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A Church Divided: American Catholics and the Equal Rights Amendment

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a contentious feminist issue that divided the people of the United States of America for a century. The fight over whether equal rights for women should be incorporated in the Constitution was bitter. Religious institutions were not exempt from this strife, and perhaps one of the most intensely divided establishments during the debate was the Catholic Church. Few social issues have created such a severe rift between individuals of the same religious institution than the ERA did within the Catholic Church. The extreme contention within the Catholic Church regarding the ERA merits academic inquiry for a number of reasons. It demonstrates the extent to which poignant socio-political debates can lead to extreme polarization of individuals and institutions that have a significant amount of common belief. The division of the Catholic Church over the ERA is also important because it illustrates the degree to which feminist issues divided segments of the American population that generally agree on other political and social issues. Furthermore, the battle over the ERA throughout the nineteenth century shows that the social and political views of both people and institutions can change considerably over time.

A fair amount of scholarly research has been done on the history of the Equal Rights Amendment. Most of this research focuses on the events that took place in the process of the attempt to pass the ERA, and its ultimate defeat.¹ In addition, much of the academic literature that examines the history of the ERA movement views it as part of a whole: there are few books

¹ Leslie K. Gladstone, "The Equal Rights Amendment: A Chronology." CRS Report for Congress. November 15, 1999.

that focus solely on the ERA. Rather, most research materials address a broad range of feminist social issues in a single volume of work, making the ERA one of many foci.² What's more, relatively little research that focuses primarily on the Catholic Church's relationship to the ERA has been carried out at this point. The secondary source literature available on this topic is disparate and somewhat unconnected. The books and articles that address Catholicism and the ERA are not in active dialogue with one another. Furthermore, the literature rarely concentrates on the division within the Catholic Church that resulted from the debates regarding the attempted passage of the ERA. Rather, available secondary sources tend to take one of two approaches. They either embark on an overly broad approach that encompasses feminist issues in the aggregate while addressing the ERA in addition to other issues, or they narrowly focus on a highly specific populace related to the Catholic Church.

In fact, in her article titled "Feminist Consciousness among American Nuns: Patterns of Ideological Diffusion," Patricia Wittbert asserts that "one topic that has been relatively ignored in the focus on non-mainstream groups is the extent and configuration of feminist beliefs among the women in Roman Catholic religious congregations in the United States."³ She argues that American Catholic nuns and their attitudes toward feminist issues such as the Equal Rights Amendment have been largely left out of scholarly efforts to analyze feminist movements throughout history. Although Wittbert focuses on the attitudes of nuns as opposed to the entirety of the Catholic Church, her research is relevant as it demonstrates the fact that groups that one would not necessarily expect to be in support of the ERA—Catholic nuns—did in fact side with the feminist movement in defiance of much of the church hierarchy.

² See works by Freeman, Hirsch and Keller, MacLean, and Schwarzenbach and Smith.

³ Patricia Wittbert, "Feminist Consciousness amongst American Nuns: Patterns of Ideological Diffusion," *Women's Studies International Forum* 12, no. 5 (1989): 529.

Wittbert's focus on American nuns is complemented by the writings of Antoinette Iadarola. Iadarola's article, "The American Catholic Bishops and Woman: From the Nineteenth Amendment to the ERA," addresses the positions of prominent Catholic clergy on a variety of feminists issues. This scholar contributes greatly to the background history of the Catholic Church and the ERA by outlining Catholic teachings and attitudes toward women, thus providing context for the debate.⁴ Iadarola approaches her subject through the lens of a social historian. She focuses on Catholic theology, describing various doctrines and events that shaped religious interpretations of women and women's issues. Thus her work contextualizes other secondary sources on the matter by expounding on the teachings of the Church that are inextricably linked to many Catholics' strong opposition to the ERA.

"The 'Old Right' in Action: Mormon and Catholic Involvement in the Equal Rights Amendment Referendum" by James Richardson takes the broader approach of examining the actions and attitudes of not just Catholics but also another religious group that played a major role in the fight over the ERA: Mormons. However, though Richardson includes two religious groups in his study, the scope of the overall article is actually relatively narrow, as he limits his discussion of the ERA to a particular election year in the state of Nevada when a referendum on a state-wide ERA was one of the most hotly debated issues. Like a political historian, Richardson places the article in the context of social and political movements. More specifically, the book concerns the unexpected phenomenon of conservative religious groups' increasing involvement in American politics: a phenomenon that is contrary to the assumed "functional equivalence hypothesis" that claims that "if people are involved in more 'emotional' religions

⁴ Antoinette Iadarola, "The American Catholic Bishops and Woman: From the Nineteenth Amendment to the ERA," *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (January 1985): 457.

groups such as evangelical Protestantism, then they are not interested in politics and vice versa.”⁵

Interestingly, the paper concludes with a question about the constitutional rights of religious organizations to lobby on political issues, emphasizing the political nature of Richardson’s historical research.

Daniel Williams’ *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* is principally political in nature. He examines the growth of the conservative religious movement within American politics: a movement that included many Catholics.⁶ Though broad in its approach to feminist issues related to the family, part of this work does adequately address Catholic division over the ERA. In particular, it gives insight into the activism of Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative Catholic politician who vehemently opposed the passage of the ERA.

Perhaps the most relevant and in-depth analysis of the Catholic struggle over the ERA movement is James Kenneally’s “Women Divided: The Catholic Struggle for an Equal Rights Amendment, 1923-1945.” A work of social history, this article—unlike much of the secondary source literature available—addresses the issue of Catholic division over the ERA with neither an overly broad nor overly narrow purview. However, the timeframe of the article does limit the focus to some extent since it examines a time period prior to the 1970s. Kenneally does provide useful context for the period on which he focuses, including a brief history of the women’s suffrage movement that set the stage for the push for an ERA. This article likewise gives insight into the earliest stages of the feminist attempts to pass a constitutional amendment providing for de jure equal rights for the sexes. Kenneally’s article includes a valuable social history of the

⁵ James T. Richardson, “The ‘Old Right’ in Action: Mormon and Catholic Involvement in the Equal Rights Amendment Referendum,” *New Christian Politics* (January 1984): 213.

⁶ A chapter in the book titled “The Grassroots Campaign to Save the Family” is the most relevant segment of the work.

various Catholic groups that sprung up in reaction to the ERA, including the National Council of Catholic Women.⁷

In lieu of existing sources that do so effectively, this paper will present a codified history of Catholic views on the Equal Rights Amendment throughout the twentieth century. This paper seeks to rectify the fact that leading secondary sources on the subject fail to adequately address the issue. Current scholarly research either fails to sufficiently address the Catholic Church's involvement in the ERA movement or focuses solely on a highly specific population associated within the Catholic Church. As such, this research is valuable because it will provide both an overview of the events surrounding the conflict over the ERA as well as outlining the division within the Catholic Church that resulted from the debate over the legislation. Thus, this paper will expand upon the fairly limited degree to which current scholarly literature explores the manner in which the Catholic Church was divided over the Equal Rights Amendment. Furthermore, this paper will demonstrate that Catholic views on the ERA—including those of official theology, bishops, nuns, and lay people—changed significantly throughout the twentieth century.

The push for an Equal Rights Amendment has a long history. The movement advocating a constitutional amendment requiring equal rights for men and women dates to 1914, when the National Women's Party set forth the first such proposal.⁸ Various groups advocated for—and opposed—several different iterations of the ERA during the 1920s. Most placed the primary focus on economic independence, but did not necessarily agree on what economic independence entailed. This debate over the meaning and purpose of an ERA resulted in strife within the

⁷ James Kenneally, "Women Divided: The Catholic Struggle for an Equal Rights Amendment, 1923-1945," *The Catholic Historical Review* 75, no. 2 (April 1989): 250.

⁸ Nancy F. Cott, "Historical Perspectives: The Equal Rights Amendment Conflict in the 1920s," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45.

women's movement as groups struggled to determine whether they should support a single-issue platform or attempt to cooperate with other groups for more encompassing efforts at broad social change.⁹ In essence, "the initial conflict between women over the ERA set the goal of enabling women to have the same opportunities and situation as men *against* the goal of enabling women freely to be different from men without adverse consequences."¹⁰

In essence, the clash over the Equal Rights Amendment at the beginning of the nineteenth century largely centered on the question of "what next?" After the passage of the nineteenth amendment, many feminists held opposing viewpoints regarding what the next step should be in improving the condition of women in the United States.¹¹ While many women believed that the nineteenth amendment adequately addressed the need for women to have the opportunity to engage in the public sphere, many other feminists believed their work was far from complete. These feminists were not satisfied with mere suffrage, but rather sought to ensure better treatment of women in society in all arenas. As a result, the primary concern of the day quickly became protective legislation for women. Protective legislation was essentially the passage of labor laws that regulated the work of women in an effort to improve their economic position.¹² Groups such as the League of Women Voters, the Women's Joint Congressional Committee, and the National Women's Trade Union League sought to secure state regulation of labor issues such as working conditions and worker's hours in hopes that they would ensure women were able to establish themselves as an economic force without being taken advantage of or abused by the capitalist wage economy system.¹³

⁹ Ibid, 44.

¹⁰ Ibid, 44.

¹¹ Antoinette Iadarola, "American Catholic Bishops and Woman: From the Nineteenth Amendment to ERA" *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (January 1985): 463.

¹² Freeman, 66.

¹³ Cott, 47.

Reformers who believed that the granting of suffrage ended the need for a women's movement tended to support protective legislation. Believing that women and men had important inherent physical differences that separated them, supporters of protective legislation argued that women needed special accommodation in the workforce because they could never naturally compete with men.¹⁴ On the other hand, feminists who supported the ERA believed that protective legislation was discriminatory against women. They argued that it limited the ability of women to gain equality with men in all aspects of the law by perpetuating the idea that men and women were fundamentally different and thus should be treated in dissimilar manners.¹⁵ These women disagreed with the often religiously-based assertion that men and women were profoundly unlike to the extent that women must always be sheltered from the world by protective legislation.¹⁶ Pro-ERA women argued that by creating different work standards for the sexes, protective legislation would perpetuate the idea that women were inferior to and less capable than their male counterparts. As such, supporters of the ERA asserted that a constitutional amendment requiring legal equality for men and women was the best way to achieve real parity between the sexes because it would put men and women on an equal playing field in all arenas of life, including the workforce.¹⁷

Despite the controversy over the precise meaning of "equal rights" and what the next step following the nineteenth amendment should be, the idea of an ERA began to gain popularity in America. In 1923 Congressional hearings on an ERA took place after Senator Charles Curtis and Representative Daniel Anthony, Jr. submitted legislation requesting such an amendment. This primordial version of the ERA read: "Men and women shall have equal rights throughout

¹⁴ Iadarola, 464.

¹⁵ Ibid, 464.

¹⁶ Ibid, 464.

¹⁷ Ibid, 464.

the United States and in every place subject to its jurisdiction.”¹⁸ The legislation did not progress past the hearing process, however, and slowly the topic of the ERA became less and less discussed on the national level¹⁹ despite its reintroduction to congress each year.²⁰ Nevertheless, during the 1940s the ERA reemerged as a central political issue in America. Support for an ERA was incorporated into the two major national party platforms during this decade: in 1940 for the Republican Party and 1944 for the Democratic Party.²¹ In 1946 the ERA was again brought before the Senate for consideration but failed to pass by 11 votes.²² Over the course of the next thirty years the ERA was slowly phased out as a major political topic as other social issues—such as the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement—came to the forefront of the American political sphere and the ERA was no longer considered a priority.²³ These events in the early to mid-nineteenth century contextualize the official Catholic theology regarding women’s rights generally and the ERA specifically.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the official stance of the Catholic Church toward feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment was less than favorable. The theology, history, and leadership of the Church opposed many feminist issues of the time, including the ERA, abortion, and female employment. For American Catholics in the early 1900s there was little doubt about the Church’s beliefs regarding the nature and proper place of women. With a focus on the importance of piety, purity, submissive-ness, and domesticity, women were believed to be innately religious and positive moral influences on men. Women were expected to be

¹⁸ Sibyl A. Schwarzenbach and Patricia Smith, ed., *Women and the United States Constitution: History, Interpretation, and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 361.

¹⁹ Leslie K. Gladstone, “The Equal Rights Amendment: A Chronology.” CRS Report for Congress. November 15, 1999.

²⁰ Schwarzenbach, 350.

²¹ Jo Freeman, *We Will Be Heard: Women’s Struggles for Political Power in the United States* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 122.

²² Gladstone, 4.

²³ Freeman, 122.

subordinate to their spouse and have firm but gentle control over the domestic matters of the household.²⁴ In addition, official Catholic doctrine held that women and men were to occupy separate spheres based upon fundamental biological differences.²⁵ Furthermore, Catholic teachings indicated that women received salvation through the act of motherhood, providing added emphasis on the importance of remaining in the home instead of being involved in public affairs.²⁶

Because traditional social expectations for women were rooted in the theology and tradition of the Catholic Church, “to many American Catholics this was not only an acceptable model but a familiar one, resting in part on a Christian tradition that held such a pattern was designed by God, exemplified by the Virgin Mary, and revealed by a Pauline interpretation of scripture and natural law.”²⁷ Since the customary role of women as submissive wives and mothers was so deeply important to Catholic theology it is no surprise that the perceived consequences of violating these traditional roles was catastrophic on a grand scale. In fact, Catholic beliefs indicated that if women moved outside their God-created roles, they were sinning like Eve, going against the natural order of the universe, and risking bringing about the destruction of human society.²⁸ It is clear that “these perceptions of women were antagonistic to the feminist movement and to the equal rights amendment first introduced in 1923.”²⁹

In addition, many years of Papal teachings directly addressed the issue of women’s rights and equality, further rooting anti-feminism in the beliefs of Catholicism. Prior to Vatican II, the pontiffs “assumed and explicitly taught women’s inequality and subordination to men, as well as

²⁴ Kenneally, 187.

²⁵ Ibid, 188.

²⁶ Christine E. Gudorf, “Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women,” *Social Compass* 36 no. 3 (1989): 298.

²⁷ Kenneally, 187.

²⁸ Ibid, 188.

²⁹ Ibid, 199.

condemned advocates of both women's equality and public roles for women."³⁰ As a result of these papal instructions, most Catholic higher-ups believed that success of the feminist movement would result in blurred gender lines, less stable homes and families, the undermining of the God-designed superiority of men over women, and the endangerment of women's natural moral leadership. As such, according to Catholic doctrine the Equal Rights Amendment was a dangerous social reform that could cause upheaval in society.³¹ Thus, in the early 1900s Catholic theology was in strong opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, as well as other feminist issues of the day.

Due in large part to such Catholic theology on women's rights, one of the groups that most strongly argued against the ERA was American Catholic bishops. In the 1920s the vast majority of these Church leaders opposed the women's suffrage movement: thus, the bishops' opposition to the ERA was hardly unexpected.³² Alarmed by the increasing number of mothers entering the work force in the 1940s during World War II, Catholic bishops in the US expressed concern about the perceived conflict between employment and effective child care. In 1946 the bishops cautioned that society must not allow the turning of "the mind and heart of [woman] away from the home, thereby depriving the family, State, and Church of her proper contributions to the common welfare."³³ Thus it is evident that during the early nineteenth century the majority of Catholic bishops adhered to the Church's official doctrines against women's equality and opposed the Equal Rights Amendment.

Nuns are another intriguing element of the Catholic Church that was divided over the ERA. Like most groups in the Catholic Church, nuns were far from united in their views. After

³⁰ Gudorf, 296.

³¹ Ibid, 199.

³² Iadarola, 460.

³³ Ibid, 465.

all, “categorizing women simply as pro or antifeminist fails to do justice to the many and varied permutations of gender-affirming beliefs and values which arise among them.”³⁴ Nonetheless, scholars have demonstrated that nuns have a rich feminist heritage that traces back to the early 1900s. Regarded as being “in some ways the most liberated women in nineteenth-century America,” members of female Catholic religious orders had many opportunities not widely available to lay women at the time. For example, nuns had increased access to education, work, and economic self-sufficiency, in part because they were not expected to marry and have children. As a result, a number of Catholic nuns identified as feminists even in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. However, not all women religious supported women’s movements such as the ERA.

The same increased opportunity that empowered many women religious also limited many nuns’ exposure to sex discrimination, on the other hand. Because they were both sheltered from the world around them and frequently had unusually ample opportunities for personal growth and access to resources, many nuns did not relate to the struggles of the average woman.³⁵ Having generally experienced less discrimination in the workplace and the public sector than the average American woman, many nuns were initially not particularly sympathetic to feminist causes during the early twentieth century. However, as the Catholic Church reduced restrictions on the lives of nuns throughout the century, these sisters became increasingly aware of and committed to combating gender inequalities.³⁶ As a result, while women religious have always been divided on feminist issues, it is clear that in the early 1900s nuns were not overwhelming in support of the ERA. As time progressed, however, more and more nuns became supportive of the legislation.

³⁴ Wittbert, 529.

³⁵ Ibid, 529.

³⁶ Ibid, 530.

The American Catholic laity was another vital part of the nineteenth century conflict over the ERA. Several studies have been performed in order to ascertain the degree to which average Catholics in the early 1900s supported and opposed the Equal Rights Amendment. One such study revealed that only a very small fraction of the leadership in the pro-ERA movement had a Catholic background. While this could be in part due to the fact that the survey only examined top leadership positions—which were overwhelmingly occupied by wealthier women—it “still appears as if there is a direct relationship between religion and women's rights.”³⁷ A number of studies regarding everyday Catholics—laypeople who were not directly affiliated with the Catholic hierarchy or religious orders—suggests that average Catholics were deeply divided over the ERA. However, it does seem clear that most Catholics in the beginning of the century aligned with official Church teachings on women’s roles and thus opposed the ERA.³⁸

In fact, many Catholics were strongly in favor of protective legislation—considered by many feminists of the day to be antithetical to the premise of the ERA—because it allowed women who needed to join the work force to do so while still promoting the Catholic doctrine of the difference between the sexes.³⁹ Indeed, scholars assert that

Catholic anti-ERA forces argued that women, forced into the job market against their will and nature, viewed their occupations as only temporary and, therefore, had no desire to organize themselves in labor unions. If women, then, were transient members of the working force not interested in organizing themselves, they would need protective legislation.

In addition, Catholic opponents of the ERA believed that its adoption would harm disadvantaged women by removing what small gains had been made in workers’ protection and economic

³⁷ Kenneally, 201.

³⁸ Ibid, 201.

³⁹ Iadarola, 464.

security.⁴⁰ This desire to protect populations with less privilege aligned with Catholic social teachings on the value of life, making it an appealing argument to many Catholics in the early nineteenth century.

Due to the strong lay opposition to the ERA that was founded on Catholic teachings, a number of major laity-led Catholic-based organizations sprung up in the early years of the conflict surrounding the ERA. Perhaps the most important and influential of these groups was the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW). This “united Catholic womanhood” desired a return to normalcy after the conclusion of the Second World War, and a vital part of that status quo was the role of women traditionally supported by the Catholic Church. The Equal Rights Amendment was perceived as a threat to the social order that had already been disrupted by war, and the NCCW took a strong stance against it. In 1924 the NCCW issued an official statement condemning the proposed legislation “because of the jeopardy in which it places the interests of women.”⁴¹ The NCCW issued a number of other statements regarding the perceived dangers of the ERA. A statement by Dr. Elizabeth Morrissey, the Chairman of the Council’s Social Action Committee, emphasized the previously discussed reasons for opposition to the ERA: the desire for protective legislation, the natural distinction between men and women, and the need for women in the home.⁴²

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, Catholic views on the Equal Rights Amendment began to change dramatically. This shift in support for feminist causes is necessarily contextualized by the historical events amongst which it developed. Although the ERA was discussed to some extent in the 1950s and 1960s it did not achieve the support

⁴⁰ Nancy MacLean, *The American Women's Movement, 1945-2000: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 5.

⁴¹ Iadarola, 463.

⁴² Morrissey, Elizabeth. “Testimony Given the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Equal Rights Sub-committee. Congressional Digest. September, 1945.

necessary to pass.⁴³ However, in the 1970s the ERA re-emerged as a high-profile issue as the push for women's liberation resumed. In fact, in 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment passed in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.⁴⁴ This proposed alteration to the constitution of the United States of America read: "equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex."⁴⁵ Despite passing in both houses of Congress and gaining a voting extension until 1982, the ERA failed to gain the approval of the requisite number of state legislatures necessary for ratification by the deadline set forth by Congress. As a result, the proposed amendment never became incorporated into the Constitution of the United States of America.

Late nineteenth century opponents of the ERA relied upon a number of arguments for amending the U.S. Constitution. They frequently argued that an amendment to the constitution was unnecessary because protective legislation and court rulings were already creating a large measure of gender equality. In fact, the beginning of the 1970s was a period of unprecedented growth of women's rights as many pieces of legislation addressing gender equality were enacted by Congress. In addition to the congressional approval of the ERA, the 1970s saw the creation of tax breaks for workers with children, the passage of the Higher Education Act's Title IX, and the enforcement of existing sex discrimination laws regarding employment opportunities among other improvements.⁴⁶ However, supporters of the ERA responded by stating that an ERA would go further than piecemeal legislation and court rulings in clarifying the exact extent to which equality was to be guaranteed. Furthermore, it would finally permit "the kind of first-

⁴³ Freeman, 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁵ U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary. *The "Equal Rights" Amendment: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Committee of the Judiciary*. 91st Cong., 2nd sess., May 5-7, 1970.

⁴⁶ MacLean, 24.

class citizenship which will permit [women] early in life to make career choices that are not now available.”⁴⁷ Thus the desire for an amendment establishing equal rights for the sexes was not only about gaining privileges historically reserved for men but rather about gaining full legal equality.

As previously mentioned, many years of Papal teachings indicated that official Catholic doctrine was inherently anti-feminist and opposed to the passage of an ERA. However, the harsh realities and experiences of World War II demonstrated that women were capable of participating in the work force and public life while also caring for home and family. Greater numbers of women than ever entered the work force in order to compensate for the fact that a major segment of the male population was overseas engaged in a war. These women not only effectively carried out work traditionally reserved for men, but they did so without noticeably neglecting their responsibilities in the home.⁴⁸ As it became more and more evident that female employment did not, in fact, spell the doom of American society, Pope Pius XII revamped previous Catholic teachings to some extent. The pontiff perceived that in order for women to participate effectively in the public forum they might indeed require particular rights once believed to be in opposition to Catholic teaching, although he still hoped that women would not exercise some of those rights “for the good of the family.”⁴⁹ Thus, while papal teachings on women and their place in society had progressed to some extent since the early nineteenth century segment of the ERA debate, it is clear that during the early to mid-nineteenth century official Catholic doctrine was still antithetical to the demand for equal rights for the sexes.

However, in the second half of the nineteenth century American Catholic bishops became markedly less opposed to demands for equal rights for women, although the church hierarchy was still divided on the issue of the ERA. For example, the Bishop’s Committee on Women in Society and in the Church is believed to have wanted to endorse the ERA in the 1970s. This six-

⁴⁷ Schwarzenbach, 353.

⁴⁸ MacLean, 5.

⁴⁹ Gudorf, 296.

member group of Catholic bishops tasked with evaluating the position of women in American society and the Catholicism concluded that the ERA was in the best interests of women. However, the move to sanction the legislation was squashed by their superiors in the Church hierarchy “on grounds that the passage of the Amendment would somehow have further legalized abortion, an issue of preeminent concern to the American bishops.”⁵⁰ Essentially, Catholic leaders were still fearful that increasing the rights of women in the world of politics and economics would lead to increasing the rights of women in other realms, especially the world of reproductive choice. From this time forward, American bishops tended to vocalize support for the ERA while heavily stressing their opposition to increased abortion rights, thus separating the issue of women’s equality from the issue of women’s health.⁵¹ In 1982 the first joint statement of support for the ERA from a group of twenty-three Catholic bishops supplemented the support of individual bishops in their own dioceses that advocated for ratification of the proposed amendment.⁵² Thus, the views of bishops regarding the ERA evolved over time: while most originally strongly opposed the ERA it later became regarded as “common sense” that women should be granted equal rights under the law.⁵³

Like the American Catholic bishops, nuns’ views on the ERA also shifted between the early and late 1900s. A newspaper article from 1980 titled “Nun Slams Anti-ERA Bishops” relates Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler’s opinions on the subject. Traxler argued that “mere economics of the ERA makes its passage a moral imperative.”⁵⁴ She argues that it is logical to pass the ERA so that women have increased economic opportunity and are empowered to care for themselves. This nun also directly defies and confronts the bishops of the Catholic Church,

⁵⁰ Iadarola, 470.

⁵¹ Ibid, 470.

⁵² Ibid, 471.

⁵³ Ibid, 471.

⁵⁴ Traxler. 1.

saying they have “lacked vision in their support or non-support of social legislation” in recent history.⁵⁵ Furthermore, respondents to a 1989 interview of a number of nuns were much more united in their support of the ERA than in previous decades. In fact, many of the nuns who were asked about their opinions on the matter seemed confused that the ERA would be a contentious topic, stating that it was obvious that women should have complete de jure equality with men.⁵⁶ While certainly not all nuns in the twentieth century conformed to the opinions expressed by these nuns, a large portion of women religious defied the upper echelons of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and strongly supported the passage of the ERA.⁵⁷ In fact, statistics indicate that in the 1980s—the period immediately after the attempted passage of the ERA—nuns overwhelmingly identified as feminists and would have been wholly in line with contemporary mainstream feminist movements were it not for their almost universal pro-life stance on abortion.⁵⁸

Like their bishops and nuns, Catholic lay people in the United States also experienced a stark change in views on the ERA as the nineteenth century progressed. It is certain that many individuals and groups associated with the Catholic Church continued to oppose the ERA. For example, a statement put forth by the National Council of Catholic Women in June of 1977 appealed to the same Catholic teachings about the nature and proper treatment of the sexes that had been utilized to argue against the ERA nearly half a century earlier.⁵⁹ However, popular opinion amongst lay Catholics had turned in favor of the ERA by the 1970s. In fact, a study of pro-ERA and anti-ERA women activists conducted in 1975 indicated that 3.2% of women

⁵⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁵⁶ Wittbert, 532.

⁵⁷ MacLean, 38.

⁵⁸ Wittbert, 529.

⁵⁹ National Council of Catholic Women. “From a Statement of Position recently published by the NCCW.” June-July 1977.

involved in the fight against the ERA were Catholic, while 6.4% of women involved in the fight for the ERA were Catholic.⁶⁰ Further data collected in 1978 revealed that Catholic women were more likely to support the ERA than their Protestant counterparts.⁶¹ What's more, in 1980 a study of 1,205 people yielded results that showed 64.3% of Catholic women supported the ERA and 54.5% of Catholic men supported the ERA.⁶² Thus, it is clear that although some significant minority segments of the Catholic laity continued to oppose the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment well into the late 1900s, a majority of average American Catholics in fact supported the legislation by the turn of the century.

Essentially, though limited amounts of academic research address the topic, it is evident that the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment in the nineteenth century deeply divided the Catholic Church. Official Church theology and doctrine of the time was strongly antifeminist and naturally pre-disposed against women's demands for equal rights. In addition, most of the Church hierarchy was strongly opposed to the ERA initially, including the pope and most American bishops. Catholic nuns likewise did not begin the nineteenth century in support of the ERA, despite their feminist leanings. The lay people of the church likewise did not support the ERA on a broad scale during the early 1900s, but rather fell in line with Catholic teachings and the Catholic hierarchy in their opposition to ERA legislation. However, as time went on the views of all three of these Catholic sub-groups changed dramatically. Although Catholic doctrine only slightly modified its stance on women's rights, beginning in the 1960s Catholic bishops, nuns, and lay people began to support the ERA in unprecedented numbers. While many

⁶⁰ Tedin, Kent L. "Religious Preference and Pro/Anti Activism on the Equal Rights Amendment Issue." *The Pacific Sociological Review* 21, no. 1 (January 1978): 55-66.

⁶¹ Critchlow, Donald T. and Cynthia L. Stachecki. "The Equal Rights Amendment Reconsidered: Politics, Policy, and Social Mobilization in a Democracy." *The Journal of Policy History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 157-176.

⁶² Burris, Val. "Who Opposed the ERA? An Analysis of the Social Bases of Antifeminism." *Social Science Quarterly* 64 no. 2 (June 1983): 305-317.

Catholics at all levels of leadership continued to oppose the legislation on doctrinal grounds, by the end of the nineteenth century a relatively clear majority of Catholics advocated for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Thus, it is evident that American Catholic views on the Equal Rights Amendment changed greatly over time throughout the nineteenth century as church doctrine, bishops, nuns, and laity re-evaluated the feminist movement's demands for fully equal legal rights.

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