever qualified by the experience of that marriage. The depth of what remains admits of degrees, but something remains. But does what remains disallow a second marriage? My own view is that it does not. Whatever ongoing obligation a residual bond entails, it need not include a prohibition of remarriage – any more than the ongoing union between spouses after one of them has died prohibits a second marriage on the part of the one who still lives” (p. 310).

This view contradicts Catholic teaching that excludes the possibility of remarriage after divorce: “Today there are numerous Catholics in many countries who have recourse to civil divorce and contract new civil unions. In fidelity to the words of Jesus Christ – ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery’ (*Mk* 10:11-12) –, the Church maintains that a new union cannot be recognized as valid, if the first marriage was. If the divorced are remarried civilly, they find themselves in a situation that objectively contravenes God's law. Consequently, they cannot receive Eucharistic communion as long as this situation persists. For the same reason, they cannot exercise certain ecclesial responsibilities. Reconciliation through the sacrament of Penance can be granted only to those who have repented for having violated the sign of the covenant and of fidelity to Christ, and who are committed to living in complete continence”.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

With this Notification, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith expresses profound regret that a member of an Institute of Consecrated Life, Sr. Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M., affirms positions that are in direct contradiction with Catholic teaching in the field of sexual morality. The Congregation warns the faithful that her book *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* is not in conformity with the teaching of the Church. Consequently it cannot be used as a valid expression of Catholic teaching, either in counseling and formation, or in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. Furthermore the Congregation wishes to encourage theologians to pursue

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<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1646-1647, 2382; cf. *Mt* 5:31-32; 19:3-9; *Mk* 10:9; *Lk* 16:18; *1 Cor* 7:10-11; SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the Modern World, nn. 48-49; *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1141; JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (November 22, 1981), n. 13: *AAS* 74 (1982), 93-96.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1650; cf. JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, n. 84: *AAS* 74 (1982), 184-186; CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter *Annus Internationalis Familiae* Concerning the Reception of Holy Communion by the Divorced and Remarried Members of the Faithful (September 14, 1994): *AAS* 86 (1994), 974-979.

the task of studying and teaching moral theology in full concord with the principles of Catholic doctrine.

*The Sovereign Pontiff Benedict XVI, in the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect on March 16, 2012, approved the present Notification, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation on March 14, 2012, and ordered its publication.*

Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, March 30, 2012.

William Cardinal Levada  
*Prefect*

+ Luis F. Ladaria, S.I.  
Titular Archbishop of Thibica  
*Secretary*