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“How Come There’s Only Men Up There?”: Catholic Women’s Grassroots Anti-Abortion Activism

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on the history of grassroots anti-abortion activism in the United States has emphasized the work of conservative evangelical activists who mobilized in the late 1980s. The lay Catholic women who organized and sustained the grassroots movement since the 1970s remain less well understood. This essay addresses the history of socially progressive—and feminist-identified—Catholic women who mobilized to fight abortion in the 1970s and 1980s. Drawing upon oral history interviews, organizational records, arrest dockets, and newspaper clippings, I argue that lay Catholic women initially welcomed evangelicals into the grassroots anti-abortion movement, but were unprepared for the patriarchal

worldview that evangelicals would impose on the movement. Although they were ultimately pushed out of leadership positions, lay Catholic women's influence on the character of abortion protest continued to flourish long after they had withdrawn from the movement. When progressive Catholic women left leadership posts, anti-abortion support for welfare programs, peace, and social justice waned.

"HOW COME THERE'S ONLY MEN UP THERE?"

Catholic Women's Grassroots Anti-Abortion Activism

Karissa Haugeberg

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In 1980, lay activist Juli Loesch assembled a group of Catholic women near the Pentagon to bring attention to Prolifers for Survival, a 2,500-member organization devoted to opposing nuclear weapons and abortion. Loesch and two nurse-midwives enacted a skit from Exodus in which Egyptian midwives defied Pharaoh's orders to kill Hebrew boys. They hoped that passersby would draw connections between the Biblical story of an unjust ruler and the policies of the contemporary state, which accumulated nuclear weapons and permitted abortion. The theatrical protest concluded when the trio was arrested after enacting a childbirth, replete with fake blood. They were eventually convicted of depredation of government property, for which they received suspended sentences and probation.¹

Loesch and her colleagues belonged to a subculture of Catholics whose opposition to abortion grew out of their experiences in social justice movements, including civil rights and antiwar activism, but became more focused, militant, and explicitly religious over time. Beginning in the late 1970s, several thousand Catholics, frustrated by the gradualist approach favored by moderate anti-abortion organizations and clergy, began to participate in direct action protests against abortion, hoping to bring a swift end to a procedure that, for them, had come to symbolize absolute



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