

ORDERED AFFECTION

Sexuality and Ignatian Spirituality

Timothy P. Muldoon

CHRISTIAN SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY develops out of a recognition that all physical matter can be a window, as it were, into the mystery of God. Philip Endean, paraphrasing Karl Rahner's theology of symbol, expresses this notion well:

All reality—even God's own being—is symbolic. This outer material is not an extrinsic sign (*Vertretungssymbol*) of God's creative power, but an intrinsic symbol (*Realsymbol*) of God's self-gift.¹

The body is a real symbol of the human being, inasmuch as the body manifests and makes present the reality of the person, created in the image and likeness of God. What, then, of the body's desires? If the body is the *Realsymbol* of the human being, and the human being is created in the image and likeness of God—though affected by sin—what theological sense ought we to make of hunger, thirst and, especially, sexual desire? This essay will argue that Ignatian spirituality, rooted in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, offers a way forward in considering a response to these questions. It will focus on sexual desire and develop the thesis that Ignatian spirituality invites reflection on the harmonizing of all affections, including such desire, towards the end of union with God.

To be clear, it is important to begin with the observation that Ignatius himself had little to say directly about sex, and his view of marriage as subordinate to celibate religious life mirrored that of his contemporaries. Yet what he produced in the *Spiritual Exercises* is an invitation to an

¹ Philip Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 132, citing Rahner's seminal essay 'The Theology of the Symbol', in *Theological Investigations*, volume 4 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), 221–252.

experience of God—or, more precisely, an invitation to reflection upon one’s experiences of God—which involves understanding all the ways that one’s life bears the divine imprint, despite being tarnished by sinful choices. It is therefore possible to examine the dynamics of Ignatian spirituality with particular focus on the question of how it might invite a person to reflect upon his or her sexuality in the context of the desire for union with God. To put the issue more colloquially, the person undertaking the Exercises—and, further, the person trying to live according to what he or she discovers in the context of the Exercises—is asking the question, ‘how might I use my sexuality for the greater glory of God?’

I would like to look first at the roots of Christian reflection on sexuality, in order to understand the historical and theological context of Ignatius’ writings. Next, I shall examine the *Spiritual Exercises*, paying particular attention to Ignatius’ emphasis on the ordering of affection. Finally, I shall extrapolate from the text of the *Exercises* to explore some implications for what the ordering of affection might mean for sexuality.

Christian Tradition and Sexuality

The New Testament sources about sexual desire in itself are notoriously minimal. In the synoptic Gospels, for example, Jesus extols marriage as reflective of God’s design in the beginning (Mark 10:2–9, Matthew 19:3–6), while rejecting sexual impropriety (*porneia*, cf. Matthew 19:9). There are Paul’s warnings about sex, tempered by his recognition that marriage has been instituted by God: ‘it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion’ (1 Corinthians 7:9). In the letter to the Ephesians there is the recognition of marriage as bearing witness to the love of Christ for the Church, even recognising the covenantal sign of man and woman ‘in one flesh’. Nowhere in the New Testament, though, do we find the kind of robust celebration of sex that we see, for example, in the Song of Songs; more frequently, we encounter caution about a passion which, if not moderated by the will to serve the new covenant instituted by Christ, will lead one away from union with God in heaven, where men and women ‘neither marry nor are given in marriage’ (Mark 12:25, Matthew 22:30, Luke 20:35).

The predominant patristic view of sexuality, influenced as it was by Stoic and Neoplatonic sources, coalesced in Augustine’s suspicion that even the best sex should be left behind in the ideal Christian life as



The Wedding at Cana, by Gerard David

tainted with original sin.² Saint Paul had, of course, suggested that it was best ‘to remain unmarried as I am’ (1 Corinthians 7:8), mindful of the new law of the spirit that called Christians beyond the lusts of the flesh (cf. Romans 7:5–25, 8:3–13; 1 Corinthians 3:1–3; Galatians 5:13–24). Augustine professed a lukewarm affirmation of sex, surprising considering the even dimmer view of it held by some of his predecessors and contemporaries (such as Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Jerome).

Sexual language was certainly not a favoured vehicle for exploration of the spiritual life. Some figures in the early Church, however, such as Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite, could discern a truth about the contemplation of God revealed through the human experience of *eros*.³ Gregory’s essay *On Virginity*, which he probably

² Studies of Augustine’s influence on the development of medieval Christian attitudes toward sex are too numerous to mention. Peter Brown’s *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990) represents the most widely respected treatment of the patristic period.

³ See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983).

wrote as a married man, shows a measured affirmation of sexual passion as, potentially, a manner of obedience to God and a benefit to the state.⁴ Of Gregory, Andrew Louth writes the following:

If there is properly an ecstatic element in Gregory's doctrine, it is in the ecstatic nature of love, which continually seeks to draw the soul out of itself to union with God as He is in Himself. Gregory uses both *eros* and *agape* to describe this love, a love which is essentially a desire for union with the beloved.⁵

Gregory's emphasis includes both marriage and celibacy as potential instantiations of ordering sexual desire for the sake of obedience to God. Sexual renunciation may signal a full embrace of divine will, but sexual activity in marriage can also be ordered to a divine *telos* and (following the example of figures such as Isaac) may also be the means by which a human being ought to obey God's will. Sarah Coakley describes it well:

The key issue, in fact, for Gregory, is a training of desire, a lifelong commitment to what we might now call the 'long haul' of personal, erotic transformation, and thereby of reflection on the final significance of all one's desires before God.⁶

The Ordering of Affection in the Spiritual Exercises

The notion of spiritual athleticism that we find among patristic authors such as Gregory has its root in Paul, who used the metaphor of 'running the race' (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24; 2 Timothy 4:7; Philippians 3:14) for the Christian life. In appropriating the notion of exercise, then, Ignatius was drawing from a long tradition of advice for spiritual discipline.

Ignatius describes his Spiritual Exercises as aiming to help a person 'to master oneself and order one's life, without being swayed by an affection which might be disordered'.⁷ The image is teleological: one

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, chapter 8.

⁵ Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 93.

⁶ Sarah Coakley, 'Pleasure Principles: Toward a Contemporary Theology of Desire', *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 33/2 (Autumn 2005).

⁷ This translation is mine, of Ignatius' Autograph (number 21). The original reads as follows: '*Exercicios espirituales para vencer a si mismo y ordenar su vida, sin determinarse por affection alguna que*

will finish the race and achieve union with God—the goal of the spiritual life—if one avoids being distracted from the race by pursuing some disordered affection.

The spiritual discipline of ordering affection had roots in the writings of such figures as Augustine, Aquinas and Thomas à Kempis;⁸ and the theme of ordering affection was present in several of the Greek fathers. In his *Summa theologiae*, which influenced Ignatius' own theology probably more than any other single work, Aquinas cited Augustine in describing charity as 'a virtue and our most completely ordered affection, [which] joins us to God and makes us love Him'.⁹ Similarly, Thomas à Kempis' treatment of affection anticipates that of Ignatius:

If your heart is free from ill-ordered affection, no good deed will be difficult for you. If you aim at and seek after nothing but the pleasure of God and the welfare of your neighbour, you will enjoy freedom within.¹⁰

If there is novelty in Ignatius, it is that his *Spiritual Exercises* is a pedagogical manual for the training of affection. By undertaking the Exercises, a person learns skills to recognise disordered affection, in order to stay on course towards union with God. Ordered affection emerges, then, as a discipline of the spiritual life.

Ignatius uses the word 'desire' (*desear/deseo*) dozens of times throughout the *Spiritual Exercises*, and he similarly appeals to desire in many of his letters. An obvious example is in the text of the Exercises, where he encourages exercitants to ask God 'for what [they] want and desire'.¹¹ In Annotation Sixteen, Ignatius sketches a kind of moral philosophy reminiscent of Aquinas and Aristotle:¹²

desordenada sea'. The full text of the Autograph is available on the website of the Jesuits of the Colombian Province: <http://www.jesuitas.org.co/Documentos/ee.html>.

⁸ Philip Sheldrake identifies many other Christian writers whose writings explore the theme of desire: Hadewijch, Bonaventure, Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, Julian of Norwich, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross and others. See his *Befriending Our Desires* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 10 and *passim*.

⁹ Aquinas' teaching on charity is in the *Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, qq. 28–33.

¹⁰ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 2.4.

¹¹ Ignatius uses this formula of expressing 'wants and desires' (*demandar a Dios nuestro Señor lo que quiero y deseo*) in Exx 48, 98, 167; see also several places where he directs the exercitant to express to God what he desires in prayer: Exx 130, 133, 151, 166–168, 177.

¹² Ignatius' reliance on Aquinas is well known, commending the study of Thomas to all scholastics in the Society of Jesus. On this point, see Ronald Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chicago: Loyola, 2004), 66. Aquinas' treatise on habit (*Summa theologiae*, Ia-IIae, qq.

If by chance the exercitant feels an affection or inclination to something in a disordered way, it is profitable for that person to strive with all possible effort to come over to the opposite of that to which he or she is wrongly attached One should make earnest prayers and other spiritual exercises and ask God our Lord for the contrary; that is, to have no desire for this office or benefice or anything else unless his Divine Majesty has put proper order into those desires (Exx 16)

Similarly, the First Principle and Foundation emphasizes the right ordering of desire. Human beings are created to ‘praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord’, and to use all means at their disposal towards this fundamental goal. Accordingly, Ignatius writes, people ought to desire neither health nor sickness, wealth nor poverty, honour nor dishonour, a long life nor a short one. In light of the exercises he prescribes, his implication is that the task of discernment is to discover the roots of desire, in order to discover which desires arise out of one’s relationship with God. Ignatius’ closing comment in the First Principle and Foundation is very telling: our job is only ‘desiring and choosing whatever brings about the end for which we are created’.¹³

Ignatius and Sexuality

Ignatius and his followers were at times accused of a tendency towards Pelagianism because of their emphasis on the work that human beings themselves had to undertake in the spiritual life. It was Thomas Aquinas, rather than Augustine, who gave Ignatius and, later, his influential disciple Jerónimo Nadal, the theological warrant for such an emphasis. For whereas Augustine held fast to the belief that all human desire (*concupiscentia*) was affected by the Fall—in particular, all expressions even of lawful (procreative) sexual relations¹⁴—Aquinas held to a more optimistic view. His theory of ‘cooperating grace’ left room for a human free will that was damaged by original sin, but not

49–70) relies heavily on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which describes the relationship between habits and the cultivation of virtue.

¹³ On Ignatius’ counsel to express desire in the context of the Exercises, see E. E. Kinerk, ‘Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus’, *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 16 (November 1984).

¹⁴ On Augustine’s understanding of the presence of venial sin in even procreative sex, see Roland J. Teske, *Marriage and Desire in the Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1998).

destroyed by it; and God's grace, he wrote, perfected what was left imperfect after the Fall.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, Aquinas' view of sex is more expansive than that of Augustine; he rejects the idea that all sex carries with it sin.¹⁶ To be sure, nowhere in Ignatius' writings is there an explicit connection between ordered affection and sexual expression; on the contrary, his references to sexuality are usually in the context of exhortations to preserve celibacy.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Ignatius recognises that marriage can be a state of life to which God might call a person. In his preamble to an election in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius recalls the First Principle and Foundation with the reminder that any life path that an exercitant chooses has to flow from the prior commitment to the end for which God has created him or her. He uses the example of marriage, observing that some first choose to marry and then, by means of marriage, to serve God; he describes such people as 'wanting God to come to their disordered affections', transforming the end into the means and vice versa. Ordered affection, by contrast, seeks to serve God first, and only then to choose marriage (Exx 169). Yet more than simply affirming the Church's doctrine, Ignatius recognises here that the choice to marry can represent an ordered affection, choosing something to which God directs a soul who loves God. Moreover, following Aquinas, Ignatius would, we can surmise, affirm the goodness of sexual relations in marriage—which, according to canon law, rendered a valid sacramental marriage indissoluble.¹⁸

An Ignatian Spirituality of Sex

The development of Ignatian spirituality took root in a Renaissance culture heavily influenced by a new humanism which could be expressed in Terence's famous dictum *nihil humanum alienum a me puto*:

¹⁵ On Aquinas' influence on Ignatius' theology of desire, and on Nadal's explication of this theology in the early Society of Jesus, see John O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1993), 249–250.

¹⁶ *Summa theologiae*, IIa-IIae, q. 153 a. 2.

¹⁷ See, for example, the letter to Emerio de Bonis of 23 May 1556 in which Ignatius describes sexual temptation as 'overcoming the enemy who up to the present has harassed you'. See 'Saint Ignatius Writes to his Brethren: Selected Letters and Instructions of St Ignatius of Loyola', edited by Joseph Tylenda, available at <http://woodstock.georgetown.edu/ignatius/letters.htm>, n. 46.

¹⁸ Ignatius' 'Rules for Thinking, Judging and Feeling with the Church' underscore his strong belief in always following ecclesial doctrine (Exx 352–370).

'I consider nothing human to be foreign to me'.¹⁹ This dictum was appropriated as a cornerstone of early Jesuit education, with its Thomistic optimism about the human capacity to cooperate with God's grace, choosing in freedom the will of God to perfect and bring to fruition human actions in the world. Ignatian humanism was a long way from the Neoplatonic, Stoic and Gnostic suspicions of the flesh.

It is true that Ignatius and the early Jesuits held fast to celibacy as a prerequisite of the religious life,²⁰ but their early ministries show a willingness to cooperate with lay men and women; and Ignatius himself was quite comfortable in his many dealings with married and widowed women, as his ample correspondence shows. For Ignatius and the early Jesuits, perfection in the spiritual life was not coterminous with a celibate religious existence, but rather with the election of the life to which God called the soul in love with God.

This broadly 'vocational' emphasis in Ignatian spirituality provides the basis for thinking about an Ignatian spirituality of sex. In short: sexual desire, sexual expression, sexual activity represent ordered affection to the extent that they celebrate and manifest the life to which God has called the person whose affection is ordered towards the love of God. The very language of the 'Contemplation to Attain Love', which is the culmination of the Fourth Week of the Exercises, is suggestive:

First. Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words.

Second. Love consists in a mutual communication between two persons. That is, the one who loves gives and communicates to the beloved what he or she has, or a part of what one has or can have; and the beloved in return does the same to the lover. (Exx 230–231)²¹

The Contemplation aims at directing exercitants to engage in conversation with God as a lover; it is in this context that Ignatius includes the well-known *Suscipe* prayer ('Take, Lord, receive all my

¹⁹ Cf. Modras, *Ignatian Humanism*, 83.

²⁰ In the *Constitutions* (VI.1.1. [547]), Ignatius indicates that there is no need to talk about chastity, which for him is obviously indispensable in the religious life.

²¹ It is interesting to note that Ignatius does not use the words 'husband' and 'wife', following the author of the letter to the Ephesians (5:22–33), in describing the love Christ has for the Church. Instead, he uses 'lover' and 'beloved'. Perhaps his choice of words reflects an acknowledgement that some marriages among his contemporaries were based more in the demands of social propriety than the kind of love toward which the dynamics of the Exercises move a person.

liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will ...'). Yet it also articulates a basic dynamism in all loves, including love between human beings: that of communicating ('being one together') the full reality of selves.

In the context of a sacramental marriage—a sacred, public vow to love the other as Christ loves the Church—sexual intimacy is itself no less than the water of baptism or the bread of the Eucharist: the real symbol (*sacramentum tantum*) of the reality of grace (*res tantum*) poured out through the mediation of the body (*res et sacramentum*). For just as the sharing of the body and blood of Christ ought to manifest a real love among the members of Christ's body, so too ought sexual intimacy to manifest a real love between husband and wife. 'This is my body'—the language is equally apt in sexual intimacy, for it is a language that is ratified not only in the privileged moments of what we call 'sex', but also in the thousands of touches, glances, kisses and embraces that are part of the warp and woof of daily married life. Marital sexual intimacy may well be for some the most efficacious sacramental symbol (*res et sacramentum*) of all, because it is expressed and experienced in the flesh. The theological anthropology implicit in Ignatian spirituality is particularly apt for an appreciation of the spiritual capacity of sexual intimacy: its emphasis on the ordering of affection through application of all the faculties of sensation suggests an image of the human person as capable of a sensory, physical encounter with divine reality.²² Augustine



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²² Cf. the fifth meditation in the Second Week (Exx 65), in which Ignatius exhorts exercitants to apply all five senses for a fuller experience of prayer.

described the human being as *capax dei*—‘capable’ of God;²³ Ignatian spirituality similarly sees the human body as capable of being the locus of encounter with God.

A key theme in the *Spiritual Exercises* is the use of sense in the ordering of all affection. Ignatius’ keen insight into the complexity of human experience allowed him to recognise the interrelationships among the will, the emotions and the intellect. In particular, he understood how people experience doubt in their commitments, sometimes being swayed by temptations or false desires. Emotional attraction is not enough; one’s commitment must be cemented, as it were, in the will. But the movement from attraction to willed commitment is not a one-step process; it must be affirmed and ratified again and again over the course of one’s life. Antonio Guillén puts it well: ‘Ignatius would have us educate our senses and feelings “so that one’s sensual nature may be obedient to reason, and all the lower parts of the self may become more submissive to the higher” (Exx 87)’.²⁴

To imitate Christ and to feel as Christ would feel—these constitute the method the Exercises prescribe for deepening union with God. They amount to a discipline of all of one’s senses and emotions, so that these faculties may be put at the disposal of Christ and used for God’s greater glory. Ignatius’ rules for the two types of discernment (the first, of God’s will in an election; and the second, of spirits or movements of the soul)²⁵ are illustrative, because they focus attention not only on the complexity of often competing emotions and desires, but also on the fruit of the right ordering of affection. One cannot exactly ‘demand’ to feel a certain way, but one can, according to Ignatius, train the senses in a way that allows for the fruitful unfolding of love and for the eventual consolation that follows from a life ordered solely towards the praise, reverence and service of God.

The rules for discernment point to a basic datum about all affections: they ‘precede’ the will, in the sense that they do not arise as a result of choice and present themselves to the will as enticements to action.

²³ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIV. 11.

²⁴ Antonio Guillén, ‘Imitating Christ our Lord with the Senses’, *The Way*, 47/1–2 (January/April 2008), 226.

²⁵ Cf. George Ganss in his notes on discernment of spirits: ‘The Exercises present two distinct forms of discernment: (1) discernment of the will of God and (2) discernment of spirits, which is a means to discerning God’s will’. (George E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* [Mahwah: Paulist, 1991], 428).

Discernment is the process of choosing which affections to follow. The choice to pursue some sexual desires can be fruitful: those which enable couples to grow in greater love—to manifest their love in both deeds and words. For this reason, it is appropriate and perhaps even necessary for people to practise some (non-genital) forms of sexual expression as part of the discernment process about a relationship. Sexual expression amounts to a training of the senses and the will, to allow the development of those senses that knit lover and beloved together in relationship. Sexual expression is powerful precisely because it can engage all the senses at once. As a real symbol, sexuality functions at the level of attraction, ‘drawing together’ a couple. Antonio Guillén again: ‘We can love and desire something on a long term basis only if we are really attracted to it.’²⁶ And it is possible to love and desire the other not only for what he or she is in his or her selfhood, but also because he or she is a sacrament of encounter with the love of God.

***A sacrament
of encounter
with the love
of God***

It is important to distinguish, then, between married sex and unmarried sex; for only the former represents an act of will ratified, as it were, through public commitment. From a historical standpoint, it is clear that Ignatius would never have counselled (or been allowed to get away with counselling) that sex outside marriage could be virtuous. Unmarried sex may be passionate; it may arise out of the perception of real love; it may be orientated towards the perceived good of the other; it may indeed be selfless. But it is not an act of the will to the same degree as that which is founded on a public commitment to love as Christ loves the Church. To be precise, marriage represents an ‘election’, in the strict sense of the first type of discernment, that is, discerning the will of God for one’s life—an irreversible decision. Unmarried sex is more likely to be disordered precisely because it happens before (or without the intention of) a publicly affirmed election. It may arise out of the second kind of discernment of spirits, but Ignatius himself recognised that even discernment of spirits can sometimes be erroneous.²⁷ For Ignatius, a

²⁶ Guillén, ‘Imitating Christ our Lord with the Senses’, 226.

²⁷ William Barry comments, ‘events can distort our discernment of how we are being led’, citing the example of Ignatius’ early conviction that he should go to Jerusalem, a decision he later realised was erroneous. Later, he writes of Ignatius’s discovery that God is not the only source of pious thoughts. (‘Discernment of Spirits as an Act of Faith’, in *Spirit, Style, Story: Essays Honoring John W. Padberg*, SJ edited by Thomas M. Lucas [Chicago: Loyola, 2003].)



Sacred and Profane Love, by Titian

decision made outside the context of an election—that is, without the previous ordering of the will towards the end for which God has made a person, carefully discerned and chosen in an election—is disordered precisely because it makes the question of God’s will secondary to the person’s own desire. James Gaffney puts it well:

There are examples of perfectly decent people making perfectly decent vocational choices—like marrying a certain spouse ... — accompanied in each case by the intention of living a good Christian life in the chosen circumstances. By Ignatius’s standards, choices made in that way are corrupt and corrupting. And what makes them corrupt is their readiness to make ultimate purposes into pious afterthoughts.²⁸

By contrast, married sex, when discerned in such a way as to be ordered towards the imperative to love as Christ loved—an orientation reminiscent of the Song of Songs—is an expression of great joy both in itself and in its sacramental symbolization of the shared pilgrimage towards God.

Restoring Holy Sexual Desire

The early history of the Church shows caution, and sometimes distaste for sexual expression even within the context of sacramental marriage. Yet the trajectory of the Church’s thinking, based on an incarnational

²⁸ James Gaffney, ‘Two Faces of Loyola’, Loyola Day address at Loyola University, New Orleans, Fall 1987, reprinted in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, edited by George W. Traub (Chicago: Loyola, 2008), 155–158, here 156.

and sacramental theology, left the the way open for medieval and modern thinkers to begin to restore a positive appreciation of sacramental sexual desire. Commenting on the legacy of Augustine, Sebastian Moore offers a road-map for discerning the implications of an authentic appreciation of sexual desire:

The task before us is not to subject sexual passion to the will, but to restore it to desire, whose origin and end is God, whose liberation is of God's grace made manifest in the life, teaching, crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁹

He fixes on the Jesuit philosopher Bernard Lonergan as a thinker whose emphasis on self-knowledge and self-appropriation offers the method by which human beings can engage desire in an integrated way. Lonergan himself alluded to such a task:

As man cannot divest himself of his animality, so he cannot put off the eros of his mind Nor are the pure desire [to know] and the sensitive psyche two things, one of them 'I' and the other 'It' If my intelligence is mine, so is my sexuality.³⁰

Sexuality is a dimension of our personhood, and as such shapes the way we live in and experience the world. Vowed celibates, singles and married people all face choices about how to direct their sexual desires. Accordingly, the challenge for all human beings is to discern how to integrate this dimension into a wider self-understanding, an awareness of self both as solitary and relational.

All experiences of desire, all experiences of longing, of aching for something which seems just out of reach, point us towards the transcendent, towards a *telos* which finds its consummation in the love of God. There are, of course, intermediate objects of desire, as Maslow's famous hierarchy suggests. Sexual desire in isolation from other desires can become detached from a broader sense of integration, leading people to fixate on objects which appear to satisfy them but do not. Ignatius' own experience is telling: he describes his first 26 years as being consumed 'with the vanities of the world',³¹ which included

²⁹ Sebastian Moore, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 106.

³⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: U. of Toronto P, 1992), 498–499.

³¹ *Autobiography*, 1.

various sexual encounters. It was only the experience of his long convalescence which gave him the opportunity to pay close attention to the different kinds of desires that emerged in his imagination; and he recognised that his romantic desires ultimately left him feeling dry. His meditation on the dynamics of desire recalls a description that Augustine used of his early experience of sexual desire: he was ‘not yet in love’, but in love with the idea of being in love.³² Both Augustine and Ignatius had a primary experience of sexual desires, but could later reflect upon these experiences in ways that produced a kind of ‘secondary desire’ or ‘meta-desire’—feeling a certain way about feeling a certain way. ‘Primary desire’—the initial feeling produced by an experience, sexual or other—does not tell the whole story.

Ordered affection may be described as the harmony of all desires, both primary and secondary. Practically, it means that one’s experiences of sexual desire are mutual experiences of integration, of generativity and creativity, of consolation and joy. And since sexuality is a capacity through which human beings reach out towards others, such experiences have a necessarily social character. Socialisation, education about social norms, and religious or cultural practices will certainly shape people’s imaginations and expectations in matters of sex, both positively and negatively.

Even in the postmodern age it is possible to articulate some shared social norms—which help young people, in particular, to develop a concern for personal and social goods in matters of sex.³³

***The
difficult work
of discerning
true and false
desire***

Yet such norms can do little more than provide a baseline below which are choices that lead to harm. What remains for those seeking to harmonize desire—to develop virtuosity in love—is the necessity of self-knowledge. Only the person who understands the goal of our desiring can do the difficult work of discerning true and false desire, life-giving and corrosive expressions of it. Manifestations of the latter are rife today: addiction to pornography, eating disorders, sexual slavery, the sexualisation of pre-adolescents, and various forms of sexual

³² Augustine, *Confessions*, III. 1.

³³ See Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), as well as her extensive notes on the recent history of attempts to define a framework for sexual norms.

violence.³⁴ Norms are important as expressions of a society's best attempts to shape a common-good approach to sexual desire; but these norms must be supplemented by mentoring in the practice of self-knowledge.

I shall mention one implication of the imperative towards self-knowledge in closing. Ann Smith puts it well: 'we must be gentle with those who want to try to love too soon. The fire they are playing with is of God, and they will not listen to us if we try to devalue it.'³⁵ It is an absurdity to pretend that young people will not experiment with their sexuality, just as they experiment with language and role-playing. It is part of them; the task of adults is to coach them in the appropriate mystagogy of sexuality. There are age-appropriate explorations of the many ways that bodies can express intimacy long before genital sexual intercourse is appropriate. We must teach them the complex language of eyes and hands, hugs and kisses, in order that they develop a sense of optimism at the symbolic capacities of their bodies. We must provide paradigms for them, examples of people whose sexual lives testify to a symphonic commitment to authentic love.

It is worth remembering that Jesus' only real reference to mutual sexual intimacy is a recollection of the Genesis account of creation: 'the two shall become one flesh' (Mark 10:8, Matthew 19:6). In the divine order, sexual desire is inscribed as a foundational reality—foundational in the sense that it is ordained both for intimacy and for procreation, both of which might be described as building blocks of the kingdom, instantiations of the *imago Dei*. Yes, on some level Augustine was right: sex has a capacity to be used for harm and can (too frequently) represent disorder in the soul. But like Prometheus' fire, this dangerous gift can also be beautiful, nourishing, even in some

³⁴ On pornography addiction, an MSNBC story from 2006 cited a figure of 25 million adults in the United States visiting pornographic websites every week: see <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/11640411/>. On eating disorders, the US Center for Disease Control reports that from 1999 to 2006, 36.8 per cent of underweight and normal-weight females aged 16 to 64 indicated that they had tried to lose weight in the previous year (see http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/infosheets/infosheet_eatingbehaviors.pdf). On sexual slavery, Frontline reports that half a million women are trafficked globally each year; see the story at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/slaves/>. On the sexualisation of adolescents, see M. Gigi Durham, *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Overlook, 2008), and Diane E. Levin and Jean Kilbourne, *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids* (New York: Ballantine, 2008). The World Health Organization report on sexual violence is at http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf.

³⁵ Ann Smith, 'Sexuality and the Creativity of God', in *The Way*, 23 (1983), 101.

sense deifying, enabling human beings to express in their very selves a deep, embedded capacity to be the manifestation of divine love for another. It is in this latter sense that we can call sex 'sacramental', grace-filled, transfiguring ordinary flesh. In light of this promise, the ordering of desire constitutes the sometimes difficult, and often beautiful, sanctification of ordinary life.

Timothy P. Muldoon is the author of three books, including *The Ignatian Workout*, a contemporary adaptation of Saint Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. He teaches in the honours programme at Boston College, where he also serves in the office of university mission and ministry. His next book will be *Longing to Love: A Memoir of Desire, Relationships, and Spiritual Transformation* (Chicago: Loyola, 2010).