

THE DEVOUT CONSUMMATION

ON HEALING THE WOUND BETWEEN CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS

'Why do you observe the splinter that is in your brother's eye and never notice the great log that is in your own? And how dare you say to your brother, "Let me take that splinter out of your eye," when, look, there is a great log in your own? Hypocrite! Take the log out of your own eye first, and then you will see clearly enough to take the splinter out of your brother's eye.' (Matthew 7:3-5 NJB)

'What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane.' (Acts 10:15 NJB)

'Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?' (Jeremiah 8:22 NIV)

THE STORY SO FAR

In BRAINWAVES Report BW/010, 'Healing of the Nation', I suggested that Protestantism, alone of all the major faiths, was born without a contemplative, mystical dimension since Luther frowned upon contemplative prayer; but that if we Protestants took this up seriously, our lives would slow down and the fragmentation of the Christian Church might begin to reduce. I went on:

Further, Protestants and Catholics will cease to see themselves as entrenched theological enemies, and the seemingly unbridgeable divide of the Reformation may begin to heal.

In Report BW/012, 'Healing of the Church', which formed the sequel, I explained the reason for this stance of Luther's. Luther was a chronic depressive who could not cope with solitude, in which he invariably experienced his worst spiritual trials. So he avoided it whenever possible, and counselled his followers to do the same. Yet solitude is the mother of contemplation. So it came about that Protestantism developed with a pronounced weakness in the realm of mysticism and contemplative prayer, which I believe to be central to Christianity¹ and indeed one of God's greatest gifts to the human race. I have concluded that this blind spot has been a major contributor on the Protestant side to the impasse between the Protestant and Catholic Churches, not least because the latter has commonly been correspondingly strong in this same region. In various times and places certain Protestants have made good the deficiency,² but nevertheless it continues to prevail.

This is not to suggest that typical Catholic worshippers are necessarily any more contemplative than their Protestant counterparts. But rather, contemplative prayer and the historic mystical tradition supply the context and framework within which Roman Catholic culture and worship grew and can be understood. This is, perhaps, one reason why the Communion of Saints features more in the thinking of a Catholic than it does for most Protestants.

I have subsequently come to believe that there is on the Roman Catholic side a blind spot of their own, which is in some ways comparable, and which has affected Catholic thinking in some

¹ See for instance Evelyn Underhill, *The Mystics of the Church*.

² E.g. Underhill, *The Mystics*, chapter XI, 'Some Protestant Mystics'.

significant areas. If I am right, then there exist parallel and complementary flaws in both of these two great traditions. This raises the hope that Christians from both parties, in accordance with Our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, will be prepared to recognise the faults on their own side, thus making a step towards reconciliation with their brethren across the divide.

This is the hope in which I write, not in order to raise fresh controversy, but to try and explain why the gulf has proved intractable after five centuries of theological wrangling by great minds who profess to believe that the highest virtue is *love*. It is the hope that if the axe is laid to the root of controversy, sooner or later the tree will die.

THE ROOT PROBLEM

Where then do I believe that a distortion has crept deep into Catholic thinking comparable to the Protestant rejection of contemplative prayer? There seems to lie deep within the psyche of the Catholic Church the belief that the act of sexual intercourse - for me, like contemplation, one of God's great and good, universal gifts to humanity - is somehow inherently sinful, unholy, tainted, a selfish pleasure, through which original sin is transmitted from one generation to the next, and only to be engaged in if there is the desire (or at the very least, the possibility) for a child to be conceived. Over the centuries this single root has led to a succession of historic problems which have divided the Churches, to handle which has required no small degree of mental agility.

I appreciate that for many Catholics this is not going to be easy reading. However the option of maintaining that the Catholic Church is entirely correct on matters of sex is a luxury no longer open to us. The astonishing and appalling prevalence of child sex abuse by Catholic priests in many parts of the world, which His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has been at deep pains to acknowledge and apologise for, can no longer be overlooked.³ Deep down beneath the surface there lies a festering and poisonous evil. Those who love the Catholic Church and who love children can surely not rest until the full and deepest reasons for this horrendous phenomenon have been brought to light, understood and rooted out, together with all its consequences. We need to know and face up to the worst.

It is my thesis that the ultimate cause of this abuse has also resulted in a number of problem areas which have in turn become obstacles to the bridging of the Reformation gulf from the Catholic side; and that once it is recognised as such, reconciliation becomes a viable possibility. But the investigation is likely to be painful.

SEXUALITY IN THE BIBLE

How first of all does the Bible present sexuality? There are indeed various hygiene-based taboos associated with bodily discharges in the Mosaic law, as for instance in Leviticus 15. But I find scant suggestion, at least in the New Testament, that sex makes one unholy. Jesus himself taught the opposite:

³ As I write a new revelation appears in the press. David Sharrock's article in *The Times* for 22 July 2009 begins, 'A report detailing the alleged sexual abuse of 450 children by Catholic priests in the Archdiocese of Dublin was handed to the Irish Government yesterday.'

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'Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made them male and female, and that he said: This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and the two become one flesh? They are no longer two, therefore, but one flesh. So then, what God has united, human beings must not divide.' (Matthew 19:4-6 NJB)

Married sex according to Jesus is the uniting of husband and wife by God, not to be divided. It is difficult to see in this anything but the highest possible endorsement of the sexual act by the Son of God. Like Peter in Acts 10, we do well not to call unclean what God has called clean.

Again,

The disciples said to him, 'If that is how things are between husband and wife, it is advisable not to marry.' But he replied, 'It is not everyone who can accept what I have said, but only to those to whom it is granted. There are eunuchs born so from their mother's womb; there are eunuchs made so by human agency and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.' (Matthew 19:10-2 NJB)

At the heart of this is a *balance*. There is a calling to celibacy, which is granted to some. But Jesus makes plain that not all are so called. It is not forced on anyone. Consequently those who marry, who are not called to celibacy, are also acceptable to God. It follows that married sex cannot be of itself unholy: God does not call people into unholiness. As James put it,

God cannot be tempted to do anything wrong, and he does not tempt anybody. (James 1:13 JB)

Those who opt for celibacy are not giving up something that is bad in order to be less sinful. They are voluntarily giving up something good.

I find the same balance in St Paul, who in 1 Corinthians 7 is responding to some ascetics who were claiming that 'it is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman.' (v.1) Paul counters:

[Y]et to avoid immorality every man should have his own wife and every woman her own husband. The husband must give to his wife what she has a right to expect, and so too the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and in the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. You must not deprive each other, except by mutual consent for a limited time, to leave yourselves free for prayer, and to come together again afterwards; otherwise Satan may take advantage of any lack of self-control to put you to the test. (1 Corinthians 7:2-5 NJB)

I conclude from this chapter:

(1) Within marriage, sex is to be encouraged without qualification. This is because it is a celebration of the heart of marriage, the belonging of each partner to the other (vv.3-4). This is in itself sufficient justification for sex, quite apart from the question of producing children. There is no suggestion that sex within marriage makes one unholy. Rather, the danger is that prolonged abstinence might lead to adultery. There is a parallel with food. Food is good for us, even essential. Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19). That there are times when a temporary fast is preferable does not mean it is intrinsically evil. It does mean that there is a virtue in self-discipline.

(2) There is a calling to celibacy, but this is emphatically a matter for the individuals concerned and is in no way to be imposed by others (e.g. vv.36-8). This is because some people may find that the burden of celibacy proves too great (v.9), and to them he gives his support. He rejects the notion that the virgin who marries will be guilty of sin (v.28) and makes no suggestion that

she will be sullied on her wedding night.

(3) The possible attraction of celibacy is that it frees one's time and energies for the work of God (vv.32-5), given the imminence of Christ's return (vv.29-31).

What undergirds Paul's thinking is not that the sexual drive is evil; merely that it is *strong*.

In Ephesians 5:22-33, writing I believe in the wake of a deep mystical experience in Caesarea jail which was to transform his entire outlook, including his emotional life and sense of vocation, Paul presents a grand view of marriage as encapsulating the love affair between Christ and His Church. And as we shall see, in 1 Timothy 4:1-5, he later describes the forbidding of marriage as a 'doctrine of demons'.⁴

Further support is to be found from Hebrews (probably written by Barnabas⁵);

Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. (Hebrews 13:4 NRSV)

The implication is that for the marriage bed to be holy is the normal state of affairs. The writer of Proverbs speaks for almost the whole Bible when he says,

Let your fountain be blessed,
and rejoice in the wife of your youth,
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.
May her breasts satisfy you at all times;
may you be intoxicated always by her love. (Proverbs 5:18-9 NRSV)⁶

The Song of Songs is devoted in its entirety to the celebration of erotic love, and it was so, long before squeamish commentators spiritualised it in terms of the romance between Christ and His Church.

Let us now consider three issues where a negative view of sex has in my view distorted Catholic teaching. Where is this effect first plainly discernible?

ISSUE 1: THE PERPETUAL VIRGINITY OF MARY

Catholics believe that Our Lady, Mary the mother of Jesus, not only conceived Him virginally through the Holy Spirit, but also that she remained a virgin ever after. Thus the Catholic apologist Fr Jim Mc Manus tells us that

God's eternal plan for the coming of his Son into the world involved not just the choice of Mary as the mother of Jesus but also the choice of Joseph as the husband of Mary and legal father of Jesus. Scripture doesn't give us details about the marriage of Mary and Joseph, but from earliest times the Church held the conviction that they lived their marriage without a normal sexual relationship....Those who are referred to as the brothers and sisters of the Lord are his first cousins, children of Joseph by a previous marriage, or children of Joseph's sister.⁷

⁴ On the authenticity of Ephesians and of the Pastoral Epistles see Mosse, *The Three Gospels*, 215-20 and 236-7 respectively.

⁵ Edmundson, *The Church in Rome*, 153-60 ; Mosse, *The Three Gospels*., 316-7.

⁶ The only dissenting note of which I am aware is Revelation 14:3-5, where however the reference may be to a wrongful use of sex rather than sexual activity itself.

⁷ Jim McManus, C.Ss.R., *All Generations*, 92-3. McManus is writing with explicitly ecumenical intentions 'to outline in simple language the scriptural, patristic and liturgical grounds for Catholic devotion to Mary' (10). His book is commended in a

McManus's dating 'from earliest times' is open to question on two grounds. First, unlike the Virgin Birth, which all Christians affirm in the creeds, the perpetual virginity of Mary is significantly absent from them. It does not seem to have been an issue, for instance, at the Council of Nicaea in 325, which formulated the original Nicene Creed, nor at that of Constantinople in 381, which amended and ratified it.

Second, the New Testament evidence tells against it. So St Mark, our earliest evangelist, quotes the astonished inhabitants of Nazareth as asking:

'This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters, too, are they not here with us?' (Mark 6:3, NJB; see also Matthew 13:55-6)

What did St Mark intend us to understand by this? If he meant cousins, why say brothers and sisters? What could be the point of naming Jesus' brothers and sisters in the same breath as His named mother, if not that James, Joset, Jude and Simon and the girls were also children of one and the same mother? So we would conclude if we had no other agenda. Again, what possible relevance would the children of Joseph's sister have to the circumstances in question? The entire argument hangs on the *immediacy* of their relation to Jesus.

Similar is Mark 3:31-35, translated by the New Jerusalem Bible as follows:

Now his mother and his brothers arrived and, standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting around him at the time the message was passed to him, 'Look, your mother and brothers (*adelphoi*) and sisters (*adelphai*) are outside asking for you.' He replied, 'who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking around at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'

This incident turns on the immediacy of the family ties between Jesus and those who had come to take Him away. If they were not brothers and sisters why did the crowd think they were? Why would He have been constrained to obey cousins? If they were not his biological brothers and sisters, the child of his mother who was also present, could He not just have replied, 'You are mistaken. I have no brothers or sisters', thereby ending the matter? Instead, he responds in effect that his spiritual family are closer to him than his natural family, leaving the fact that they were His natural family uncontested.

The suggestion that the 'brothers and sisters' were children of Joseph by a previous marriage takes us into even deeper water. If Joseph had such prior offspring, why do they not feature in the nativity story? Given the reason supplied by Luke for the journey to Bethlehem, in order to take part in a census, one would have thought it essential that they too were present there in the stable. Yet all the shepherds found was 'Mary, and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.' (Luke 2:16 NJB) Who has ever seen a Christmas crib scene in which the stable is populated with six of Joseph's other children? This is not a solution. It is special pleading employed on account of an alien agenda.

Consider now the evidence of Matthew, whose nativity account pays special attention to Joseph. Matthew tells us that Joseph took Mary as his wife,

but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son (1:25 NRSV; Greek *heôs hou eteken huion*)

Similar renderings, employing the conjunction 'till' or 'until' may be found in the AV, RV, RSV, NEB, Phillips, NIV and TNIV translations, and most recently in that of the Catholic scholar Nicholas King. As any lexicon or concordance will confirm, the particle *heôs*, used here with *hou*, is the normal Greek word for 'until'. It is used to indicate a temporal condition *which comes to an end*. We find an exact parallel in the account of the transfiguration at Matthew 17:9, rendered by the NJB,

'Tell no one about this vision until (*heôs hou*) the Son of man has risen from the dead',

where it is clearly indicated that after the resurrection the ban on discussion will cease to apply. Were it intended to last for ever, the 'until' clause would be redundant and we would never have heard the story.

Similarly, in Matthew 1:25 the temporal clause is totally without point if the writer intends us to understand that Joseph had no marital relations with his wife *at any time*. He could have conveyed that by omitting the clause altogether. By putting it in at all he makes plain that the period of abstinence had a defined terminus. The renderings of the Jerusalem Bible,

and, though he had not had intercourse with her, she gave birth to a son

which turns the temporal clause into a concessive one, and of the New Jerusalem Bible,

he had not had intercourse with her when she gave birth to a son

are both in my judgement grave mistranslations, apparently designed to obscure Matthew's point that the period of abstinence was for a limited time only. And while Church history is littered with attempts to make the Bible read what we would like it to read, rather than what it does, it is sad to see this happening at the hands the Roman Catholic Church.⁸ It is unfortunate that this verse, which tells so powerfully against his case, receives not a mention by McManus.

Further, if the Catholic view is right, then Matthew is guilty of a gross omission. At what point did Joseph understand that never, ever, in the course of his married life, was he to be allowed to make love to his chosen bride? Was he forewarned, or did he only discover this after Jesus' birth? How did he react? This, had it been the case, would have been a vital part of the story. Why does Matthew, who clearly considers himself to be a party to the level of intimacy between Joseph and Mary, omit this detail, which places an entirely new complexion on the matter? Why is he silent on an issue to which Catholics attach such importance? The answer, I suggest, is that Matthew believed that Jesus in fact had four brothers and at least two sisters by Mary and Joseph, as he plans to make plain later on (13:55-6).

That Jesus had at least one brother is further attested in the New Testament and outside it. St Paul tells how, three years after his conversion, he visited Jerusalem and met Cephas and 'James, the

⁸ Among non-Catholic translations the only one I can find which supports the translation of *heôs hou* as 'before' is the GNB. Mgr Ronald Knox, who translates the Latin Vulgate as, 'and he had not known her when (Latin *donec*) she bore a son' adds the comment, 'The text here is more literally rendered 'he knew her not till she bore a son'; but the Hebrew word represented by 'till' does not imply that the event which might have been expected *did* take place afterwards...So that this phrase does not impugn the perpetual virginity of our Lady.' I find this a little curious. Knox has allowed his theology to dictate his translation. That Matthew's narrative was originally written in Hebrew, as Knox believed, rather than Greek is today held by few (see Mosse, *The Three Gospels*, chapter 4).

Lord's brother' (Galatians 1:19) - not kinsman, *suggenês*, or cousin, *anepsios*, but brother, *adelphos*. That he was known as 'the Lord's brother (*adelphos*)' by the early Church is confirmed by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* II.i.2, II.xxiii.1, VII.xix.1). Eusebius explains (*EH* II.i.2) that like Jesus, he too was considered to be a *son of Joseph*. The notion that he was anything else is to my knowledge devoid of any historical support. As is commonly understood, after having been a sceptic until Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection, he became leader of the church in Jerusalem on the departure of Peter and was martyred there in 62. His earlier scepticism, and that of his brothers, is suggested in Mark 3:21,32 and parallels and made explicit in John 7:3-5, where *adelphos*, in the plural, is used again. He is generally credited - rightly, in my opinion - with authorship of the Letter of James in the New Testament.

The unanimous testimony of the New Testament writers who touch on the subject at all is therefore that Joseph and Mary had normal sexual relations after Jesus' birth, thus providing Jesus with identifiable brothers and sisters. So when Mgr Roderick Strange writes in *The Times* that this solution

is simple, but it leaves untouched the testimony to her perpetual virginity from the earliest generations of the Christian community. That cannot simply be ignored⁹

he is simply wrong. The 'earliest generation of the Christian community', the New Testament Church, believed otherwise; as, it would seem, did the compilers of the creeds. So also, as McManus acknowledges (92), did Tertullian.

Further, the existence of a tradition is of itself no guarantee of its truth. There are recognised criteria used by ancient historians to establish the genuineness or otherwise of traditions. Edmundson¹⁰ spells them out very clearly, and I have summarised his list in *The Three Gospels*, p.xxii:

- (1) There should have been many good witnesses to the event(s) in question.
- (2) The tradition must have started soon after the event(s) so as to be accurately passed on.
- (3) There should be early acceptance of the tradition by the community to which it relates.
- (4) There should be later, widespread acceptance of the tradition even by potential sceptics.

It seems to me that on these criteria the tradition of the perpetual virginity of Mary does not score particularly highly.

Strange continues,

Another solution suggests that they were extended family, cousins and half-brothers and sisters. But in Western society today, that solution seems feeble. It looks like a way of maintaining Mary's virginity that colludes with that suspicion of sexuality as demeaning that has too often handicapped and blemished Christian teaching.

On the feebleness of the 'extended family' solution, for the reasons given above, I would agree. It continues to beg the question of just who were the parents of them all. As such, it is a non-solution. But Strange has rightly identified the heart of the problem, the 'suspicion of sexuality as demeaning'. This is what lies behind the whole business. Someone has decided that there is something a bit unholy about sex which taints and sullies those participating in it. And while for ordinary mortals this has to be tolerated if the race is to continue, it cannot be allowed that the holy mother of Jesus could

⁹ Strange, 'The virgin birth...'.

¹⁰ Edmundson, *The Church in Rome*, 46-7.

ever have been so engaged, for in doing so she would have ceased to be holy.

McManus has one further throw:

At the end of all the theological and scriptural debates about the virginity of Mary, Catholic faith rests not on the opinion of experts but on the teaching of the Church. As the Bishops of the United States said, "What is normative in the matter of the Virgin Birth is the teaching of the Church, whose interpretation is guided by the Holy Spirit." (McManus, 93)

By 'experts', McManus means qualified ancient historians, such as I would describe Edmundson. He is telling us that the Church is prepared to argue on the historical plane for as long as it thinks it can win there. If the argument goes against it, then the Church reserves the right to rule the historical criteria out of court, the only arena of any true merit being that in which the Church has proclaimed itself to have sole competence.

The danger here is extreme. For the Church, even when totally convinced that it is guided by the Holy Spirit, does not have an unblemished record. One recalls the case of Galileo, when for several centuries the Church preferred its own leadings to the relevant scientific discipline. In the present case the relevant discipline is ancient history. Implicit in the rejection by the Church of the testimony of the New Testament is a refusal to treat that book as a historical document, subject to the normal canons of ancient history. I have argued at length in *The Three Gospels* for the vital need to regard it as history, showing the disastrous effect that disregard of historical issues necessarily has upon scholarship.

If God's truth is *true*, then ultimately this will become apparent through all channels by which we approach it. There can therefore ultimately be no clash between faith and intellect. If therefore at any time these two God-given faculties appear to disagree, the proper course not to try and trump one by the other, thereby belittling one or other of God's gifts. Instead, we need to understand, how did this situation arise in the first place?

Ambrose and the Height of Asceticism

How then did the early Church come by the notion of Mary's perpetual virginity? McManus (94) quotes a Greek Orthodox theologian as stating that the title *aeiparthenos* was formally used to describe her at the Fifth Ecumenical Council held at Constantinople in 553. In fact the first notable champion of the doctrine was Ambrose.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan from 374 to 397, saw sexuality as a 'scar' upon every human body.¹¹ Conversely, for him virginity was the highest state of holiness. The Church had therefore to be a chaste virgin, unmixed, distinct from the world. Peter Brown, whose book *The Body and Society*, a work of monumental scholarship, provides the essential documentation for this period, writes:

Ambrose's thought on virginity could be summed up in one word: *integritas*. This meant the precious ability to keep what was one's own untarnished by alien intrusion:

For in what does the chastity of a virgin consist, but in an integrity unexposed to taint from the outside?¹²
And indeed, when a girl is deflowered by the customary process of marriage, she loses what is her own, when

¹¹ Ambrose, *Expositio in Evangelium Secundum Lucum* 9.9, p.335: 1887B.

¹² Ambrose, *De virginibus* 1.5.21, p.10:205C.

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something else comes to mix with her.¹³

It was because she had avoided all admixture that Mary had been chosen by Christ as the source of his own flesh....

Hence it was essential for Ambrose to assert, against other Christians, that Mary had remained a perpetual virgin. (Brown, 354).

Ambrose's belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary was theologically and not historically derived. Hence as already seen, attempts to retrofit it into New Testament history have never been very convincing. If he had had a more positive view of God's gift of sex he might have reached other conclusions. But his view of sex was the culmination of a tide of asceticism which had been sweeping the Christian Church and its offshoots since the second century. St Paul apparently saw this coming:

The Spirit has explicitly said that during the last times some will desert the faith and pay attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines that come from devils, seduced by the hypocrisy of liars whose consciences are branded as though with a red-hot iron: *they forbid marriage* and prohibit foods which God created to be accepted with thanksgiving by all who believe and know the truth. Everything God created is good, and no food is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving: the word of God and prayer make it holy. (1 Timothy 4:1-5 NJB; emphasis added)

It would seem that it was this kind of challenge that Paul had in mind when he concluded this epistle with a warning against the 'contradictions of knowledge (*gnôsis*) falsely so-called' (6:20). The balance between the married and the unmarried vocations was going to come under heavy attack. It did not take long. The following brief skeleton of the growth of sexual renunciation is drawn from Brown's extensive study.

Tertullian (160-220) in Carthage was one of the first to believe 'that abstinence from sex was the most effective technique with which to achieve clarity of soul' (Brown, 78). Cessation from sex began to be seen as a blow to the repeated cycle of birth and death, and so a hastening of the end of the age. Progressively, sexual desire began to be replace death as the focus of human frailty. A succession of quasi-Christian cults, and for a variety of reasons, demanded some form of renunciation of marriage or sexual practice. These included the followers of Marcion (c.140-180), the Encratites ('Continent ones') who followed Tatian (c.170), the Gnostic followers of Valentinus (130-165) and of Mani (216-77) (the Manicheans, with whom the young Augustine consorted).

In the Christian Church during the second and third centuries the seed took root, *pari passu* with the growing the division between clergy and laity. Although married people could still be ordained and consecrated, it became increasingly understood that the demands of holiness and purity required that they abstain from sex for the rest of their lives. If a priest's wife died, he was not allowed to remarry. By the time of Clement of Alexandria (c.150 - c.215), there was 'a general sense that intercourse in itself...excluded the Holy Spirit' (Brown, 146). Origen (185-254) was among those who held that 'married intercourse coarsened the spirit' (Brown, 173).

In the Latin West, 'Holiness and continence of the flesh' tended to gravitate around the clergy of the Catholic Church. It defined them as a 'holy' priesthood, subject to a state of perpetual ritual abstinence. A little before 303, the Council of Elvira, in southern Spain, declared that 'bishops, priests, deacons, and all members of the clergy connected with the liturgy must abstain from their wives and must not beget sons.' Such clergymen might have been married and raised families: but the notion that they would continue to have intercourse with their wives while serving at the altar was increasingly regarded as shocking. (Brown, 203)

¹³ Ambrose, *Exhortatio virginitatis* 6.35: 131C.

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The Response to Ambrose: Jerome, Jovinian and Augustine

But against Ambrose's belief in a spiritual hierarchy at whose peak was the virgin or the continent state, Jovinian, a serious-minded ascetic from Rome, contended that

all Christians emerged from the baptismal waters equal. They had been equally rewarded with the gift of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit (Brown, 359),

regardless of their marital status. Jovinian seems to have returned to the balance that we found in the teaching of Jesus and Paul: God does indeed call some to celibacy, but He loves equally those whom He so calls, and those whom He does not. The concept of virginity, and the elevation of the continent laity, had in Jovinian's view been overplayed. For Ambrose, this challenge

threatened to undo all that the revolution of late antiquity had achieved for the Christian Church. Hierarchy, and not community, had become the order of the day. (Brown, 360-1)

As he explained to the congregation of Vercelli who were seeking to choose a nonascetic bishop,

The hardest battle of all that Adam's fallen progeny had to fight was an unremitting struggle of the mind against sensuality, against *voluptas*. (Brown, 361)

Even between married couples, sex must not be fun:

The legal husband must not allow himself to be tempted, through love of sensuous delight, to play the adulterer with his own wife....¹⁴

What Ambrose now demanded was that the couple should strive to minimize an ill-defined and ever-present possibility for 'unchastity' connected with the pleasure that accompanied the act of intercourse itself. This ideal was held up to the Christians of Vercelli in order to persuade them to choose as their leaders and moral guides only men who had maximized their own control of the sexual urge - those who had lived lives of perpetual celibacy. (Brown, 362)

Jerome (c.342-420) was even more militant than Ambrose. Arguing against Jovinian, he wrote that

even first marriages were regrettable, if pardonable, capitulations to the flesh, and that second marriages were only one step away from the brothel. He went on to suggest that priests were holy only in so far as they possessed the purity of virgins. The married clergy were mere raw recruits in the army of the church, brought in because of a temporary shortage of battle-hardened veterans of lifelong celibacy. (Brown, 377)

Indeed, in Jerome's view

even the blood of martyrdom was barely able to wipe away 'the dirt of marriage' from a Christian woman. (Brown, 397)

Thus Jerome came within a whisker of fulfilling St Paul's apostolic caution about those who would forbid marriage. In the early 390s Jovinian and his followers were condemned by synods at Rome and Milan, led respectively by the bishops Siricius and Ambrose.

Augustine, bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430 and a convert of Ambrose, with his dissolute early life long behind him, sought a middle way between Jerome and Jovinian, arguing for the positive benefits of Christian marriage. Within it, sex for the purposes of procreation was acceptable, but beyond that, sex engaged in purely to satisfy the concupiscence of the flesh was a mild, venial fault

¹⁴ Ambrose, *Letter* 2.8: 919B.

(*venialis culpa*; *The Good of Marriage*, VI.6). But sexual desire was nevertheless distorted by the fall, and clearly manifested the rebellion of the human will with which the fall was synonymous. Moreover, sexual intercourse was the mechanism by which original sin was transmitted through the human race.

Sexual desire still disquieted Augustine. In mankind's present state, the sexual drive was a disruptive force. Augustine never found a way, any more than did any of his Christian contemporaries, of articulating the possibility that sexual pleasure might, in itself, enrich the relations between husband and wife. (Brown, 402)

Although far more liberal than either Ambrose or Jerome, he never lost his obsession with the supposed linkage between sex and sin.¹⁵ So although he went some way towards rescuing marriage from their strictures, on sex one essential point stuck: *to engage in sex was always going to be something for which a justification was required* if it was ever to be anything but sinful concupiscence. The Catholic Church took its lead on the perpetual virginity of Mary from Ambrose, and although it largely adopted Augustine's more liberal view of marriage, it retained his sense of the moral ambiguity of sex. The notion that married couples might legitimately engage in sex just for fun found few supporters.

ISSUE 2: CELIBACY OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Abbot Christopher Jamison writes that

A person's sexuality invites them to make choices in three areas of life: sexual activity, sexual status and sexual integrity.

As regards sexual activity, we can choose sexual abstinence, which means no genital activity, or we can choose to be active; this choice is not a permanent one and it may vary from time to time; for example a person who becomes HIV+ may have been sexually active but then chooses to avoid all sexual contact.

The second choice is about status, where we can choose to be single, married or celibate (i.e. committed for life to being single)....

The third and final choice is whether or not to be chaste....To be chaste...is to live out our chosen status with integrity, being faithful to a marriage partner for example.¹⁶ (Jamison, 90-1)

All Christians are called to chastity. Some are called to celibacy. Among the leaders of the Early Church St Paul, it seems, was not married. But by rights he could have been, as was St Peter:

Have we not every right to eat and drink? And every right to be accompanied by a Christian wife, like the other apostles, like the brothers of the Lord, and like Cephas? (1 Corinthians 9:4-5 NJB)¹⁷

A few years later Paul is perfectly happy that the officers appointed in his churches should be married with children, provided that they can keep their households in good order.¹⁸ The balance that we spoke of earlier between the twin vocations to marry and not to marry was thus preserved, it would seem, until the end of the first century.

We have seen above how this balance was overtaken by the asceticism of the second century

¹⁵ There is an excellently documented account of Christian attitudes to marriage down to the death of Augustine in 430 in the Introduction to Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 1-28.

¹⁶ Jamison, *Finding Happiness*, 90-1.

¹⁷ See also Mark 1:29-31, where Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law.

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 3:1-5,12; Titus 1:6.

onwards. In the sixth century, writes Brown,

the strict continence of the Catholic clergy in much of the Latin West still rested on the time-honoured institution of postmarital celibacy....Only in the late sixth century, when their wives finally disappeared from the households of the clergy and the majority of the bishops came to their cities from the monastery, would an ancient style of Christian leadership vanish from the West, and the clerical celibacy associated with the Middle Ages proper be said to have begun. (Brown, 431-2)

The celibacy of the priesthood was formally imposed by the Lateran Councils of 1123 and 1139, owing as much to considerations of inherited wealth being otherwise lost to the Church as to moral propriety.

Christopher Jamison again writes helpfully:

The Catholic Church has chosen to insist that priests in the West must be celibate (unless they are convert clergy from other churches). While celibacy is essential to the monastic life, it is not part of the definition of the priestly life. There are many reasons for a celibate priesthood, but it is important here simply to understand the difference between the celibate discipline placed upon priests and the essential nature of celibacy for monks and nuns. (Jamison, 93)

While one can only admire the dedication of millions of who have voluntarily surrendered their marital lives for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, it is hard to escape the feeling that somewhere, in respect of priests, a wrong turning has been taken. The Catholic Church has paid and continues to pay a high price for demanding priestly celibacy. First, there are many today who feel themselves torn between a vocation to the priesthood and an absence of vocation to celibacy, and who in consequence do not offer themselves for training as priests. Thus Fr Gerald O'Collins writes in *The Tablet* of 'the crisis of so many priestless parishes':

A very serious and widespread priest shortage threatens the eucharistic life of the Church. The local community has a right to the regular celebration of the Eucharist and not merely to the distribution of the Holy Communion, with the possibility of sharing in the Mass limited to a few occasions during the year....Change is demanded by the clear teaching of Vatican II about the celebration of the Eucharist being central to the life of the Church. (O'Collins, 8)

Second, there is always the risk that the sexual dynamic, if denied a healthy mode of expression, will find unhealthy ones. There have been those throughout history who, unable to bear the burden of celibacy, have consorted with women and had children by them. And as we now know, there is today a worldwide scandal in which Catholic priests have committed the grossest sexual abuse upon children, their acts being often condoned and concealed by the hierarchy.

This is not of course to suggest that sexual problems and misdemeanours are in any way exclusive to the Catholic Church. Protestants are no less human and fallible. But the Roman Catholic Church is the only communion, to my knowledge, in which whole dioceses, or their equivalents, have been bankrupted by compensation claims arising from sexual abuse.¹⁹ Nor, as is sometimes suggested, is this simply a matter of a small percentage of errant priests which is no larger than is to be found in churches which permit their ministers to be married. At the heart of the problem is the connivance in their activities by the hierarchy. Thus David Sharrock reports,

A long-awaited report into clerical abuse in the Diocese of Dublin is expected to be published this week and bishops are bracing themselves for another round of public anger. It will be a horror story of how known paedophile priests were shunted from parish to parish by their religious superiors. The number of children who suffered as a result of the

¹⁹ To date seven US dioceses have filed for bankruptcy on account of damages incurred by sexual abuse charges (David Sharrock, 'Church bankruptcy...').

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Church's cover-up could run into thousands.

It will also be another shattering blow to the moral authority of an institution that once ruled Ireland with an iron rod, following hard on the heels of the Ryan report, an independent tribunal that concluded in May after a decade of evidence-gathering that there had been "endemic and systemic" sexual, physical and emotional abuse of hundreds of thousands of Irish children in residential institutions run by religious orders.²⁰

It cannot be denied: something has gone wrong in the Catholic Church in regard to sex to a degree not found in other Christian Churches.

It is ironical that St Peter, celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church as the first Bishop of Rome,²¹ would on account of his wife not today be eligible to enter the priesthood.

ISSUE 3: CONTRACEPTION

The notion, inherited through Ambrose and Augustine from the Gnostics, that sex is essentially problematical, fraught with the possibilities of sin and so in need of strict regulation, surfaces again in Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. As its opening words make clear, this is a document about 'The transmission of human life' which, although 'a source of great joy', nevertheless 'entails many difficulties and hardships' (1). It is on my reading a stern document about 'the objective moral order which was established by God' (10) of which the Church is the guardian and interpreter (4), and according to which married couples 'are not free to act as they choose' (10). This moral law is highly forbidding. It

can only be observed with the gravest difficulty, sometimes only by heroic effort. (3)

Again,

We have no wish at all to pass over in silence the difficulties, at times very great, which beset the lives of Christian married couples....

For this reason husbands and wives should take up the burden appointed to them, willingly, in the strength of faith and of that hope which "does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Then let them implore the help of God with unremitting prayer and, most of all, let them draw grace and charity from that unfailing fount which is the Eucharist. If, however, sin still exercises its hold over them, they are not to lose heart. Rather must they, humble and persevering, have recourse to the mercy of God, abundantly bestowed in the Sacrament of Penance. (25)

The essential point here is that inherited from Augustine and his contemporaries, that sexual intercourse, even between married couples, is fraught with sin and in need of justification. Thus

each and every marital act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life. (13)

What is not considered is that in bestowing the gift of sex upon the human race, God may have had a dual purpose. Besides making sex His chosen vehicle for reproduction, He may have intended us to enjoy it for no better reason than that it is just good fun. Amidst all the talk of law, difficulties, burdens, sin and penance, one might never deduce from *Humanae Vitae* that sex is a love gift of delight from God to His children, in itself as innocent, fragrant and beautiful as the petals of a rose.

²⁰ David Sharrock, 'They poisoned...'

²¹ And with some historical justification: see Edmundson, 44-58; Mosse, *The Three Gospels*, 262-3.

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It does not follow from the fact that gluttony is a sin that food is necessarily sinful. As we have noted, Jesus Himself taught otherwise. Similarly, it does not follow from the fact that lust - the desire for inappropriate sex - is a sin that sex itself is necessarily sinful.

One can often tell the strength of an argument by the kind of defences and anomalies it throws up when challenged. Thus *Humanae Vitae* places a fault line between 'natural' and 'artificial' forms of contraception (14-17). This leads into a tangle. Consider how Longenecker, writing for the Catholic Truth Society, expounds present day orthodoxy:

When a husband and wife make love they are sealing with a physical action a union that is spiritual and eternal.

That love is meant to produce children and when the possibility of children is artificially eliminated from the action of making love that relationship of love is reduced to selfishness between the two people. This is a victory for the evil side because two people who were supposed to be living a radiant life of self-sacrifice and love, have chosen selfish pleasure instead. An action of love that was supposed to bring new life into the world has been used for mere personal pleasure. (Longenecker, 30-1)

So there we have it. Sex for its own sake is 'selfish pleasure.' But consider. A couple who continue to make love after the wife has reached the menopause will by definition be doing so 'for mere personal pleasure' with no possibility of bringing new life into the world. Is this really 'a victory for the evil side'? Or is it acceptable because they are relying on nature? If they have hitherto been employing artificial contraception - say, by sterilisation (as forbidden by *Humanae Vitae* 14) - have they suddenly stopped sinning? Yet their intentions and actual practice may be little different. Or are we to conclude that all sex after the menopause is forbidden because it has lost its 'intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life'? The distinction between natural and artificial contraception raises more problems than it solves.

The notion that sex engaged in for its own sake is 'a victory for the evil side' finds as far as I can see scant support in the teaching of Scripture about either sex or evil. One recalls the curious moralising of the Irish Catholic bishop of relatively recent times who forbade the women of his flock to use tampons lest the very act of insertion should generate lustful thoughts. There is a paranoia here that a little education, not to say practical experience, would most probably dispel very quickly.

The real problem is the failure to consider that there may be more to sex than reproduction, and that God Himself may approve of *fun*. Flowers are beautiful, fragrant and precious in their own right besides forming a plant's reproductive system. Again, God gave us legs to enable us to move from one place to another. This does not mean that it is wrong to go for an afternoon walk for the sheer pleasure of doing so. Nor does it mean that 'artificial' - human-devised - modes of transport such as bicycles, cars and popemobiles are all necessarily evil or selfish. God gave us brains with which to devise artifices. A pill which prevents a heart attack is no less 'artificial' than one which prevents conception.

The notion that sex needs justification still survives. Pope Benedict is quoted in *The Tablet* as suggesting

that we need to go beyond asking, "How can we make sex safe?" to the more fundamental question, "What is sex

for?"²²

Today I suspect a part of the answer would be supplied by the neuroscientists in a way that Augustine and his contemporaries could never have envisaged. Apparently the act of sex releases certain chemicals such as dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and phenylethylamine (PEA), which between them promote the well-being and proper functioning of the brain.

One may go further. It is a matter of personal experience that sex can also be a means of grace. In the period of tranquillity which follows sexual release one may be very well attuned to the whispers of the Holy Spirit that come to some people through the sacraments, to others in contemplative prayer, to others from the Bible, to others on first waking and to others indeed at any time of God's choosing.²³ However in the nature of things, it is wholly understandable that neither a priesthood which has been true to its profession of celibacy, nor one which has been untrue to it, may not have discovered this.

CONCLUSION: THE PRIZE

Until recent times - even as late as 1968, the year of *Humanae Vitae* - it could be argued that the stern, negative, almost puritanical attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards sex was correct and in need of no modification. Today this is an option no longer open to us. In the wake of the paedophile scandal which has shaken the Catholic Church in many parts of the world, it must be granted that in some way or other all is not well in the Church in regard to sex.

My thesis is that married sex is a massive and highly potent area which has from the second century been resolutely placed in the (Catholic) Church's Jungian shadow bag on the suspicion that it is a murky area, unholy and fraught with sinful possibilities. As a result, it has periodically erupted into a succession of historic, refractory, problems, some internal, some in relationship with other Churches. They include the perpetual virginity of Mary, the mandatory celibacy of the priesthood and consequent abuses, and the outlawing of artificial means of contraception. If however we gently remove it from the bag and lift it into the light of God, it could yet turn out to be as beautiful, delicate and innocent as a rose. We may even discover it to be *God-given fun*, in which our heavenly Father wishes us to delight; and as such, a means of grace. If so, then healing will begin when we allow God to integrate this rejected side of ourselves into our life proper.²⁴

When this happens a number of issues which have traditionally divided the Christian Church may begin to defuse. Some of the more obvious ones, tackled in this paper, relate directly to issues of sex. Others may follow.

For it would seem from the case presented both here and in reports BW/010 and BW/012 that there is a parallelism between the Churches on both sides of the Reformation gulf which may help to explain why the traditional bones of contention - the nature of the Eucharist, the priesthood and

²² David Igo, 'Hope out of Africa'.

²³ I have made a similar point in different terminology in my booklet *Creative Thinking*.

²⁴ Some steps along this track are suggested by Cynthia Bourgeault's challenging article, 'Reclaiming the Path of Erotic Love'. Bourgeault makes the point that love is not a zero-sum commodity. As is evident from Jesus' two great commandments, we do not love God any less because we love someone else more. Rather, God is the source and subject of love itself. 'God is that which makes love possible, the source from which it emerges and the light by which it is recognised' (45).

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papacy, and the meaning of St Paul - have proved so intractable. Both sides have for understandable reasons rejected as unworthy one of God's greatest gifts to humanity: mystical, contemplative prayer on the one hand, and sex on the other. Each of these gifts may be experienced as a means of grace through which God may be encountered. The loss or rejection of either will inevitably have damaged His Church. The pair of losses has been catastrophic.

Further, there is on this analysis a curious complementarity between Augustine and Luther, who may be seen as epitomizing the two streams. Augustine was a mystic and a contemplative with a hangup about sex. Luther was an extremely happily married man with a hangup about contemplative prayer. Small wonder that their respective followers have been like chalk and cheese! Conversely, how much they have to learn from each other, once the will is there.

It is my prayer that the process of understanding and acknowledging our failings in respect of God's most generous gifts on both sides of the divide will bring Catholics and Protestants together again on our knees before God. If so, we may yet find the healing which for half a millennium has proved so elusive. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Martin Mosse,
October 2009.

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