

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

SEX IN CHRISTIAN MORALITY

THE SUM AND substance of traditional christian sexual morality consists in the judgment that sexual intercourse ought to take place only between a man and a woman who are married to each other. The traditional christian position, then, evaluates all other sexual activity insofar as it is fully human, responsible and deliberate activity, in terms of this judgment. There are not a few roman catholic thinkers today who are suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that this position is not universally tenable.¹ I am not in agreement with this challenge to the traditional christian position.

Such a challenge of venerable doctrine leads to a discussion in the Church which is carried on only with difficulty. The traditional position is hoary with age and sanctity, so hoary that direct challenge and frank argumentation are rare indeed. For example, an author may propose that the principle governing our use of sexuality is 'responsible love' or 'the law of love alone'. But the same author may fail to draw the obvious conclusion that follows

¹ For example, John G. Milhaven, reviewing Charles E. Curran's latest book, *Contemporary Problems in Moral Theology* (New York, 1970) says:

Curran refuses to accept the teaching of theologians that all sexual intercourse and any direct sexual stimulation outside marriage is always gravely wrong. In his judgment, this teaching has tended in the past to stifle a proper understanding of human sexuality and human sexual development and to connect sex with a fear of mortal sin. The fear has impeded the development of a proper attitude towards human sexuality on the part of many catholics and even brought about grave repercussions in their adult attitude to sexuality . . . For a homosexual whom modern medical science cannot help, homosexual acts may not even be objectively wrong. Provided there is no harm to other persons a man could accept his homosexual behaviour as the only way in which he can achieve some degree of humanity and stability. There are exceptional situations in which sexual intercourse outside marriage would not be wrong, e.g. with a view to proper medical experimentation and knowledge . . . I must agree, reluctantly, with Richard McCormick that Curran does not offer an adequate analysis of sexuality to ground his allowing 'for cases when premarital coitus would be right'. (McCormick's choice of the word 'coitus' in place of Curran's 'sexual relationship' reminds us that in the interaction between the two men we are witnessing the changing of the guard in american moral theology.) McCormick is afraid that Curran's theoretical fuzziness lets him go too far. I fear it does not let him go far enough.

In his book *Sex: The Radical View of a Catholic Theologian* (New York and London, 1970), Michael F. Valente makes the challenge more explicit. And James Kavanaugh raised the issue three years ago in his book, *A Modern Priest Looks at his outdated Church*, (New York, 1967) pp 99-113; esp. p 109. Since that time Kavanaugh seems to have lost the respect for purity which he had in 1967 (cf pp 112-113). His latest book, *The Birth of God* (New York, 1969), makes the challenge more direct: 'Even the commandment forbidding adultery no longer applies'. p 109.

from his principle: namely, that if couples are in love 'responsibly', they do not require the marriage contract in order to have sexual intercourse licitly and as the proper and right thing to do before God and within the christian community.²

Yet a reasonable reader of the original proposal cannot fail but to imagine situations in which couples 'responsibly' loved without being married to each other, or ever ending up married to each other. In these situations, the 'reasonable reader' asks himself, should the responsible lovers enjoy sexual intercourse or not? And if not, why not? One solution may confront the reader, at least by implication, which is that the adjective 'responsible' when used to modify 'love' always means marriage. But that is a trick of definition and unworthy, at first sight, of serious consideration. Unless something more is said, and it often is not, our 'reasonable reader' cannot fail but to conclude that the principle of 'responsibility', for example, or 'law of love', when stripped of historical accretions, changes what he and many others assumed was the christian moral position: namely, that sexual intercourse properly belongs only to marriage. If our reader is not only reasonable but clever, he will go on to suspect that the questions that spontaneously occurred to him were not explicitly stated and worked out by the author, because the veneration due to the traditional position claims the active support of church authorities, and the author did not want any trouble. Because of this difficulty, which I believe is real, we will discuss the question for the most part by defining typical positions rather than by reference to specific thinkers and their works.

The typical reasons advanced against the traditional christian position fall into two classifications. The first classification I call the 'sex hang-up' argument. It usually consists in autobiographical accounts or other 'hard' cases of psychic woe, attributed to moral instruction at the hands of the Church through one of her agents. The agents can be parents, nuns, priests, etc. The cases, involving great suffering, usually have happy endings, once the persons discover that sex is good and learn to enjoy it without guilt-feelings.³ Most moral theologians find this a mixed-up argument and tend to dismiss it out of hand; but it must be met before one can discuss morality.

Christian morality presupposes freedom. One must be free to act or not to act, free to choose, for an act to be human and worthy of moral evaluation. This is a constant of christian ethical teaching, as is the doctrine that sexuality as such is good. Christians have never capitulated to any form of the dualist heresy, which condemns the body as evil. Only a free person who

² But as recently as 1968, Robert H. Springer could write: 'On the subject of premarital intercourse, it should be made clear at the outset that theological examination of the question is concerned only with those who are engaged to be married'. 'Notes on Moral Theology', in *Theological Studies*, Vol 29 (1968), p 294. Springer may have been reading all the theologians in 1968, but he was not listening to the discussions not found in print.

³ Cf note 1 above, p 148. The issue becomes comical in Michael Novak's latest novel, *Naked I Leave* (New York, 1970).

knows that human sexuality is good can make a moral decision about sexual activity and expression. Traditional christian sexual morality, and the morality discussed here, presupposes people internally free to determine their own use or non-use of full genital sexuality.⁴

The second classification of arguments against the traditional doctrine of sexual morality arises from the collapse of the notion of nature. In the days when one could turn with confidence to the biology of Aristotle – for example, his *De Generatione Animalium* – to find the ‘nature’ of sexuality, one could read morality from science very easily. The purpose of sexuality was clear, and morality consisted in conformity to that purpose. But those days are gone forever, save perhaps in the minds of a few ‘traditionalists’. As a consequence, a position emerges which simply assumes that the demise of ‘nature’ (as aristotelian biology saw it) has meant the demise of traditional christian sexual morality.⁵ To refute this assumption, we must make a few distinctions and establish our method for specifying the morally significant ‘nature’ or meaning of sexuality.

The first distinction is between morality and ethics. Morality is living and concrete. It is what people freely do and how they judge that activity as right and wrong. Ethics, on the other hand, consists of the reasons given as to why something is right and something else wrong. These reasons are often used in giving moral instruction. They are central to the process of growth or change in an individual’s or a people’s morality. The argument that we ought to change our traditional christian morality because we no longer have a science that unequivocally defines the ‘nature’ of sex is simply confusing ethics and morality. The New Testament presupposes a sexual morality which is traditionally christian, yet it contains little or no ethics. As a sample of its sex ethics, I would cite St Paul:

I am free to do anything, you say. Yes, but not everything is for my good. No doubt I am free to do anything, but I for one will not let anything make free with me. ‘Food is for the belly and the belly for food’, you say. True; and one day God will put an end to both. But it is not true that the body is for lust; it is for the Lord – and the Lord for the body. God not only raised our Lord from the dead; he will

⁴ I cannot here give even a passing judgment on the sexual morality taught to catholic children in the recent past. Perhaps the training was so bad that there exists a generation in the Church so compulsive in this matter, so lacking in freedom, that they are incapable of moral behaviour where their sexuality is directly involved, because they cannot freely use or not use it. If such is the case, which I seriously doubt, then sexual morality as understood here, that is, principles and considerations meant to influence and even to determine choice, would not be relevant for these people.

⁵ Although they understand the problem somewhat differently from the way I do, both Milhaven and Curran have focused on this question of ‘nature’: Milhaven, ‘Moral Absolutes and Thomas Aquinas’, in *Absolutes in Moral Theology?*, ed. C. E. Curran (Washington, D. C. 1968), pp 154–185; Curran, ‘Natural Law and Moral Theology’, in *Contraception: Authority and Dissent*, ed. C. E. Curran (New York, 1969), pp 151–175; *Christian Morality Today* (New York, 1966), pp 79–91.

also raise us by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are limbs and organs of Christ? Shall I then take from Christ his bodily parts and make them over to a harlot? Never! You surely know that anyone who links himself with a harlot becomes physically one with her (for scripture says, 'The pair shall become one flesh'); but he who links himself with Christ is one with him, spiritually. Shun fornication. Every other sin that a man can commit is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a shrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God's gift to you? You do not belong to yourselves; you were bought at a price. Then honour God in your body.⁶

Whether or not the passing of the classical world-view and its biology should be seen as encouraging us to make this apostolic statement once again the christian starting point in sex ethics, it does at least teach us that the collapse of an ethic does not necessarily mean the collapse of a morality: especially when the morality was enunciated in the first place without the help of the ethic, which was added later. Those who argue from a changed or lost doctrine of nature fail to understand this.

Another typical position is more complex. According to this position, the little 'ethics' and even the morality presupposed in the New Testament has passed away. With such a judgment, this position treats the sexual morality presupposed by the New Testament writers as if it has suffered the same fate as aristotelian biology in the light of contemporary science. But the two, New Testament sexual morality and aristotelian biology, are not similar in this respect. Contemporary biology has replaced aristotelian biology in a sense that is both empirical and definitive. The discovery that women produce ova as part of their contribution to the generation of a child leaves Aristotle's biology in the dust. But there is no empirical discovery that refutes the sexual morality which the orthodox tradition at least has found stated and presupposed in the New Testament. That sexual morality is a human reality, not merely an empirical reality.⁷ If it still makes good sense, or even the best sense possible, of human living, then it may still be valid, contemporary acceptance or rejection notwithstanding. Furthermore, contemporary rejection ought to show that some other morality makes better sense; contemporary acceptance, which I represent, ought to show that the morality in question still makes the best sense. If it does make the best sense, then I think it would be fitting to conclude that we ought not only to retain traditional christian morality, but follow it.

This 'making sense', whether in terms of revelation or of reason, is our method of enquiry. When a thinker like St Thomas adopted aristotelian

⁶ 1 Cor 6, 12-20 (New English Bible).

⁷ In making this point I have in mind the distinction Father Lonergan makes between reality that is mediated by meaning and reality that is constituted by meaning. Cf *Collection* (New York, 1967) - 'Dimensions of Meaning', pp 252-267 (chap. 16).

biology into the substance of his ethics of sex, he was answering the question, 'What is the meaning of human sexuality?', from the best sources available to him. We must do the same today. Our problem is rather more complex, for no single science today makes authoritative pronouncements on the matter. We cannot turn to a single text or scientific authority which answers the question, 'What is the meaning of human sexuality?', in such a way that we can state the 'purpose' of human sexuality unequivocally or unambiguously, and from that statement of 'purpose' form a judgment as to what is moral and what is immoral sexual behaviour. Rather we must try to determine, from all the information available, especially from scripture and christian tradition and practice, what is the meaning intended in this reality as created by God our Father. As Lord of evolution, culture and history, the Lord of all does not limit our enquiry in any way.

But at the same time, our method could not work if we had to have exhaustive knowledge about human sexuality: namely, knowledge that answered all questions about human sexuality definitively. We need only sufficient knowledge in order to draw reasonable conclusions. This method, perhaps, is not for the insecure, for there is no 'logic' that can create arguments which make one's conclusions into absolute certainties. In this method, the principles of morality are the best possible meanings, not certitudes. But in the case of human sexuality and, I believe, many other cases, it is possible to know with sufficient confidence, before we know everything about a reality, what is the radical meaning of that reality. The radical meaning sums up the purpose which we respect in the reality created for us and given to us when we use the reality or choose not to use it.

The complexity of the quest, and perhaps the fear that no such meaning can be discovered once the concept 'nature' passed from the scientific scene, leads to the typical position we have mentioned: the notion that one can derive a sex ethics from the christian doctrine of love alone.⁸ The effort to do so leads into a *cul-de-sac*. St Thomas for one avoided this blind alley and argued his sexual ethics from the notions of right reason and nature⁹ and he had justification for his method. The christian doctrine of love does not need sex. As far as that doctrine in itself is concerned, we could all live perfectly virginal lives. One may have the christian love of which John speaks in his epistle; this love may be deep and truly human; it may involve bodily feeling and incarnational presence of one to the other. This love may be everything it ought to be; and yet it may still be inappropriate to express it in total sexual terms. Or, if it is appropriate that christian love should be expressed

I do not have in mind such systematic works on the law of love as Gerard Gillean, S. J., *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology* (Westminster, Maryland, 1962); but rather popular thoughts on love such as the works cited in notes 1 and 3 above (pp 143 and 149): cf Eugene Kennedy, 'It Shows Up in Sex', in *The Critic*, vol. 28, No. 6 (July - August, 1970), pp 32-38. The situation ethics controversy, especially the work of Joseph Fletcher, is relevant here because of its influence on catholics.

⁹ *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q 153 and q 154, articles 2 and 3.

in this way, then the christian tradition of restricting sexual intercourse to the monogamous marriage union has been a real mistake and ought to be dismissed from christian life and conduct.

Few real christian thinkers hold that the latter option is completely right. Some, perhaps many, prefer to relax the moral position of sexual restraint in the traditional christian sense, permitting exceptions or special situations; and even the most traditional admit a limited number of such possibilities.¹⁰ But even those who may wish to relax this moral position do not really advocate its total abandonment. Yet too few seem to realize that unless one is ready to abandon the moral position of sexual restraint completely, then one must find justifying grounds for holding to some form of christian sexual restraint other than the christian doctrine of love. Put very bluntly, but I think accurately, the christian doctrine of love is one of universal charity. Therefore, if one specifies the meaning of human sexuality as one of the richest and deepest expressions of love, then the christian doctrine of love is no place to search for a restraining order. The christian command is to love as richly and deeply and widely as possible.

We can schematize the problem in this way. To connect the christian doctrine of love to human sexuality requires that human sexuality be defined as an expression of love. From such a definition one would be compelled to argue that the creator intended persons to use their sexuality only when they mean to express deep and profound and responsible love. But the christian teaching is that I ought to love as deeply and profoundly and as widely as possible. The result would therefore be not to restrain the use of sex, but to encourage it.

Furthermore, as we have said, the New Testament does not connect christian love to sexuality as such. 'There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus'.¹¹ It is true that the New Testament, building on the Old Testament tradition, connects christian love with marriage; but this is an optional and free connection. The christian *may* marry, but he does not *have* to marry. Nevertheless, all christians, to be christian, must love. Christian love admits of an almost incredible variety of expressions, all free; and marriage is but one of them. We must therefore find something 'more' within the doctrine of christian love, when related to sex, on which to build a christian sexual ethic. Yet the instinct which seeks to derive a christian sexual ethic from the christian doctrine of love cannot be entirely wrong: for this doctrine, in one sense,

¹⁰ I remember a hypothetical case I had years ago in a seminary ethics class. Atomic explosions had sterilized the majority of human males, so ran the case. We were asked the question: What was the moral obligation of the remaining few, even the married among them, in the use of their potency? Our answer was simple: The good of the race, its future, took precedence over the good of monogamous marriage. Therefore, the potent men were to ensure the future of the race. They were not only not obliged to restrict themselves to sexual union with only their wives; they were positively obliged to have sexual intercourse with other women.

¹¹ Gal 3, 28.

governs all christian morality. We may expect, therefore, to find one expression of christian love, among the many possible, which has a special significance: one which coincides with an important characteristic of human sexuality. From this conjunction, then, would arise the meaning that gives an ethic to traditional christian sexual morality and aids us in deciding to retain that morality.

All the various expressions of christian love require the sign of faith or fidelity, for we are saved by faith: *fides caritate formata* (faith which is formed by charity). This loving faith must be faithful to the end. We must persevere in order to merit an eternal crown. This fidelity to the end is so great that it is not our achievement but God's free gift of perseverance. Perseverance or fidelity is a central characteristic, the specific form, we might say, of christian love. As our Father shows forth faithful love, so are we to be perfected as our heavenly Father is perfect. We are meant for faithful love. We may say, then, that all christian love is faithful love. Christ shows us this form of faithful love especially from the moment when he takes the cup in the garden of Gethsemani until he dies on the cross. We ought to accept the same cup in every eucharist we share. According to this pattern, and no matter how lived or expressed, all christian love signifies fidelity.

Let us first examine an unmarried expression of christian love. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that constitute the 'religious' life lose their meaning unless they signify fidelity – both the fidelity of God to man and man's response or fidelity to God – an imperfect fidelity marked by sin in this life. 'Religious', like all christians, strive to reproduce as fully as possible in their own lives the fidelity through which we are all saved, the cross of Christ. Only Christ was perfectly faithful, and he is the model of our faith: not in the narrow meaning of faith as belief, for Jesus as man knew many things we merely believe. He is rather *the* example of our faith when faith means fidelity, trust in the Father, and a hope that reaches beyond the injustice and death of this life. He is our faith as the source of that courage to return good for evil, which is the law of his cross. Without a share in his fidelity to the Father, trust in the goodness of the Father, and his hope in resurrected life, none of us can live the christian life to which we are called. The love of God is a well-formed love, and fidelity is its form. That is to say that Christ is the form of love. 'This is my commandment: Love one another, as I have loved you. There is no greater love than this, that a man should lay down his life for his friends'.¹²

Although neither the life nor words of Christ in the gospels are the direct reason for seeing marriage as one of the expressions of christian fidelity or faithful love, Jesus seems to have taught such a doctrine which Paul learned and recorded for us. Perhaps the teaching which Paul records, he saw as related to Jesus's teaching on divorce. That teaching was unique and seems to require that marriage be a sign of God's fidelity. 'What God has joined

¹² Jn 15, 12-14.

together, man must not separate'.¹³ Thus the Church regards marriage as a sacrament and enjoins that by the mercy of God the married couple live as a sign of his love for his people. The most famous passage on this matter is, of course, the text from Ephesians. Here Paul underlines fidelity as the core of christian love in marriage, which is seen as showing forth the source of all christian love: God's love for men, that is, Christ's love for his Church. But marriage involves, as we shall see, a special brand of fidelity to distinguish it from other forms of christian love. For nowhere in the New Testament or the christian tradition, where the showing forth of faithful love is the meaning and norm of marriage, is marriage regarded as a state of life necessary for all christians. Yet all christian love is faithful, and all christians must faithfully love. That is to say, christian love does not require marriage; it can do without it. To put it briefly, human sexuality is not just an expression of love. Marriage is not just an expression of faithful love. There is some other specifying characteristic.

Before pinpointing this specifying characteristic, we must remind ourselves again of an important point. According to the morality of the New Testament, marriage is a free option; it is not an obligatory option. Nevertheless, it is the only option in which full sexual expression is morally permissible. In no other human relationship founded on love is it morally permissible to employ full sexuality as an expression of that love or as an expression of anything else; for nowhere in the New Testament or the orthodox christian tradition is full sexual exchange considered proper and fitting in any relationship other than that of monogamous marriage.

In this light we must put our choices before us in a very stark fashion. Either christians were and are a very 'hung-up' group, or they see some meaning in sex other than, or in addition to, the expression of love. If sex well expresses and properly signifies deep and honestly-felt love, then there is no earthly reason for christian sexual restraint. The sentimental and sloppy character of many arguments bearing on sex ethics should give us the hint that there is a problem here. Those who maintain that christian sexual morality is derived from love alone must, I believe, resort to special pleading in arguing for the preservation of some vestige of christian sexual restraint. A typical pattern involves pleading that love of such depth as to justify sexual expression is so infrequent that commonly it occurs only once in a life-time. With this pleading, one is at least in effect back to a position which restricts sex to marriage. But one may gratuitously deny the pleading. Love of such depth is not so rare nor does it occur only between a man and a woman.

All love must be honest, truthful, respectful of the other person. All love must be responsible. And, praise God, love relationships between human beings are not so terribly rare. Just as our 'reasonable reader' did, I can think of many relationships between men and women that fit these criteria. Yet these men and women are not married to each other and never will be. The

¹³ Mt 19, 6.

christian tradition of sexual morality should be thrown out, not just tampered with (mere 'tampering' is a dishonest procedure), if one concludes that men and women in honest, responsible love relationships ought to have sexual intercourse. Further, we can all think of many relationships between women and other women, between men and other men, which are real love, authentic christian love. Ought these people also to have sexual relations? Again, an affirmative answer should mean the setting aside of the christian tradition.

But if the christian tradition makes sense in some pertinent way and if that sense is still valid, then we may defend the christian morality of sexual restraint in unambiguous and unsentimental terms.

I think that the tradition does make very good sense. So far we have seen that in the christian tradition love is freed from sex. In this tradition the primary or fundamental meaning of sex is *not* that it is *the* language of love. For the cross is the primary language of christian love. Sex must be converted or redeemed, like everything else human, in order to become *one* expression of love: not a necessary expression, but one that we are free to use or not to use. Christ does not seem to have used this expression of love; and it plays no central role in christianity as it does in some other religious systems. But if sex is not seen *primarily* as the expression of love, not even as the expression of faithful love, then its radical or fundamental meaning, which specifies its moral use, must lie elsewhere. It must lie in what sex does primarily express. I suggest that according to the christian tradition sex primarily expresses *exclusive fidelity*, and exclusive fidelity ought to be one among other possible expressions of faithful love. The radical meaning of sexuality is to show forth exclusive fidelity, with a further qualification which we will touch upon later.

As we have said, all christian love must be faithful love; so sex as an expression of fidelity would not reveal it as meaning something that ought to have only restricted use. It is the notion of exclusivity as modifying fidelity that reveals in sexuality the meaning in which christian sexual restraint is grounded.

Exclusive fidelity is a difficult notion for the christian to handle in an intra-human context. There is only one relationship of fidelity that is absolutely exclusive, that between God and man. From God's side there is no wavering, but man does waver. He tends to violate the first commandment and he does build idols. Nevertheless there does exist one human relationship of exclusive fidelity – the relationship of husband and wife. How difficult it is to understand the absolute character of this relationship is clear from the traditional and present theologizing about Christ's teaching on the matter of divorce or the indissolubility of marriage.¹⁴ Merely to mention the problem indicates

¹⁴ Father Quentin Quesnell, S. J., in a recent article, not only provides an excellent bibliography for this subject but also makes a point parallel to my own: 'Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven', in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (1968), pp 335-358.

that for the christian all human fidelity, and especially an exclusive fidelity, must be judged in relationship to that one exclusive fidelity to which he or she as christian is called – fidelity to God. And, since there exists this one exclusive relationship in the life of each christian, any other relationship claiming exclusivity must be a duplication of the first relationship; otherwise, that primary relationship would cease to be exclusive.

The secondary relationship is a symbolic or sacramental restatement of the primary one; it derives its special characteristics from the first relationship which it duplicates. Further, even duplicating the primary relationship would undermine its exclusivity were there not just cause. Marriage, therefore, does not justify itself solely because it is a relationship of exclusive fidelity. After all, a homosexual liaison, at least in theory, could be a relationship of exclusive fidelity. So could any other inter-personal relationship, for that matter. But merely inter-personal values do not justify the exclusivity of marriage in the christian context, since the primary relationship with God is the exclusive consummation of all inter-personal values. Marriage requires, rather, additional justification through its social aims, which are greater than the personal aims of the faithful couple. These are the traditional aims of bearing and rearing children.

Two points are obvious immediately. Firstly, the bearing and rearing of children justifies marriage as an institution and not the individual marriage. Human and personal values justify the individual marriage, even sterile marriages. But christian men and women would have to seek these values elsewhere were the institution as such not justified by the larger social aim. Therefore, a married union between a man and a woman may be entered upon, even if it is known to be sterile from the beginning, because the *institution* of so uniting a man and a woman intends the birth and rearing of children. Single sterile exceptions do not undermine the meaning of the institution. But although two men or two women who would so bind themselves and call their union marriage would be no more sterile than some male-female couples, they would not be participating in the justified institution. This would manifestly be unfair if all human beings required an intra-human union of exclusive fidelity with full physical sexual expression. We have argued that, as human beings in God's plan of redemption, we are free from such a requirement. We have a relationship of exclusive fidelity with God. Whatever is essential to the fullest human living is not necessarily lost if a man or a woman should choose not to enter upon a human relationship of exclusive fidelity. This doctrine does not condemn the homosexual in any way. Through sublimation, homosexual instincts have as moral a use as those of the heterosexual who has not chosen marriage. But it does seem that the homosexual is called to a celibate life without the luxury of as many viable options as his or her heterosexual counterpart. (I would like to discuss this much further in another article. Here it is pertinent to insist only that the christian morality I am defending in *no* way judges a person because of his or her inclinations. It evaluates only free practice.)

Secondly, apart from christian faith, the arguments for preferring monogamous marriage over other means of providing for children are inconclusive. If one believes that God loves men with a steadfast love such that each individual is uniquely loved and thereby owes God a response that excludes all other absolute claims (an exclusive fidelity), then it is fitting that children begin life in an institution and a society built up with such institutions designed to show forth sacramentally the exclusivity of God's love for man and the fidelity required in man's response.

Full sexual expression through complete intimacy and intercourse, therefore, is given morally only as the sign of a relationship of *exclusive fidelity* between a man and a woman. But men and women may create the bond and give this sign of *exclusive fidelity* only because marriage has a further justification: it is the basic unit of a society in which children are meant to be born and raised under a sign of the *one* relationship of *exclusive fidelity*, that between God and man.

We have found among the many possible, therefore, one expression of christian love, marriage, which has the special significance of *exclusive fidelity*. This special significance coincides with a characteristic of sexuality, the relation of sexuality to procreation. This characteristic, in turn, coincides with the special significance of exclusive fidelity to give us the meaning of sexuality that grounds an ethic of traditional christian sexual morality.

The marriage relationship is exclusive for this reason: just as there is one God, and only one, whom each of us adores, so there is one and only one other person whom each of us may call wife or husband at any one time, and ideally only one in our life time: 'A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry whom she will, provided the marriage is within the Lord's fellowship. But she is better off as she is; that is my opinion, and I believe that I too have the Spirit of God'.¹⁵ As the one God excludes all other gods, the one husband or wife excludes a certain sort of relationship with any other person whom we may love. The relationship is freely entered into; in the christian vision no-one *has* to get married. It is *not* different from our other relationships simply as a relationship of love. Two friends may love as profoundly, and husbands and wives should have friends. It is different because of the specific responsibilities that give structure to the married relationship; and it is the only such relationship at any given time in anyone's life; therefore it is exclusive.

Since sex is the sign of this married and exclusive love, which is one and not the only form of christian love, it is, therefore, wrong to think of sex merely as an expression of love, when love is taken in its general meaning. It is by no means even the only expression of love in marriage. Sex is rather the special and specific sign of the exclusive character of the relationship between a married man and woman.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 7, 39-40.

It takes little thought or imagination to see that if sex radically means what I here suggest that it means, the signification of exclusive fidelity in marriage, then the traditional christian sexual morality can be accepted without much difficulty and stand without the ambiguity and sentimentality found in many presentations today. Finally, we have built our sexual ethics on more than a direct analysis of the christian notion of love alone.¹⁶

I believe that there is more than one way to establish the ethic sketched here,¹⁷ but all methods would have to clarify the morally significant meaning of sexuality. This we have sought to do by an argument of alternatives. We can now review and summarize those alternatives. Fundamentally, I am saying that sexual ethics follow from the meaning found in human sexuality. It is a natural law argument raised to the level of a theological argument. As a natural law argument it presupposes that what we know as human beings through our common observations and our disciplined sciences about sexuality does not conflict but harmonizes with the meaning we find theologically. The theological argument results in the claim that in the context of redemption sex is meant to express exclusive fidelity in marriage. If the meaning found in human sexuality is not the signifying of an exclusive relationship of fidelity, then what does it signify? What are the alternatives? For the christian, as for the humanist, the primary signification could be deep love. In our day, birth prevention is sufficiently effective that one cannot reasonably construct arguments for sexual restraint on a question of justice to unborn life.¹⁸ Therefore, if deep love is the primary signification of human sexuality, if sex is a bodily language designed to express deep and responsible love, then, as we have noted, we can all think of many relationships between men and women who will never marry each other, and between persons of

¹⁶ The understanding of sex presented here would limit it to marriage, as the christian tradition has done, but would say nothing directly about the matter of the fertility of individual married acts of sexual intercourse. Therefore, our argument does not solve the question of birth control as that was presented in *Humanae Vitae*; for the argument concludes only by restricting proper sexual activity to the marriage union. It would not necessarily follow from our terms that each and every act of intercourse must be 'left open to procreation'.

¹⁷ I could have taken another approach to this question: namely, an historical one. In this approach I believe it would have been easy to show that in christian sources sexual intercourse and love are in no way conspicuously linked. One may say that it is a notion of recent vintage to suggest that sexual intercourse by its own nature is an expression of that love with which Christ concerned himself in his teaching and especially in his summation of the Law. I would simply say that this contemporary notion is mistaken and quite the contrary was the case with Christ. A book recently published in the United States argues that Jesus was married perhaps twice. Such a position would seem to be the natural consequence of linking christian love to sexual intercourse as its expression (and, of course, preserving as an anachronism the link between intercourse and marriage). Whenever Jesus and a woman are linked in love, speculation is free to conjure up a marriage, if sex and love are related as expression to reality expressed.

¹⁸ Cf., *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q 154 articles 2 and 3.

the same sex, that *ought* to be fully expressed sexually.

We may feel instinctively that this alternative is leading in the wrong direction. And it is. Sex is an imperialist. It tends to take over. No one wants it tied to all love relationships. The average heterosexual at least wants his or her love relationships with the same sex freed from sexual activity. Contemporary american society is so pre-occupied with sex that deliverance from sex as imperialist would seem to be a major order of business coming just after deliverance from war, poverty and racial injustice. When sex is legitimized by love alone or love in general, either we limit our loving or we do not limit our sexual activity, or we choose not to be consistent. Even if we distinguish between real and apparent love, and declare that real love is rare, we all feel that we are really in love quite often enough to justify a very unrestrained sex life. We feel we are in love a sufficient number of times to let sex as imperialist take over. Almost all men and women settle for some principle of restraint. If this principle is not clear and rigorous, it may function to give an individual private sexual morality, but it will not function as an ethic should. It will not answer the real question, 'Why be moral in this particular way?' That has been the fate of many recent ethical arguments. I hope that here we have proposed an argument not subject to the same fate. If it is not subject to the same fate, this will be because we have uncovered the radical meaning of human sexuality.

Again the alternatives make our point for us. Many christians try to build sentimental arguments about the complete giving of one to the other to justify an almost instinctual, perhaps culturally conditioned, preference that sex be related to marriage and thereby restrained. But there is complete giving in a christian sense without marriage. I think many marriages, even good marriages, lack the depth, the complete giving, that existed between Francis and Clare, between Ignatius and Francis Xavier, between Jesus and John if you wish. Why not full sexual expression? Is it merely a matter of social *mores* and personal taste? Or does our morality come down to some arbitrary command of God? I think not. I think that the meaning we have expounded is embedded in human sexuality and that the christian tradition draws it to our attention. This meaning, then, becomes the norm of sexual behaviour. I find that this meaning is the language built into human sexuality. Human sexuality is meant to signify a relationship of exclusive fidelity in marriage.

Positively, no one consideration comes to proving this intention, but it does make sense of a number of facts: for example, the fact that sexuality is related to procreation makes it fitting that it be used in a context in which children are wanted and provided for. The fact that highly desirable human and spiritual values are realized through stable and monogamous marriage is the justification for restricting a special bodily language for use only in this context for which it seems to be specially appropriate, even specially designed. The moral activity of restraint, then, brings out the meaning hidden in the nature of sexuality: a meaning God intended in the reality and which is lost

in immoral use. I find that this line of thought fits in with our quotation from St Paul.¹⁹

Using contemporary language to express this point anew, I find St Paul saying that it is the nature of sexuality to express an exclusive relationship because it brings about a special union. 'The pair shall become one flesh'. And he further implies that since our bodies are shrines of the indwelling holy Spirit, and therefore we are living in the order of his grace and love, what we do ought to show forth his grace and love. This hints at the sacramental character of marriage or sexual union. At this point theology and the observation of nature converge to find intended in sexuality²⁰ the radical meaning that, when properly used, it ought to signify binding fidelity. Such a human relationship of binding and exclusive fidelity exists between a man and his wife.

The establishing of such an exclusive relationship is justified on the basis of social and personal considerations. It is not a relationship that is necessary in all cases for personal human fulfilment, nor for realizing the love of God or exercising his commandment to love. It is a free union of exclusive faithful love. What is unique about it is that it is exclusive, for all true love is faithful, especially all christian love. In such a union, active sexual expression – sexual intercourse – is a fitting and proper sign of the meaning of the union. In other states of christian life, the restraint or non-active sexuality of the christian is the fitting and proper expression of exclusive fidelity, the exclusive fidelity to which we are all called: fidelity, trust and hope in the love of God.

Christians owe it to their fellowmen and women to announce again, loud and clear, that there is no fidelity without God, that there is no love without fidelity, and finally that sex is no language of love without exclusive fidelity.

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¹⁹ 1 Cor 6, 12–20.

²⁰ By now I am sure the reader is aware that the sexuality discussed in this article is limited to full physical intercourse. That limitation leaves for further discussion the ethics of our sometimes diffuse, sometimes pointed, general sexuality, which is more or less explicitly present in all human relationships: the traditional questions of modesty and restraint in intimate behaviour, etc.