

Connecticut nun and ethicist addresses sexual taboos and Christianity in her latest book

By Tracy Simmons

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When Sister Margaret Farley became an ethicist almost 40 years ago, she never intended to write a book about sexual ethics. But after looking into the pained faces of hundreds of lay people, of students and of women tussling with the complexities of love, she began to mull over their struggles.

Last year, she published "Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics." The book earned Farley, a Yale scholar, the 2008 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion, a \$200,000 honor given for new ideas. Farley's belief is that justice is an indispensable part of sexual ethics. She defined the verb "justice" in her book as, "to render to each her or his due."

Farley, who lives in Guilford, acknowledges she's taken a progressive stance on hot-button sexual issues, like homosexuality, remarriage and masturbation. While the Catholic Church has distinguished between the "homosexual condition" and homosexual actions, which it describes as "intrinsically disordered," Farley says the Bible does not give a clear answer on same-sex relationships.

"Although homosexual genital actions are still judged to be intrinsically disordered, and hence, 'objectively' immoral, they can be 'subjectively' moral depending on the state of mind and intentions of an individual person," she writes. "It is difficult to see how on the basis of sheer human rationality alone ... an absolute prohibition of same-sex relationships or activities can be maintained ... We have to witness that homosexuality can be a way of embodying responsible human love and sustaining human and Christian fellowship."

Her views on divorce and remarriage, same-sex relationships, and ordination of women can be considered to differ with the official positions taken by the current Roman Catholic hierarchy, but Farley said that she proposes such challenges as an ethicist and moral theologian who is, "trying to think through some of the troubling issues facing the church and society."

"I do not just assert my positions, I work my way to them, paying serious attention to the concrete situations in real lives where questions are raised, and working with significant resources in Scripture and in the Christian tradition," she said. "My conclusions may indeed sometimes differ from official positions, but my effort is to shed light both on new questions, new contexts, and potentially new interpretations of the tradition."

Farley says that homosexuals have both a right, and a responsibility, to be fruitful through having and/or raising children and that a committed couple has the right to a satisfying sexual relationship.

Similarly, on issues of divorce and remarriage, Farley disagrees with the Catholic church's insistence that Christian marriage is indissoluble. "When it truly becomes impossible to sustain a marriage relationship, the obligation to do so is released," she wrote.

Susan Garrett, who directs the Grawemeyer award program, said Farley's idea to chew over these issues, rather than believe what society and the church advocates, is essential.

"It's an important message in light of all the confusion surrounding sexuality today. The religious right issues stark decrees while the entertainment industry tells us 'Anything goes.' People are confused about what's right," Garrett said.

"Just Love," the seventh book Farley has written or co-written, addresses what she calls "Taboo morality," which finds actions like masturbation immoral.

"In the sexual sphere, ethical rules have been what one would call taboo, that this is right or this is wrong, and people feel guilty if they break the taboo," she said. "It doesn't work today because we know so much more about sexuality. ... The taboo morality doesn't work and we don't have much of another one that does work."

But the idea that anything goes also does not work, Farley said.

"Neither one of those positions are helpful today and people aren't necessarily happier in their sex lives either. Actually, there's a tremendous amount of unhappiness and pain and suffering. What we need to do is think through these questions," she said.

Although Farley is a member of the Sisters of Mercy orders of nuns and weaves Christianity into the book, she hopes her publication reaches people of with various religious backgrounds.

"I hope what I do may be helpful for people of other faiths, or people with no faith traditions for that matter," she said. "I wrote it for the people, for the ethical seekers of today."

She said assessing ethics is her job.

"People still have this kind of romantic image of nuns floating around in long habits teaching little children, which is a very important thing to do," she said, "but part of my calling is to learn how to think philosophically and ethically."

Farley is also a self-proclaimed feminist.

"I certainly am a feminist," she said. "Feminism is opposition to discrimination on the basis of gender, pure and simple. Everybody, in my view, should be a feminist."

Farley earned a master's degree in philosophy from the University of Detroit and taught at Mercy College for about five years before moving to Connecticut in 1967 to pursue a doctorate. In 1971 she began her career at Yale Divinity School and was the first woman appointed to serve full-time on the YDS faculty.

She is now retired from YDS but is still overseeing some doctoral dissertations. She said she is playing with the idea of writing a sequel to "Just Love" and plans on writing a book about free choice.

"Ultimately the elements in a choice have to do with motivation, we choose our motivation, and finally, and this is way oversimplified, I think we choose our own desires. We don't choose to awaken them, but we choose which ones to follow through on," Farley said.