

DOING SEXUAL ETHICS IN A POST-PERMISSIVE SOCIETY

By DENISE LARDNER CARMODY

THIS IS A large topic, but perhaps we can suggest the major items Christian spirituality should be considering by discussing sexual experience, paschal love, and practical attitudes.

Sexual experience

Christian ethics and spirituality alike have followed modernity's turn to the subject. Nowadays what people actually experience should be as important as traditional guidelines. This holds for sexuality as much as prayer and work. Unless our ethical advice about sexuality stems from experience and bids to illumine experience we should not expect people to heed us.

Present-day sexual experience can seem bewilderingly diverse. Many women now feel that past descriptions and prescriptions neglected their voice. Many homosexuals, female and male, now reject the deviant status past ethics gave them. Herpes and AIDS have cast a chill on the permissiveness touted fifteen years ago. Abortion remains an awful social problem. And beneath these obvious, news-making features of recent sexual experience lie more perennial issues: how to find the golden mean between indulgence and repression, how to integrate *eros* and *agape*, how to marry procreation and personal fulfilment, how to think about the ideal of male and female becoming one flesh, how to educate one's children for both delight and responsibility, how to deal with Church policies that seem misogynistic or little warmed by evangelical joy.

Perhaps the hallmark of present-day sexual experience is its confusion. We live in a time when past certainties seem long gone. All the more is it necessary, therefore, to clarify the simplicity and freedom of Christian faith. All the more is it necessary to oppose the love of Christ to both the panicky hedonism of the advertizing world and the instinctive repression of institutions, both secular

and religious, that mainly seek to avoid hard questions and social upset.

What, then, ought a theological reflection on present-day sexual experience to underscore? Perhaps first, that we all have sexual experience and virtually all find it both delightful and painful. There are the humbling facts of being embodied as female or male: bleeding, cramps, sexual hunger, erections, emissions, etc. Long after adolescence, our physical sexuality keeps us anchored in the animal kingdom, should keep us wry about the dust to which we return. To become graceful in, humorous about, one's sexed body is a high accomplishment, no mean goal for Christian spirituality to target. Pregnancy, nursing, pride in fertility, pride in good marital relations, menopause, frigidity, impotence, disease—these and the so many other physical aspects of adult sexuality broaden the achievement.

Second, there are the psycho-social aspects of sexual experience, which of course interact with our bodily sensations and problems. We all have to learn the roles expected of us as women and men. We all have to grope for a charm, a sexiness, a freedom from both prudishness and licentiousness that is personally fitting. Society rightly has an interest in our fertility: how we procreate, how we raise our children, if we want abortions, sterilizations, procedures to enhance fertility, surrogate mothers. Divorce, child-care, education, ministry, professional behaviour—all admit of more or less statutory, official controls. As well, all make an impression on our sense of what it means to be a man or a woman, a spouse or a parent. So sexual experience, groping after maturation, entails much more than growing comfortable with one's body, able to interact with the other sex, able to receive and give sexual love. It cuts across our work, recreation, Church membership, study and prayer. We are never not male or female, and we are never interacting with other people who are neuter. That is both the grace and the cross of sexuality. Even when we admit that sex should not, and sometimes does not, make a material difference in the work one does as a scientist, a grocery clerk, a judge, we always make such admissions on a given day of a month marked by biorhythms, in underwear designed for her or him, under the influence of hormones produced by ovaries or testes, as people who have gone to schools and places of work with sex-specific washrooms.

When I begin to probe the sexual ethics that might help me and my contemporaries orient ourselves midst this flux of experience, I realize my first longing is for a positive, bedrock affirmation that my sexuality continues to be as Genesis says God found it and the rest of creation to be at the beginning: good, something with which the Creator is well-pleased. Historically, and perhaps inevitably, neither women nor men have received an unambiguous affirmation of their sexuality. Women have been the deviant sex, strange because male ways have been assumed to be the human norm. We have been goddesses or whores, symbols of unreal purity and unreal promiscuity. We have not been half the race, half the sexual partnership, half the image of God, half the authority to prescribe how men and women ought to live together. Men have been minotaurs to our mermaids,¹ weird creatures thought doomed to lust yet endowed with a rationality few of us could attain. Men have been groomed for war, the destruction of the life we have been groomed to gestate and care for. Men have been groomed for command, providing for women and children, mapping out the grand strategies and leaving us the mop-up, the scut-work. Historically, if not inevitably, neither sex has found it easy to believe in the goodness of maleness and femaleness. The voice of Genesis, and perhaps the voice of most of the rest of scripture,² has not sounded in our consciences as clearly as mental health requires.

So grace perhaps first emerges in sexual experience as the times, the encounters, when the joy and peace of the Spirit so anoint being female or being male that we know intuitively, immediately, God was wise and good to shape us as God has. Sebastian Moore has analyzed the implications of falling in love—desiring and being desired—to this effect.³ Falling in love is the most dramatic way we can experience the goodness of our sexuality. Then we want the beauty and intrigue of the other, who usually embodies the mystery of being human differently than we do. (Homosexual love obviously is a matter of *mutatis mutandis*.) We fear we are not so winsome a representative of our sex as the other is of his or hers. So if our attraction, our inchoate love, is returned, we feel liberated from tons of self-doubt, called good from the dimple in our chin to the inmost chamber where our heart sings as never before.

True enough, the inflation that first, romantic love can induce has to shrink back to realism. Mature love has to function, perform, when the hormones and emotions are low. But the times of

romantic consolation, like the times of consolation at prayer, should serve us as paradigms. The prophets castigated Israel for forgetting the Exodus. The saints castigated themselves for forgetting Jesus's suffering on the cross. We have to believe that the love God showed in the past is our best interpretative tool in the present. Similarly, we have to believe that the times when we felt wonderfully alive, grateful for being womanly or manly, soft or hard, playful and gentle, awed, excited, brought to climax and deeply satisfied were assurances from God we have been designed very well.

People who have been fortunate in sexual love will not find it hard to accept such a judgement. They will be able to snuggle into the silence of God the way they snuggle into the arms of their beloved. But people abused as children, battered as wives, raped, rejected as ugly, frustrated in giving vent to their affections and desires—the myriad such people will have few experiential bases for thinking well of God the maker of sexuality or themselves the sexed results. To them, even more than to the fortunate, our first ethical words have to be soothing: 'do the best you can, without strain. Love what you can, whom you can, as much of yourself as you can, trying to thank God. Remember St Teresa: let nothing disturb you. Remember St Augustine: love and do what you will. Certainly, there are acts and feelings we must condemn. Love is not shown by rape or abuse, by letting pleasure, power, or lust call the tunes. But the need to love and be loved bodily, physically, is a gift from God. The fact of having desires, hungering for affection, longing to give and receive affection—all of this is God's doing, and unquestionably good thereby.' Until we anoint sexual experience with such a bedrock affirmation, our ethics will lag far behind the love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Paschal love

The love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit is stamped by the paschal mystery. While certainly the Spirit has always been active in people's hearts, it is as given by the resurrected Christ that the Spirit emboldens us to cry, 'Abba, Father'. The mysteries of our sexuality and love both illumine the divine love and draw their fullest context, their most illuminating perspective, from the divine love. I suppose I have long known this theoretically, but recently the testimony of some married people brought it home to me more experientially.

My husband and I had given a talk ('Toward a non-sexist theology of marriage') as part of a conference on women in the Church that had drawn over a thousand people to Washington, D.C. While most of those who attended the conference were women, and most of the women were nuns, the majority of the two hundred or so who attended our talk were married people. During the discussion that followed our presentation, several in the audience spoke movingly about the practical difficulties of realizing their marital ideals. With humour, but also pathos, they spoke of financial strains, not being well equipped to communicate their feelings, wanting both to spend more time with their children and to have more time free for themselves, and the pressures work was placing on their home life. Then one of the participants rather haltingly but effectively said that he had most gained peace by thinking of the pains of his marriage, and also the joys, as part of the paschal mystery. Identifying the pains with the suffering Jesus, and taking the joys as gifts of the risen Christ, he had slowly learned to look through most of his initial, superficial thoughts and feelings and believe God was using his experience to deepen his faith and love.

Traditional Christian piety certainly could second such an attitude, if only because it comes so close to the traditional goal of imitating Christ. If we can find fresh words, images that do not seem simplistic or pietistic, imitating Christ may serve us as well as it served à Kempis or Loyola. Indeed, the death and resurrection of Jesus fashion such an elementary rhythm, such a basic two-step, that it seems hard to avoid associating our sufferings and exultations with the paschal mystery. Let us reflect on what such an association might offer contemporary sexual ethics.

The sufferings of Christ were not sexual, as far as we know, but they were physical. Jesus suffered in his body, as well as in his spirit. The love he longed to give and receive used eyes, ears, hands, arms, just as ours does. In all of this, he was a man, a male, one constrained by the behavioural patterns of his day. For him to deal with the Samaritan woman by the well as he did was to violate sexual custom as well as the custom concerning dealings with those considered heterodox. For him to accept female disciples and to love them as he loved Martha and Mary was to bless heterosexual friendship and affirm that all people, even the lowly, might make good ministers in his community. When Jesus equalized the customs about divorce, taking away male supremacy, he

harkened back to the joining of men and women that structured the Creator's first intent. When he inveighed against looking on others with lust, he expressed his repugnance, his suffering, at the spectacle of sexual abuse. All of this, as well as the sufferings he endured when his message about the Kingdom was rejected or his rehabilitation of sinners was renounced, poured into what happened on the cross. Ever since, those drawn to Jesus have felt he could understand their sorrows because fidelity to his God had made him a man of sorrows, one well acquainted with grief.

Take the worst sexual problems of present-day western society: incest, rape, abortion, battering, misogyny, homophobia. Do they not make victims assimilable to Jesus? Even if Jesus was innocent and some of these victims were not (although most probably were), the bruised flesh and slashed spirits they bear must remind God of the Son sent on mission, the Son delivered up for us human beings and our salvation. If God could no more abandon us children than a nursing mother could abandon her child, God must long to take all this sexual hurt to the divine bosom and wipe away every tear. We do not know how God received Jesus, what happened when God reached into death and snatched Jesus away. We do not understand the processes by which the crucified become the risen. But we do know the divine love works a profound transformation. We can suspect that falling into God's hands cleanses what was dirtied, restores what was gouged, and raises everything to a fulfilment it had not entered the human heart to conceive.

Insofar as the love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit is a pledge of our glorious transformation, our ethics ought to be able to neutralize the poisonous thought that sexual abuse, whether received or perpetrated, settles one's destiny. Be it the gross sins of the flesh, the adulteries and fornications, or the profound sins of the spirit that wants to debase self and others through their sexuality, the sufferings, death and resurrection of Christ are stronger. In them the creative forces that made our bodies, that made the entire material universe, simply took ravaged humanity to itself and instantly that humanity became glorious. Of course we find this hard to believe. Of course it is a stumbling block and foolishness. But it stands at the centre of our faith, and at the centre of our humanity. Those, victims or observers, who do not share our faith do share our humanity. If they are not persuaded that the crucifixion and resurrection refashioned the

human condition, they have to be impressed by the consonance of Christ's cross with the agonies so many human beings must endure. It may not have been necessary for Jesus to die, but certainly it befits the condition of those whose salvation his death served.

Our sexual sufferings, like our other sufferings, grab our attention and so probably are the first door through which the paschal mystery enters to reorient our sexual experience. What we suffer sexually, and how such suffering can purify our love, are bound to stand under the sign of the cross. Equally, however, the paschal mystery illumines our sexual delights. Resurrected, Christ blesses the flesh that served his mission to bring life, light and love. As Johannine theology makes plain, from the outset his flesh was sacramental, but in the resurrection it became so grace-filled as to pass through all barriers, to make love the permanent abiding of the divinity in our hearts. When we make love, the love of Father, Son and Spirit circulate, come into play. When we are gentle, exciting, patient, self-spending for our lovers, children, friends and the people who come to us for help, the processions of the divine three, as well as their unified love, come to bear. As much as the mysteries of Jesus's death, the mysteries of Jesus's resurrection, ascension and lordship in our midst seem too good to be true. Can it be that God's eros for us carries our eros for one another? Can it be that the Spirit is the kindly light in which we are attractive to one another, the soft repose in which we give one another renewal as well as rest? Are the excitement, the arousal, the need, the pain we experience relevant to what makes up the life of God? Unless I am mistaken in my sense of the analogical character of Catholic theology, everything decent in our sexual love bears the imprint of the unitive love that made us. Human orgasm bespeaks the ecstasy wrought by the divine perfection. Human longing tells us what divinity overcomes, what perfection need not suffer, how we can only be what we most deeply want to be by giving God our hearts. An ethics that would show people the real dimensions of their sexual potential has to reckon with these depths of the human make-up. An ethics that would illumine the teleology of sex, the reasons for femaleness and male, has to make fertility and erotic fulfilment reflections (better: expressions) of the love God is, the love God would further pour forth in our hearts, make quicken our limbs, and seal with kisses that sear our souls.

Practical attitudes

Recently, both in writing a book on ethics in the world religions and reflecting on feminist issues within the Catholic Church,⁴ I have had occasion to ponder what 'ethics' ought to mean outside the confines of academe. My conclusion has been that it should blend both the descriptive (what has been thought customary, approved) and the prescriptive (what sober analysis shows ought to be). I repeat that conclusion here, thinking that the general audience for writings bearing on ethics is less interested in the refinements and distinctions professional ethicists multiply than in the basic orientations, the general and practical attitudes an updated tradition recommends.

A post-permissive society presumably has eaten the fruit of *laissez-faire* and come away with a sour taste in its mouth. It knows that promiscuity plays into the hands of both physical and spiritual disease. Moreover, it may well have raised its consciousness beyond patriarchal assumptions and be ready to challenge both men and women to submit their sexuality to the discipline necessary for a discipleship of equals. Both of these possibilities raise in my mind the further possibility that we are on the verge of a time when sexual behaviour might become fully adult, something better fitted to the measure of Christ than it was when either repression or laxity reigned.

Repression, I believe, has no future. A heteronomous ethics, predicated on the abstract or general authority of some teaching body to interpret the gospel and impose specific, minute rules for behaviour, has little appeal for the relatively healthy, free adults I encounter. Unless ethical advice grapples with people's actual experience and honours what they report their consciences to judge, it will die for lack of credibility. In a balanced analysis of the recent Vatican statement on homosexuality, Bruce Williams has faulted the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for often seeming more concerned to snuff out dissent and procure obedience than to illumine the situation of the people it addresses and increase their evangelical peace.⁵ I think the day is long gone (if ever it was) when such an ethical style serves the Body of Christ well, and I suspect that only the religiously immature, those who hope to avoid the terrors of the divine mysteriousness, will welcome it.

Laxity is never out of vogue, but the medical realities of our time, and perhaps also the disgust of spirits long-starved for

substantial sharing between the sexes, have made sexual promiscuity much more questionable than it was a generation ago. After some initial appropriation of what traditionally had been men's prerogative, to see sexual activity as more recreational than substantial, many wings of the feminist movement now support the notion that sexuality is devalued when separated from commitment and love. If women are not to be sex-objects, and ought not to think of men as sex-objects, romance, communication, sharing and a host of other dimensions of heterosexual encounters and friendships may get their due. How procreation and the other objective, transpersonal aspects of sexuality are to be re-reckoned awaits fuller discussion, but in a post-permissive society one can hope that partners will make parenting, awareness of the need for population control, fidelity and even the nuptial symbolism for the relation between Christ and the Church (updated to remove the patriarchalism of the Hellenistic household codes) part and parcel of their joint reflection on the significance of their attractions.

Encouraged by some reflections of Rosemary Haughton, who like Sebastian Moore is a British theologian now working in the United States,⁶ I believe that the most important attitude we now must assume is a humility in face of the diversity of people's sexual experience and pain. Most of the traditional authorities have not done a good enough job with the sexuality proper to marriage, the single life, or religious life to warrant their continuing to think themselves set down in the chair of Moses. People actually experiencing overpopulation, marital pressures, homosexuality, women's liberation and many other facets of contemporary sexuality are less in need of advice about specific sorts of behaviour than in need of basic formation of conscience. If ever one wanted a time when the prudential character of sexual ethics were to the fore, now is the hour. Abstract concepts of human nature (and so of natural law) having gone into default, and biblical scholarship having shown the plasticity of biblical mores, and both anthropological and historical studies having revealed the diversity of sexual behaviour down the ages and across the continents, people cry out for the Christian sexual ethics to help them take to heart the freedom for which Christ has set us free. Their cry, I believe, is not for license but for relief from shoes that no longer fit and that keep them from walking well in the new territories (including medical ethics) they must traverse. Many of the best and the brightest therefore ask for a moral and pastoral theology that

affirms their endowment by the Holy Spirit to decide what love, responsibility, fidelity and the rest mean in their concrete circumstances. Such theologies of course should be informed by Christian tradition and sensitive to present magisterial teaching. But they will not do the job presently asked of them until such sources are subordinated to the existential fact that people have to choose midst doubts, confusions, special circumstances and the like that make their first need trust that God is with them, will illumine them, will stand by even when the lights go out and their choices seem to have been disastrous. Having told people what past consensus has been, and what present-day authorities suggest, we only complete our job when we place sexual decisions high on the list of things than which God is greater. Even when our hearts condemn us as having loved badly, having abused the temple of the Holy Spirit, not having been wise about the sanctity of human life, God is greater. I think post-permissive societies, like adolescents generally, long to hear such words, even when their faces seem bored and truculent. Sinners today are as fragile as they have ever been—and who of us is not a sinner? So the sexual ethics I favour is short on guilt and long on divine goodness.

NOTES

¹ Cf Dinnerstein, Dorothy: *The mermaid and the minotaur* (New York, 1976); also Belenky, Mary Field et al.: *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self, voice and mind* (New York, 1986) and Lerner, Gerda: *The creation of patriarchy* (New York, 1986).

² Cf Terrien, Samuel: *Till the heart sings* (Philadelphia, 1985).

³ I have in mind especially Moore's *Let this mind be in you* (Minneapolis, 1985).

⁴ Cf Carmody, Denise Lardner and Carmody, John Tully: *How to live well: ethics in the world religions* (Belmont, Calif., 1987) and Carmody, Denise Lardner: *The double cross: ordination, abortion and Catholic feminism* (New York, 1986).

⁵ Cf *Theological studies*, vol 48, no 2 (June 1987), pp 269–277.

⁶ Cf 'Marriage in women's new consciousness', in *Commitment to partnership*, ed. Roberts, William P. (New York, 1987), p 151.