

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

SEX IN CHRISTIAN MORALITY II

IN THE PRECEDING article we tried to show that the morality of sex must be based on the intrinsic meaning of sexuality, where the term 'meaning' has a sense broad enough to include symbol or sign. Following the teaching of scripture, especially Ephesians 5, 22-33, we summed up the wisdom of traditional christian sexual morality as establishing that full sexual intimacy is designed to express that exclusive fidelity which in its first instance is God's love for man. As a further specification, we were bound to acknowledge, from common experience and from science, that sexuality has to do with procreation; that it belongs to its 'nature', taken generally, to begin the process of bringing children into the world. We felt that moral meanings in general and the moral meaning of sexuality in particular must respect this sort of observation, at the risk of denying that God stands to his creation as the Creator and Lord. The purposes detectable and significant in ordinary processes must not be set aside. Hence we had to expand the meaning of sexuality as showing forth, symbolizing or standing for God's fidelity to man, by adding that the partners in such a union must be one male and one female. We said that individual fertility was not a significant issue; but that, in order to respect the 'natural' purposes and establish the higher meaning as in harmony with meanings of lesser significance, the union had to be of the kind which is generally the source of children, even if the particular instance or particular union would be sterile. A sterile man and woman married have a sign value that does not contradict or oppose the 'natural' purpose which is being realized in a large number of other male-female unions. But the analogous union of two men or of two women would have a sign value contradicting or opposing the 'natural' purpose, even if the union could achieve the higher meaning of exclusive fidelity.

Finally, we noted that christians are free to enter or not to enter upon this union which symbolizes the exclusive fidelity of God towards man. And christians have this freedom for two reasons: each one has a relationship of exclusive fidelity in his own or her own life; and this is the primary relationship of God to men itself. Each of us is loved by God in an exclusive and faithful way, and we are called to love others in turn. But we are *not* necessarily called upon to reproduce in symbolic terms the exclusivity of God's love. One exclusive relationship is enough for us; though God may have an infinite number of them. We are called to love universally with God but we cannot multiply exclusivity as he can. It follows, then, that we are free to concentrate on the exclusivity of *his* love alone; so that we love our fellow human beings truly and deeply, but without exclusive characteristics in these relationships. When we do choose to reproduce in incarnate symbolic terms the exclusive character of his love for us, then we freely marry. The exclusivity is shown in that we use our sexual capacity with our chosen partner

mutually and fully only (exclusively) in this relationship of love. If we choose not to marry, we are perhaps freer to show the exclusive character of God's love for us by devoting ourselves to a more intense religious worship, and service in christian love of our fellow men. And we are free to consecrate this celibate life among the people of God, and for them, in the religious life of the Church. Thus this life has a sign value which proclaims the fulfilment offered to all men and women in God's unmediated love.¹

It remains to remark on how God's love is exclusive if he loves all men. God's love is the foundation of all that we are. His love as Creator traces our natural existence; and his love as Redeemer traces that fuller dimension of our personalities, and finally of our whole ability to live which we christians call the supernatural life, the redemption, or the resurrection. Since God's love is as total as I have just described and each of us is unique, God's love is exclusive. I am the only (or exclusive) object of God's love, that is 'I'. My uniqueness is the exclusivity of God's love. When we, as human beings, strive to reproduce through meaning and symbol this characteristic of God's love, we obviously cannot *create* out of nothing another unique person, but we can treat another human being in a unique way (sexually) if we restrict our use of this bodily language for this exclusive purpose. And it is appropriate that we use sexuality for this exclusivity, for through sexuality we come closest to an unambiguous act of creation: procreation, the conceiving of new life. As we remarked earlier, the proof of this sort of argument is in its power to make sense of what we are discussing. I believe that this position makes sense of the traditional christian moral teaching, which in turn is grounded in the way that God's grace makes sense in us of our belief and faith.

The position so summarily sketched leaves all sorts of practical questions unanswered. And some attention to practical questions is necessary if any moral position is going to justify itself to a person; for we all test moral arguments in some degree according to their ability to hold water in practical matters. I thought it helpful, therefore, to apply the theory I have sketched to the questions of 'love-play' outside marriage, to masturbation and to homosexuality. Oddly enough, these three areas of sexual activity, which recommend themselves to moral reflection as posing problems of behaviour and conduct for human beings, are especially problematic in our day. The problem common to these three areas is summed up on the popular aphorism: 'Bad sex is better than no sex'. Christian freedom posits the contrary: 'No sex is better than bad sex', and goes even further by insisting that no sex can be a good thing. This is truly, in biblical terms, to separate oneself from the world. Our contemporaries tend to shudder at anything as unequivocal as this and especially in the area of sexual morality. What they fail to recognize

¹ Marriage, by symbolically reproducing God's exclusive love for each of us, mediates that love. Because of lack of space I cannot touch on the wide-spread problem of a union that is legally in some sense a marriage but lacks the spiritual reality discussed here.

is that the world's aphorism: 'Bad sex is better than no sex', is itself unequivocal and rigid. It declares roundly: 'One must have sex', or, less dogmatically, 'It is better if one has sex'. Either way the 'world's' position supports what is compulsive in human sexual experience. Christian sexual morality supports what is free in human sexual experience. It supports even abstinence, so that freedom may prevail in a notoriously unfree human activity.

Moral problems in our three areas of discussion are solved one way by the 'world', and another way by christians. 'Bad sex is better than no sex' means that if two people feel mutually and strongly attracted, then one ought to 'go all the way': 'one's own conflicting expectations, the expectations of others, and other value considerations notwithstanding'. To do without might be a bad thing. Insofar as this opinion is clearly and consciously held or, as is more common, is subconsciously assumed, then every form of affectionate expression, even the less significant, becomes a preparation for intercourse, an immediate prelude to masturbation; or, if a person's inclinations are such, sexual gratification with a partner of the same sex is all the more readily sought. If this assumption is active in one's mind, there is a tendency to evaluate any mental or moral obstacle in the way of the move from some form of 'love-play' to intercourse as a 'hang-up'; a tendency to evaluate efforts to eliminate masturbatory practices in one's life as largely the signs of neurotic guilt; and finally, a tendency to evaluate efforts to restrain, suppress, or re-direct homosexual inclination as signs of a cruel and artificial cultural conditioning.

Often enough there is just enough truth in these observations to warrant a *prima facie* acceptance of the world's aphorism 'Bad sex is better than no sex'. In other words, the christian has to do better than simply to stop love-play because of fear of full sexual expression or because of some other 'hang-up'; any effort to eliminate masturbatory activity or morally to evaluate masturbatory experience must be quite other than an exercise in neurotic guilt; and the homosexually inclined must not be the victims of a dreadful and cruel social condemnation which is often also hypocritical. Christian morality must not be just a variety of conservative worldly morality. It must be the wholly other thing it is meant to be. This need to be different from the world requires that christian morality never be merely a matter of *what* is done, but also a matter of *why* it is done or not done; where the 'why' has a certain precedence over the 'what', although certainly no absolute precedence or separation.

In other words, the christian solutions to the first (love-play) and third (homosexuality) of our problem areas (though not in terms of lived achievement) are quite simple and point up the complementary roles of meaning and freedom in sexual morality. For example, one judges love-play by the meaning it has for the two persons in the light of the meaning reserved for sexual intercourse. If extended 'love-play' between two unmarried christians leads to each or both having orgasm, but without giving themselves to each other in intercourse; and if both persons, or one of the two persons, do not

feel free for the relationship of marriage, then the two ought sharply to reduce in intensity their mutual signs of affection. If a man or a woman feels strong homosexual attraction, then he or she ought to seek, in God's grace, the freedom, which he only can give, to restrain sexuality and abstain from sexual gratification. The homosexual and the heterosexual christian who are seeking the grace of restraint and abstinence are in the same boat. Neither, although perhaps for different reasons, feels free to marry. All as christians have the freedom not to marry, and, in this way, the freedom to celebrate the exclusivity of God's love. These solutions are easy only verbally; but if we may borrow a sentiment from contemporary philosophy, propositions in the area of morals and religion are not intended to show truth or falsehood, but reality. Only the seen and appropriated reality of God's grace, both as the meaning of human sexuality and as my freedom to live out that meaning, can make possible in lived reality what we so facily discuss in words. Only his grace, as the lived reality of his exclusive love for us, gives any of us the experience of restraint and abstinence as a means to authentic self-transcendence. We can all restrain ourselves and abstain in many areas of life for a goal that is selfish, but only his love enables us to transcend ourselves in love.

The question of masturbation is special, not for reasons intrinsic to the activity but because a great deal of moral thinking and pastoral-confessional practice about this activity have proceeded from an inadequate standpoint. Objectively speaking, masturbation is a de-ordination, a use of a natural process that frustrates its natural purpose.

I think that it is safe to say that most masturbatory acts have nothing to do with procreation, which is one natural purpose of sex. Further, masturbation frustrates the other commonly observed purpose of sex, mutual love and affection for the other. There is no 'other' in most masturbatory practice. This commonly observed purpose of sex has its roots in the nature which both physical and human scientists study and is essential to the meaning of sex we have discovered. The meaning of sexuality as the love of exclusive fidelity takes up and integrates into itself this purpose of sex as mutual love and affection for another person. Masturbation has nothing to do with this purpose, precisely because it is not mutual.²

Traditionally, christian moralists, and especially roman catholics, have taken an objective standpoint from which to evaluate masturbatory practice. The evaluation made from this standpoint, given its limitations, is quite correct. We cannot do without the objective standpoint in morals. No matter *why* something is done, the *what* that is done is usually significant. Usually,

² I am prescinding from cases of 'mutual masturbation'. These cases could occur between children who are learning about sex by the trial and error method and are just exploring; they could be homosexual practices, especially the early stages of adult homosexuality; or they could be cases of two persons not married to each other, caught in ambiguity, wanting to go all the way with sexual intercourse, but not yet wanting quite all that sexual intercourse means or entails for them.

when a man kills another man, what he has done is related to why he did it, except in the rare instance of the completely unavoidable accident. But, in the case of masturbation, the *what* that is done has little if anything to do with the *why*. I cannot readily think of any other human activity in which what is done, objectively described, has less to do with the moral evaluation, not only because it has less to do with the *why* but also because in its own order, as objectively viewed, it amounts very nearly to the doing of nothing. It does no harm; it does no particular good. This objective lack has given rise to many efforts to find some objective evil connected with masturbation, because it seems so unnecessary to resist the practice with strong moral injunction if objectively it is so harmless. So, old wives' tales exist about the harm masturbation will do to health or to future successful married life, and so on. An older, now nearly forgotten science gave some reason to see in masturbation the loss of a potential human life already somehow complete in itself, that needed only to be planted in the right ground. But that consideration is long behind us.

The question recurs as to why masturbation, for moral purposes, is described objectively at all. When it is so described it sounds as if the practice is a misuse of sex on two counts: no relationship to procreation, no mutual love. But in reality if it is approached through the *why* of the activity, it is seldom, if ever, a use of sexuality at all. By that I mean that one is not purposively using a capacity, one is not purposively doing something sexual. Let us say that one of us lies down on his bed for a moment of rest, but simply, for no particular reason at all, does not close his eyes. In that state a light flashes before his face so bright that it blinds him. We would not say that he was guilty of a de-ordination of the nature of vision, although something has happened to that capacity. At best we can say that if he knew about the particular source of the bright light, he should have covered his eyes when he lay down to take a rest.

The analogy with masturbation is not simple, because nothing happens to the capacity for sex when the 'bright light' goes on. Nevertheless, what is usually intended in masturbation is not a specifically sexual goal, not even pleasure in a vast number of cases. And since nothing happens to the sexual capacity of any significance, one wonders why one should analyse it from a standpoint that objectifies the sexual capacity at all. What is *more often than not* going on in masturbatory activity is the release of anger, frustration, resentment, and the like.³ The whole business may start in puberty with its attendant curiosity and exploration, pass quickly into habit, and find emotions such as those named expressing themselves through the now compulsive activity. An objective analysis of sex is no help either for moral evaluation

³ This is not to deny the obvious fact that there can be and often is specifically sexual activity in this act, usually via the phantasy. But equally, such phantasies, especially in the adolescent or the immature, tend to be screens for other, possibly more harmful, emotive reactions, or even anodynes or escapes from other emotions.

or for pastoral guidance. One ought to stop worrying about the *what* and begin to relax and unwind the *why's*. And the *why's* of masturbatory practice may be very significant morally, or they may be trivial.

Harbouring deep resentment so that it poisons one's character is significant, morally speaking. The frustration of a teenager whose overall growth pattern is healthy and points to christian maturity may express itself for a time in masturbation which is not morally significant. Here the objective description of what happens biologically, with its attendant 'natural' purposes, is of no moral help at all.

But, other things being equal, a mature christian does not want to masturbate because there is enough relationship in that activity to sexuality in general, at least reflexively, that he or she would rather abstain from such activity than compromise the exclusive use of sexuality. Human sexuality, as christians see it, has an exalted dignity. It ought to be God-like in its use and in its non-use. In its use it ought to show forth the exclusivity of God's love; in its non-use it ought to show forth the freedom of God's love. To this I believe we are called in his grace.

Another example may bring out the insignificance of the *what* of masturbation. To chew gum is a de-ordination of the saliva glands. They excrete to no purpose save for what minimal good can be accomplished by the saliva that is swallowed and thereby aids digestion, or so some seem to think. But, for the most part, gum chewers work their saliva glands overtime and in doing so violate the purpose of the saliva glands. And this de-ordination is not significant. It would become significant if one chewed as an expression of deep hatred or in order to escape from meaningful and even obligatory inter-personal relationships. There are obvious parallels with masturbation. But, in both cases, the *what* that is done is of very little significance, the *why* is all important.

Once again the moral meaning is justified, not only in the intrinsic good sense it makes of what we are seeking to understand – here it is God's purposes for man in one area of his living – but also in its practical applications. Our practical applications so far have been traditional in their principal import. We may now turn to less traditional applications.

Our assessment of human sexuality, both in use and non-use, as carrying the freedom and exclusivity of God's love, implies a scale of lesser evils or greater goods. Let us say, for example, that a christian homosexual cannot see the part of our argument about limiting sex to the sort of exclusively faithful union that is in general related to child-bearing, but sees only the appropriateness of the doctrine of exclusive fidelity. It is a far lesser evil, or a far greater good, for him or her to enter into and maintain a permanent union not completely unlike monogamous marriage, than it is to be promiscuous and casual in sexual relations. If God has not yet given the grace which moves to total abstinence, he may well give the grace of a faithful union that can in some measure show forth his divine fidelity.

If the present culture makes it impossible for the christian heterosexual,

man or woman, to see the value of virginity in the religious life or before entering marriage, at least the consideration that God intends sexuality to carry into our lives some meaning that comes from his divine reality may lead to a less than perfect restraint, but a restraint nevertheless. The consideration may lead our secularized christians to prefer pre-marital sex to extra-marital sex. Pre-marital sex means that the partners in sexual activity marry each other; extra-marital sex means that they marry someone else, or that they are already married and are sharing sexual activity with someone to whom they are not married. From a christian point of view, pre-marital sex is preferable to extra-marital sex. And from the same point of view, if our theory did not persuade a person who thought of himself or herself as christian to limit sexual intercourse to marriage, but did persuade the person to limit sexual activity to special relationships rather than using sexual intercourse as the language of casual friendliness, then it has accomplished a christian purpose. The more fidelity that one expresses in the uses or non-uses of sexuality, the more easily God may use the occasion as an instrument of his grace.

Another, albeit negative, advantage of our theory that builds sexual morality on sexual meaning is that it gives us clear reason for not being swept into what I call the nonsense of sexual technology: which simply means 'what we can do we ought to do'. Traditional christian sexual morality is then interpreted as having meant, *in the past*, that we ought not to have had babies if we had not provided a marriage in which to raise them. *Now* on the other hand, we can have sexual intercourse without having babies, therefore we ought to have sexual intercourse: the unmarried with the unmarried, the married with the married to whom they are not married, and the married with the unmarried. This interpretation of tradition means that we were stuck with christian sexual morality because we did not have the technology to free us from it. Such a reading of the past may make sense of some scholastic arguments about sexual morality which use notions of justice and nature to defend christian sexual restraint,⁴ but it does not make sense of the symbolism found in marriage by the Scriptures. It is on this symbolism as primary to christian understanding that our morality is built. Furthermore, this mis-reading of the past condemns one to a loss of christian freedom in the present. If christian sexual morality, with its practices of restraint and abstinence, was just a bad thing from which modern technology can deliver us, then we are truly the damned, for modern technology seems more inclined at present to create hell rather than heaven on earth. As a matter of fact, it seems that if modern technology is not restrained and guided, it will *inevitably* create a hell on earth. I think that it is a form of madness to throw out the wisdom of christian experience at the bidding of modern technology, but that seems to be the approved temptation of modern, emancipated catholics.⁵

⁴ e.g. *Summa Theologiae II-IIae*, 9, 154.

⁵ For example, the ex-priest and embryologist, Robert Francoeur, in *National Catholic Reporter*, March 12, 1971, p 14.

Rollo May has counselled against the limitations of technological sex in his very fine book, *Love and Will*, and Jacques Ellul, among others, in his work, *Technological Society*, has shown what loss of humanity in life we can expect if we do not humanize technology. It seems to me a false liberalism and a 'phoney' modernity first to mis-read and then abandon our christian heritage of a wise sexual morality because of biological technology. I would rather that we harnessed biological technology in the name of a higher wisdom than science and technology are capable of. If we do not achieve this harnessing I doubt very much that we will have to worry about the meaning of sexuality or much of anything else.

These comments on sexual morality are part of the conviction that man can with God's aid find adequate meaning to humanize his life, and that this meaning is found in faith and therefore the humanization is the work of God, or in classical terms, a divinization.⁶ If we have found the meaning for human sexuality which comes from faith in God, then we have reason to hope. We have reason to hope that this capacity and characteristic of our living will be fully humanized, which is to say, taken up into his life and his love.⁷

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⁶ II Pet 1, 14.

⁷ Recent literature on the problems considered in this article include: Curran, Charles E.: *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1970), and 'Masturbation and objectively grave matter: an exploratory discussion', in *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 21 (1966), pp 95-109. Hagmaier, George, and Gleason, Robert: *Counselling the Catholic* (New York, 1959). Oraison, Marc: *The Human Mystery of Sexuality* (London, 1969). O'Neill, R. P., and Donovan, *Sexuality and Moral Responsibility* (Washington D.C., 1968). Von Gagn, Frederick, *The Problem of Onanism* (Cork, 1955).