

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON MARITAL INTERCOURSE

From St. Paul to Pope John Paul II



ROBERT OBACH

The Catholic Church on Marital Intercourse

The Catholic Church on Marital Intercourse

**From St. Paul to
Pope John Paul II**

Robert Obach



LEXINGTON BOOKS

A division of

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

LEXINGTON BOOKS

A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200
Lanham, MD 20706

Estover Road
Plymouth PL6 7PY
United Kingdom

Copyright © 2009 by Lexington Books

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Obach, Robert E.

The Catholic Church on marital intercourse : from St. Paul to Pope John Paul II /
Robert Obach.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7391-3087-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7391-3087-0 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-7391-3089-6 (electronic)


ISBN-10: 0-7391-3089-7 (electronic)

1. Sex—Religious aspects—Catholic Church—History of doctrines. 2. Marriage—
Religious aspects—Catholic Church—History of doctrines. 3. Catholic Church—
Doctrines—History. I. Title.

BX1795.S48O23 2009

241'.66—dc22

2008035485

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1 Biblical Approaches to Marital Sexuality	5
2 St. Paul's Unwitting Contributions to the Church's Negative Thinking on Marital Intercourse	9
3 Early Church Leaders Defend Marriage Against Gnostic Attacks	17
4 Augustine: The Man Who Carved in Stone the Church's Conditional Acceptance of Marital Intercourse	29
5 Monks, Theologians, Bishops, and Popes Disparage Marital Intercourse	51
6 The Law of Clerical Celibacy Embodies the Bias Against Marital Intimacy	61
7 Canon Law Sees Nothing Spiritual in Marital Intimacy	69
8 Marriage Recognized as a Sacrament	77

9	St. Thomas Aquinas: Modifications and Qualifications	83
10	Some Attempts to See Other Values in Marital Intercourse	93
11	The Council of Trent: Motives for Marrying and Motives for Abstaining from Marital Intercourse	99
12	A New Development: Spousal “Affection” Related to “Love”	105
13	Confessing Sins Related to Sexual Activity	113
14	Pope, Bishops, Theologians, and Canon Law Stress Procreation as the Primary Purpose of Marriage	119
15	A New Vision: Love Related to Marital Intercourse	125
16	The Teaching of Pope Pius XI: Procreation or Abstinence	131
17	A Rejected Perspective: Bodily Union as the “Direct Purpose” of Marital Intercourse	139
18	The Break with St. Augustine: Pope Pius XII Accepts the Rhythm Method	147
19	The Effects of Papal Teaching: Frustration and Tears	155
20	The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) Recognizes the Value of Marital Love	163
21	The Postconciliar Work of the “Birth Control Commission” and Its Culmination in <i>Humanae Vitae</i>	175
22	Pope John Paul II: Old Assertions and New Perceptions	189
23	Conscience and Fidelity to Church Teaching	205
	Epilogue	213
	Index	217

Preface

Why are things the way they are? Why has so much of western Christianity's teaching overlooked the biblical assertion that marital intercourse is one of God's blessings?

In Betty Smith's classic novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Francie Nolan begins her diary on her thirteenth birthday. Eleven months later she writes: "Sex is something that invariably comes into everyone's life."¹ Noting that "all the girls in school have but the one topic of conversation, sex and boys," Francie concludes: "They are very curious about it." She then writes: "Am I curious about sex?" Then, crossing out that question, she writes: "I am curious."²

When Francie is older she asks her mother, Katie Nolan, for an explanation of sex. So Katie tells her daughter "simply and plainly all that she herself knew. There were times in the telling when Katie had to use words which were considered dirty but she used them bravely and unflinchingly because she knew no other words. . . . In spite of the blunt words and homely phrasing, there was nothing revolting in Katie's explanations."³ This scene concludes with the observation that Francie "never needed to slink into dark hallways with other girls and exchange guilty confidences. She never had to learn things in a distorted way."⁴

But what was said about Francie's mother cannot be said of "Mother Church." It could be said that sexuality had been presented in a distorted way during most of western Christianity's history. The vast majority of church leaders saw nothing spiritual in the marital act. They regarded sexual pleasure as sinful because it was seen as the result of Adam and Eve's sin. Even desiring marital intimacy was perceived as a temptation that endangered one's salvation. It can be said that through most of her history the prevailing attitude of

Mother Church has been an attitude of semi-rejection, or, at best, an attitude of partial acceptance of human sexual dynamics. *The Catholic Church on Marital Intercourse* looks at the history of how church leaders developed that attitude of distrust and suspicion and how church leaders and theologians are now discovering that there is a deep spirituality in marital sexuality.

NOTES

1. Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Perennial Library Edition, 1968; Harper & Row Publishers, 1943, 1937), 217.
2. Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 217–18.
3. Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 219.
4. Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 219.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to friends and mentors who both inspired and encouraged me through those years I have worked on this book. They are Rev. Roger Balducelli; Raymond Berthiaume; Rev. Lawrence Boadt; Carol Ann Cannon, M.A.; Roy Carlisle; Ned Cuddy, Ph.D.; Dennis Doyle, Ph.D.; Rev. Robert Erickson, C.S.V.; John Feister, M.A.; Rev. Tom Gaeke; Rev. Joseph Goetz; Luis Gonzalez, Ph.D.; Rev. Robert Hater; Brendan Hill, Ph.D.; Trudy Krisher, M.A.; John McIntire; Dottie Mohan; Rev. Robert Monnin; David Riley, M.A.; Patricia Stevenson, editor, Lexington Books; Dan Thomas, M.A., Ph.D.; Maureen Tilley; John Trokan, D.Min.; Sr. Victoria Vondenberger, RSM, JCL; James and Evelyn Whitehead, Ph.D.; Maera Winters of Rowman & Littlefield; and Sr. Angela Ann Zukowski, Ph.D.

Special mention goes to those who found fault with my book and offered their critiques. I begin with my daughter, Jennifer, and her husband Steve Fuchs, who concluded that I had gone “too far” in some of my observations regarding the Catholic Church’s doctrine on marital sexuality. Then there is my mentor at the University of Strasbourg, Dr. Gabriel Vahanian, who concluded that I had “not gone far enough.” While in this category of critique, I want to include Rev. Jeff Kemper, professor of sacramental theology at the Athenaeum in Cincinnati, who, while not agreeing with the tone of a longer version of this book, nevertheless recommended it for a *nihil obstat* and an *imprimatur*. Next comes Rev. Earl Fernandes, professor of moral theology at the Athenaeum. He examined a shorter version of my book and concluded that certain passages were troubling and possibly contrary to faith and morals. I have taken Rev. Fernandes’ critiques to heart and made some changes in the text that I think would satisfy his most serious objections.

Most of all, I want to thank my wife, Sally Keyes, who, for over a dozen years, listened to me tell about the results of my research, encouraged me to continue that research, and prayed with me that I would find a publisher for this history of the development of the Catholic Church's doctrine on marital sexuality. I said to Sally that, even if my book did not find a publisher, all the effort that went into this research had been worth it because we both came to appreciate ever more deeply the sacrament of marital sexuality that comes with the realization that we are called to passionately love each other as Christ loves his church.

Introduction

"MOM, WHERE DID WE COME FROM?"

One day, while Richard and I waited for our mom to return to our car, we talked about where things came from. Then we asked ourselves, "Where did *we* come from?" As soon as our mother returned, we asked our question in unison. Without hesitation Mom replied: "Your daddy put a seed in me and you grew from that." In my six-year-old imagination I pictured my father taking a seed in his fingers and putting it on my mother's tongue so she could swallow it.

CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

When I was in the second grade at St. Pascal Baylon Catholic School, Sister Joseph Roberta began to prepare us for receiving the Sacrament of Penance (Reconciliation). In order to know what sins we had to confess, we had to learn about what was forbidden by the Ten Commandments. *The Baltimore Catechism Number One* told us that the sixth and ninth commandments declared that "impure touches" and "impure thoughts" were forbidden.

In the middle grades we received the next edition of our religion text, *The Baltimore Catechism Number Two*. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" commanded us "to be pure in thought and desire."¹ The *Catechism* taught that "thoughts about impure things become sinful when a person thinks of an unchaste act and deliberately takes pleasure in so thinking, or when unchaste desire or passion is aroused and consent is given to it."² I did not know what desire and passion were, but I had the distinct impression they

were bad and I made up my mind to avoid them lest I would have to confess such bad things to a priest.

LOOKING BACK

By the time I graduated from St. Pascal Baylon School, I had successfully evaded learning about sexuality. I had managed to avoid immodest conversations, bad companions, impure magazines, and objectionable movies, all of which were forbidden by the sixth and ninth commandments. At the same time, having associated the sexual with the sinful, I had not learned much about human sexuality—either from *The Baltimore Catechism* or the sisters of St. Joseph, or the parish priests, or my parents. While there is something very good about my boyhood innocence, there were drawbacks. My boyhood development was spiritually and psychologically distorted by a religious indoctrination that had always placed the sexual dimension in the context of the sinful.

CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL

That approach to sexuality continued through Catholic high school. In my junior year at Chaminade High School, Brother Gilfeather was our religion teacher. He often spoke about his personal experiences in order to realistically strengthen our Catholicism. On one occasion he confided that he had been tempted by “so-called friends” to “betray” Catholic Church teaching. A couple had invited him to their home. After the meal, the host and hostess began to explain how difficult it was to have children and to provide for their needs and schooling. In this way they broached the topic of birth control. Brother Gilfeather got up from their table, retrieved his coat, and walked out.

Brother Gilfeather declared that it was against “the natural law” for a married couple to desire “venereal pleasure” while trying to avoid parenthood. Seeking venereal pleasure outside of marriage was always a mortal sin. Within a marriage there was the danger that venereal pleasure could lure couples into committing the mortal sin of “practicing artificial birth control.”

SENIOR YEAR RELIGION

Toward the Eternal Commencement was our senior year religion text. It was designed to help a person discern his or her life calling. Since the celibate or

religious state was “the highest calling,” this state of life was treated first. We read that the failure to develop the habit of self-sacrifice led people to “follow their natural inclinations to indulge in worldly pleasures.”³ Lacking the habit of self-sacrifice, such persons would find “themselves unduly attracted by and attached to worldly pleasure and goods.”⁴

The text’s treatment of “The Holy State of Matrimony” stressed that children were the primary purpose of marriage. The “mutual assistance of husband and wife in all things” and “the quieting of concupiscence” were the two “secondary purposes.”⁵ Marriage quieted concupiscence by “providing a holy and a lawful outlet for the satisfaction of those tendencies which God has placed in human nature to insure the continuance of the race on earth and the peopling of Heaven with saints.”⁶ Whatever was done to “quiet” concupiscence outside of marriage was sinful.

THE TERRIBLE EVIL OF PRACTICING BIRTH CONTROL

In the sixth section our text dealt with the themes of Pope Pius XI’s 1930 encyclical, *Casti Cannubii* (On Chaste Marriage). We learned that even in marriage the desire for sexual relations with one’s spouse could be a danger to salvation. Marital sex was “destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children” and those who deliberately frustrated “its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.”⁷

Though “the modern apostles of chaos” might refer to the frustration of nature as “birth control,” the pope called birth control what it really is, namely, “uncontrolled indulgence in lust.”⁸ Comparing that “indulgence in lust” with the pagan practice of “artificial vomiting so as to be able to begin eating and drinking all over again,” our text declared that the frustration of the primary purpose of marriage was “the misuse of a gift of God” as well as the enthronement of physical pleasure as “the supreme purpose in life.”⁹

Having already internalized Brother Gilfeather’s perspectives on the sinful lure of venereal pleasure in the lives of some of his ex-friends, I began to see marriage as a danger to my eternal salvation. Marriage was no longer appealing. I had learned that in marriage the husband and wife face the ever-present temptation to sin by seeking sexual pleasure with each other. Our text had a picture of a Roman soldier beating Jesus with a whip. The caption read: “Christ expiated sins of the flesh by enduring the merciless scourging at the pillar.” I next read this: “Sins of lust within the holy state of Matrimony play their cruel part in these sufferings of our Divine Savior.”¹⁰

SOME QUESTIONS

Looking back at my twelve years of Catholic schooling, certain questions come to mind. Where was the awareness of the connection between God and our human sexuality? How come so little was said about the relationship between the sexual dimension and the transcendent presence of the divine? Why was it that the desire for sexual union with one's spouse was seen as either a concession to concupiscence, which was an effect of sin, or as temptation, which was an occasion of sin? Where was the recognition of the relationship of complementarity between the physicality of sexual intercourse and God's creation of us as male and female? Why did churchmen so often associate shame and guilt with sexual pleasure? Why did theologians frequently propose a relationship of opposition between the sexual and the holy? Why was the renunciation of sexual experience deemed to be spiritually good? Why was the spiritual dimension of marital sexuality ignored? This book seeks to answer such questions.

NOTES

1. *The Official Revised Baltimore Catechism Number Two* (New York: W. H. Sadlier, Inc., 1945), 99.
2. *The Official Revised Baltimore Catechism Number Two*, 105.
3. Right Rev. Msgr. Clarence E. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, Book Four in the *Our Quest for Happiness* series (Chicago: Mentzer, Bush & Company, 1946), 204.
4. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, 204.
5. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, 254.
6. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, 254.
7. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, 277–78.
8. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, 278.
9. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, 278.
10. Elwell et al., *Toward the Eternal Commencement*, no page number.

Biblical Approaches to Marital Sexuality

IMAGES, MYTHS, AND METAPHORS

That which transcends the visible world can only be approached imaginatively. All our human ways of picturing “the Divine Reality” are metaphors taken from the sensible world in which we live. Thus we read that God *formed* Adam out of the clay of the ground and that God *spoke* to prophets. It would not have occurred to the ancients to speak of God in any way other than the way one spoke of human beings.¹ So, when the biblical authors wanted to describe divine action or divine intent, they relied on metaphors, images, and stories that conveyed a deeper truth. They used “mythical” language and the stories they told are frequently called “myths.”

However, a myth is not a “fairy tale.” Myth is an imaginative or symbolic expression of “an insight more profound than scientific description and logical analysis can ever achieve.”² The mythological accounts of the creation of man and woman in the book of Genesis are stories that convey perceptions and attitudes concerning the meaning of human sexuality.

ATTITUDES FOUND IN BIBLICAL STORIES

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are at least four distinguishable attitudes toward sexuality.³ Sexual relating is regarded as part of ordinary, human living. Second, there is the outlook that sees sexual intercourse as necessary to increase the number of God’s people. A third attitude reflects the patriarchal mindset that perceives sexual activity as the prerogative of men. A fourth

attitude reflects the goodness in the passionate experience of a man and a woman loving one another.

The creation stories of man and woman in the book of Genesis assert that the sexual dimension is natural and good. These mythological stories reflect their authors' attitude of total acceptance of the creative Lordship of God. Thus it can be said that "the attitude of the Old Testament authors towards human sexuality, love between man and woman, and marriage and the begetting of children, is extremely open, frank, and positive."⁴

Sexuality in the Book of Genesis

There are two creation accounts in the first two chapters of Genesis. The first creation account (Gen. 1:1–2:4) declared that God had designed human beings so that they complement one another as male and female (1:26–27). God then blessed the sexual differentiation of man and woman with the gift of fertility (1:28). Six times the author declares that the created order is good. God creates male and female and then declares that creation was "very good" (1:31).

The second creation story is much older (Gen. 2:5–25). Here God is a "hands-on" creator who fashions Adam from the clay of the earth. When the man cannot find a creature like himself, God forms a woman out of Adam's rib. Eve is thus Adam's intimate partner, "bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (Gen. 2:23). The woman, sexually different and desirable, is God's gift to the man. They are able to unite in such a way that they physically become two in one flesh (Gen. 2:24). Since God intended that man and woman would unite sexually, male and female need not feel embarrassment or shame as they delight in each other's naked maleness and femaleness (Gen. 2:25). It follows that man and woman can accept as God's gifts such accompaniments of the marital act as bonding, pleasure, comfort, security, affirmation, joy, passion, and even ecstasy.

Sexuality and the Song of Songs

The very title of this biblical book, the Song of Songs (the Canticle of Canticles), makes the claim that these songs or poems are the greatest of songs. This biblical book may have originated in the songs sung at the weddings of peasant folk. Sampling these poems, one finds uninhibited expressions of passionate sexual feelings: "On my bed at night I sought him whom my heart loves" (3:1); "I belong to my lover and for me he yearns" (7:11). Such poetic recognition of the goodness of sexual pleasure expresses an attitude of total acceptance of God's design for human sexuality. Aqiba, the famed Jewish

rabbi and scholar, declared that “all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.”⁵

But Christian leaders were not comfortable with this frank outlook on human sexuality. Lacking an attitude of total acceptance of God’s creation of sexuality, some “Christian scholars rejected that rather literal (and earthly) meaning because it was thought to be beneath the dignity of God’s inspired word.”⁶ So the scholars in the early church treated the Song of Songs as an allegory of God’s love for Israel or as an allegory of the soul’s relationship with God or as an allegory of Christ’s love for his church. Origen (185–254) was one such scholar. Although he was a great theologian, it seems that he failed to appreciate the way God created us as male and female. Lamenting the pull of sexual desire, Origen sternly warned that “everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of the flesh and blood and has not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature” should “refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it.”⁷ Origen’s “counsel” reflects deafness to the scriptural words declaring the goodness of human sexuality. Origen’s writings do express an attitude of conditional acceptance that will continue to develop through the rest of Christianity’s history.

Jesus’ Attitude Regarding Marital Sexuality

Jesus of Nazareth treated the creation stories of Genesis “in the same way as his people apparently understood them, religious statements of how it was in the beginning.”⁸ Jesus understood that God had willed the goodness of human sexuality from the beginning, “especially how he willed that husbands treat their wives.”⁹ So, when some Pharisees asked Jesus whether divorce was permissible, he replied: “[F]rom the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ . . . Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate” (Mark 10:5–9).

Jesus had a positive outlook on marital relations. Recognizing God’s creative design for man and woman as depicted in the book of Genesis, Jesus had no reservations about accepting marital intimacy. With the acceptance of God’s design comes a certain serenity of outlook. As Dante wrote, “In His will is our peace.”¹⁰ The words of Dante can also express the believer’s attitude of total acceptance of God’s design as manifested in our human sexuality. Such an outlook is the opposite of another attitude, an attitude of conditional acceptance. This limited acceptance led to the pelvic anxiety that has haunted the western church for nearly nineteen centuries.

THE CHURCH'S ATTITUDE OF CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

An outlook or attitude is a mental position one takes with regard to a thing, a custom, or an idea. A person's attitude toward sexuality is fashioned out of a whole complex of experiences and information found in his or her social milieu. Similarly, an institution can develop its own unique attitude regarding sexuality. Whenever early churchmen referred to marital relations, their statements would be accompanied by such words as "if" or "but" or "on condition that." The resulting attitude toward God's design could be described as an attitude of *conditional acceptance*. At times the prevailing attitude concerning erotic activity between spouses was an attitude of dismal uneasiness. At other times their attitude was one of downright disdain. With the passage of time, that conditional attitude more or less became the basis of the church's doctrine on marital sexuality. That attitude would often prevent seeing anything spiritual or holy in the marital act. For the most part, marital relations would be accepted only on the basis of their utility in providing children or relieving concupiscence.

Some people think that St. Paul is the one responsible for the mood of pelvic anxiety that has haunted the church. But, as we shall see, it was not Paul.

NOTES

1. W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 21.
2. John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), 599.
3. Morton Kelsey and Barbara Kelsey, *Sacrament of Sexuality* (Warwick, N.Y.: Amity House, Inc., 1986), 90–102.
4. Walter Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, trans. David Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 25.
5. E. E. Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretation of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971), 250, note 10.
6. David Thomas, *Christian Marriage* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983), 70.
7. Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentaries and Homilies*, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, Vol. 26 (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1957), 23.
8. Theodore Mackin, S.J., *What Is Marriage?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 43.
9. Mackin, *What Is Marriage?*, 43.
10. Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto III, l. 85.

St. Paul's Unwitting Contributions to the Church's Negative Thinking on Marital Intercourse

FIRST CORINTHIANS—CHAPTER 7:1–40

Jesus said very little about marital sexuality. St. Paul had only a few things to say on the subject. He was not the one who promoted a negative attitude toward God's design for human sexuality. But Paul did answer some questions about marriage that were asked by some of his Corinthian converts. That is why the seventh chapter of Paul's initial letter to the Corinthians can be described as "the most important in the entire Bible for the question of marriage and related subjects."¹

But St. Paul hardly intended to provide a treatise on Christian sexuality in those scant forty verses. As things turned out, however, his answers provided the concepts that Christian thinkers would soon change into an attitude of sexual pessimism. Future bishops and theologians would use those forty verses as a quarry that provided material for a series of negative conclusions regarding marital sexuality. Those ecclesiastical interpreters of First Corinthians would fail to take into account the fact that Paul was treating marriage-related questions from the dual perspective of both his rabbinical training and his belief that the world would soon end.

Is It Good "Not to Touch a Woman"?

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he preached a crucified and risen Jesus who would soon return to bring a close to all ordinary history. Apparently a faction of Paul's Corinthian converts wanted to transform the virtue of chastity into a state of total sexual abstinence as a preparation for the return of Jesus. Thus these sexual rigorists held that "[i]t is a good thing for a man not to touch a

woman” (1 Cor. 7:1). In the centuries that followed almost all of the church’s authoritative teachers thought that Paul himself was teaching that “[i]t is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman.”

But Paul was trying to move the Corinthian ascetics away from their proposal to refrain from marital intercourse. Paul had been a Pharisee, knew the book of Genesis, and recognized that the sexual needs and desires of men and women were not evil. Accordingly, Paul sought to resolve the false problem raised by the sexual rigorists in the following way: “[T]he husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband” (1 Cor. 7:3). In marrying, the partners created a mutual “debt” of meeting each other’s sexual needs. For that reason, Paul wrote, “a wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife” (1 Cor. 7:4).

St. Paul was no prude. He taught that those who were married should stay married and continue to enjoy their acts of sexual intercourse. He also recognized that if an unmarried person’s sexual needs were strong, then he or she should marry so as not to burn with sexual passion (1 Cor. 7:9). However, Paul seems to have compromised when he responded to the overzealous faction of Corinthian ascetics. Perhaps he did not want to discourage those who were ready to embrace celibacy while they waited for the world to end. So, after advising married partners not to “deprive each other,” he seems to have offered the married ascetics a face-saving concession: they could occasionally abstain from sexual relations. “Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent, for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another” (1 Cor. 7:5).

Not only did the consent have to be a *joint consent*, but also the *duration of the abstinence was to be limited*. Furthermore, the abstinence was to be undertaken only for prayer. However, in the centuries that followed, the leaders of the western church never ceased to remind married Christians that they had a “duty” to abstain from marital intercourse. Rarely, if ever, did church leaders remind spouses of Paul’s admonition that they should soon return to their marriage bed!

Judaism and Marital Sex

Paul of Tarsus was a rabbi who “was educated strictly in the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3). When Paul responded to the Corinthian ascetics, he may have had in mind the Jewish law of *onah*, which “mandates that sex between a husband and wife take place on a regular basis.”² The law of *onah* was derived from Exodus 21:10: “If he takes another wife, he shall not withhold her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights.” The rabbis interpreted this passage

to mean that frequent intercourse is a man's duty and a woman's right. If a man did not meet his obligation to fulfill the sexual needs of his wife, it was considered a "'hardship for the body' of the woman."³

Judaism, however, wanted more for the married couple than the mere avoidance of hardship. According to the rabbis, "The Torah describes the sex life between Isaac and his wife Rebekah with the term . . . 'to make laugh' (Gen. 26:8). Both husband and wife should maximize their pleasure in the sexual act."⁴

St. Paul was probably familiar with the rabbinical teaching in the *Mishna*: a husband should not refuse to have sexual relations with his wife; the wife should not refuse relations with her husband.⁵ According to the *Mishna* there was one exception to this rule: sexual relations may be put aside in the case of studying the Mosaic Law and then only for a short period of time.⁶ This may have been what Paul had in mind when he permitted the Corinthian ascetics to abstain briefly from sexual intercourse for the sake of prayer (1 Cor. 7:5).

Effects of Paul's Compromise with the Corinthian Ascetics

Paul had stated that sexually active married couples faced fewer dangers to their chastity than married couples who decided to forego all sexual relations. At the same time, Paul provided persons who had a more ascetical bent with a rationale for occasionally abstaining from sexual relations. Perhaps Paul thought he had offered a good compromise.

But it was a flawed compromise. Paul's instructions would have been clear enough if he had stopped after writing, "Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another" (1 Cor. 7:5). Unfortunately, Paul added a warning to his advice: "then return to one another so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control" (1 Cor. 7:5). By pointing out the possibility of giving in to the temptation to commit adultery, Paul seems to have overemphasized the danger of sexual immorality. Paul's linking of Satan with sexual temptation would provide future churchmen with a scriptural rationale for connecting marital intercourse with sin.

A PREFERENCE FOR VIRGINITY?

St. Paul thought that the world as it had been known would soon come to an end. So, in referring to the unmarried and widows, he wrote: "[I]t is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do" (1 Cor. 7:8). Then he added,

“but if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire” (1 Cor. 7:9). Paul’s reasoning was quite realistic. He recognized that men and women have sexual needs that may cause them to burn with passion.

With the passing of decades, the expectation of Jesus’ immediate return faded away. Church leaders began to interpret Paul as if he meant that the married state itself was only for the “incontinent,” that is, for those who could not sexually control themselves. Ironically, even though Paul had expressly permitted men and women to marry on the basis of strong sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:9), the churchmen who came after him concluded that it was sinful for spouses to engage in marital relations for the sake of satisfying their sexual desires! Thus the words of Paul provided future leaders with a rationale that enabled them to divide Christians into two classes—the celibates and the married—with the celibates holding the superior rank.

In his Corinthian correspondence Paul’s ad hoc treatment of sexuality both advocated celibacy and approved of young people marrying to cool the fire of sexual desire. This double legacy “slid imperceptibly into an attitude that viewed marriage itself as no more than a defense against desire.”⁷ As a result, from the first century through the twentieth “a sense of the presence of ‘Satan,’ in the form of a constant and ill-defined risk of lust, lay like a heavy shadow in the corner of every Christian church.”⁸

Serving God with a “Divided Heart”

During the nineteen centuries following St. Paul’s death, churchmen almost never considered the fact that Paul was writing in the context of his understanding that the return of Jesus was imminent. But that perspective is the necessary context for understanding what Paul meant when he wrote: “I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of this world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided.” Paul then noted that the wife would be “anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband” (1 Cor. 7:31–34).

Through the rest of the Catholic Church’s history, the traditional interpretation of this text held that Paul was asserting the superiority of the virginal life over the married life. However, it can be said that Paul’s main concern was not with his converts avoiding marriage as such. His concern was with the way a follower of Christ, whether married or unmarried, should live in what Paul thought were the final days of human history. In view of the impending end of the world, those beginning married life would not be as prepared to meet the Lord as those who remained single and unattached.

Paul's assumption that the world was about to end would eventually prove to be mistaken. However, conclusions based on that mistaken assumption continue to be held to this day.

FLESH VERSUS SPIRIT IN GALATIANS 5

"The most unfortunate mistranslation in English Bibles has been the use of 'flesh' for sexual experience in the Pauline phrase . . . 'according to the flesh.'"⁹ The Greek word for "flesh" (*sarx*) has many meanings. It can be used to refer to our physical body, the self, our flesh, or humanity as a whole. But rarely does the term *sarx* (flesh) denote something sexual.

Paul reminded the Galatians that "the flesh has desires against the Spirit" (Gal. 5:17). He listed such works of the flesh as these: "immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury . . . and the like" (Gal. 5:19–21). It is clear that Paul did not intend to link "the works of the flesh" with sexual sins as such. But Paul's idea of "flesh" (*sarx*) had so many overlapping meanings that Christian leaders were able to project certain anti-sexual biases into Paul's use of that word. Thus many churchmen would interpret Paul's reference to "flesh" as if he were condemning sexual pleasure, even in marital intercourse.

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS: MARRIAGE IN CHRIST

Ephesians clearly demonstrates a positive attitude toward marriage and marital intercourse. If Paul did write this letter,¹⁰ then it seems he had changed his mind about the immediacy of Jesus' return. Here Paul does not advise single persons to remain unmarried. Instead, Paul depicted marriage as an institution blessed by Christ who is present in the union of husband and wife. This view seems to be a Christian extension of the Jewish view that sexual union in marriage is holy because it is intended by God. The author of Ephesians praised marriage as a state of Christ-inspired love: "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. . . . Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her" (Eph. 5:22–25).

Having noted that the husband cherishes his wife like his "own flesh," Paul states that Christ loves the church "because we are members of his body" (5:30). "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (5:31). Paul accomplished two things by relating the marital union of husband and wife (Gen.

2:23–24) to Jesus' love for his church. First, he shifted his readers away from society's patriarchal subordination of women to men. Second, he provided a way to envision marriage in terms of a relationship of equality between husband and wife. Because the bride and groom were married "in Christ," they could perceive their love for each other as a sign or imitation of the love of Christ for his church. Husband and wife were to be mutually subordinate to one another and mutual love was the rationale for that subordination. Thus marital sexuality had a deep spiritual significance.

Married love could be seen as a sign that represents or makes present the loving union of Christ with his church. Marriage thus became a Christian life-style in which God's eternal love and faithfulness, revealed in Jesus Christ, are made historically present.¹¹ Accordingly, marriage could be seen as a sign or sacrament in which the sexual union of husband and wife expressed Christ's love for his church. Here was a foundation for a Christian spirituality of sexuality.

However, the perspective found in Ephesians had no significant impact on the development of a spirituality of marriage. Ignoring the implications that these scriptural verses had for sexually active husbands and wives, churchmen would focus their attention on the idea that divorce was unacceptable because marriage had to be a sign of the unbreakable union between Christ and his church.

SUMMARY

Paul was not the source of the Catholic Church's attitude of pelvic anxiety. When he declared, "Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am" (1 Cor. 7:7), he was a missionary who saw his celibacy as a major asset to his ministry. Since he thought that the end of the world was near, he judged that it would be easier on his converts if those who were not yet married remained unmarried.

However, Paul's response to the ascetical faction of the Corinthian community began a process that contributed to the development of the church's attitude of sexual suspicion. St. Paul's compromise solution, offered to those who wanted to avoid marital relations, would combine with other ideas and events taking place in the early centuries of Christianity's existence. In addition to the misinterpretations of Paul's teachings on marriage, we must take into account the responses of the church's leadership to Gnostic ideas on sexuality, the impact of the philosophical perspectives of Platonism and Stoicism, and the thinking of such famed fathers of the church as Sts. Clement of Alexandria, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine.

NOTES

1. J. He'ring, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth Press, 1962), 157.
2. Rabbi Michael Gold, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 73.
3. Gold, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?*, 73.
4. Gold, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?*, 76.
5. Linwood Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37.
6. Urban, *A Short History of Christian Thought*, 37.
7. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 55.
8. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 55.
9. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 61.
10. While the letter to the Ephesians is attributed to Paul, it was probably written by someone other than Paul. For the sake of brevity I will omit the question of authorship and simply refer to the author of Ephesians as Paul.
11. Walter Kasper, *Theology of Christian Marriage*, trans. David Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, 1980), 30.

Early Church Leaders Defend Marriage Against Gnostic Attacks

REFERENCES TO GNOSTICISM IN THE PASTORAL LETTERS

In the first century there was no system of oversight by bishops and there was no list of inspired Christian scriptures. Thus, toward the latter part of the first century, the leaders of churches founded by Paul, John, Peter, and other missionaries found themselves challenged by rival religious movements, particularly Gnosticism. The Greek word *gnosis* literally means “knowledge,” hence the term “Gnosticism.” Until the second half of the twentieth century, little was known about the way Gnosticism rivaled early Christianity. What was known was scattered in several New Testament books and in a number of references found in the works of the fathers of the church.¹

The Gnostic sects based their special knowledge on a combination of elements drawn from Iranian mythology, Jewish mysticism, and certain Christian themes. The Gnostics claimed to have a special revelation that would save only those to whom that revealed “knowledge” had been given. Gnosticism also incorporated Greek philosophical speculations and made much use of the notion of freedom from the Jewish law as proclaimed in some of Paul’s letters.

The Pauline letters known as First Timothy, Second Timothy, and Titus were written in the 60s and 70s. These letters were addressed to pastors of congregations rather than ecclesial communities. Those who guided the various local churches opposed the Gnostics by exhorting Christians to follow “sound doctrine” and to ignore those “demonic instructions” that prohibited marriage. The first letter of Timothy noted that in the days to come some believers would turn from the faith “by paying attention to deceitful spirits” who would “forbid marriage” (1 Tim. 4:1–3).

Timothy was warned to be wary of teachers claiming to have special knowledge: “Avoid profane babbling and the absurdities of so-called knowledge [*gnosis*]. By professing it, some people have deviated from the faith” (2 Tim. 6:20–21). Stating that women “will be saved through motherhood” (1 Tim. 2:15), the author was probably reminding his readers that women are saved by the very reality rejected by the false teachers—namely, marriage and the continuation of the human race.

THE Gnostic VIEW: CREATION IS EVIL

Much of what we know of Gnosticism comes from the 1945 discovery of the Naj‘ Hammadi texts that were buried in the sands of Egypt. When a comprehensive study of the Gnostic texts became available in the early 1970s, it became apparent that Gnosticism was threatening early Christianity. Gnosticism divided all reality into two realms: the spiritual and the material. “Spiritual reality” was good; “physical reality” was evil. Gnostics claimed that they possessed a secret revelation that put them in communion with an ultimate spiritual reality that was superior to the “Creator God” worshipped by Jews and early Christians. Gnostic leaders taught that the God who created the material world (the God of the book of Genesis) was an evil counterfeit of the ultimate and purely spiritual reality.

Contrary to Genesis’ assertion that material creation is good, the Gnostic myth taught that only spiritual reality had a right to exist. The human body, being rooted in matter, existed only in defiance of the original order of things. It followed that marriage and human sexuality lacked any goodness or significance.

Paradoxical Perspectives on Sexual Intercourse

Never well organized, Gnostic teachings on sexual intercourse were found at both extremes of a wide spectrum. At the extreme right, Gnosticism imposed a rigid abstinence from all sexual activity. At the extreme left, Gnosticism promoted a libertine promiscuity. Both extremes repudiated the sexual dimension of married life.

The right-wing Gnostics believed that both marriage and sexual appetites were the evil products of the evil creator. They felt that they were called to reject the “evil” of marriage as well as the “evil” of satisfying sexual needs. They saw their rigorous self-denial and uncompromising asceticism as proof that they were saved.

At the opposite extreme, the left-wing Gnostics advocated sexual experience as a means of obtaining knowledge. Gnostic followers of Valentinus held that, unlike the “animal man” who was bound by moral law, no moral law bound the “spiritual man.”² These Gnostics committed acts of fornication and adultery, often seducing the women they instructed.³

Christians and Right-Wing Gnosticism

The right-wing Gnostics believed the sexual union of “two in one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) was evil, something that should not have existed. These Gnostics thought that when the evil creation of Sophia (the evil God) was undone, they would become sexless, immaterial creatures. The Encratites are representative of those Christian heretics who accepted the Gnostic view of an evil creation. Believing that sexual experience was “the first cause of death,”⁴ they held that Adam and Eve’s desire to have sexual relations with each other had been brought about by their loss of the gift of immortality. Facing death, the first parents sought to “survive” by having children. Thus sexual intercourse came about as the aftermath of the first sin. This association of the human sexual dimension with the sin of Adam and Eve would hinder the development of a spirituality of sexuality well into the twentieth century.

Arriving in Rome about 140, a man named Marcion converted to Christianity. However, he later accepted the Gnostic teaching that the physical world was created by the “evil God of the Jews.” Like the Encratites and Valentinus, Marcion adopted an attitude of total rejection of God’s creation of sexuality. Thinking that the rejection of sexuality was their way back to true life, the prayer of these Gnostics may well have been “Unsex me, O Lord of the true and spiritual world.”

Left-Wing Gnostic Views

Whereas the right-wing Gnostics advocated the avoidance of all sexual experience, the left-wing Gnostics seemed to advocate participation in sexual experience. While little is known about their liturgies, it seems that sexual orgasm was regarded as a means of revelation. Gnostics were reported as making a parody of the Christian meal, the *agape*, which followed the celebration of the Eucharist. Deploring such activity, Bishop Clement of Alexandria noted that “they have impiously called by the name of communion any common sexual intercourse.”⁵

In sum, both forms of Gnosticism were unable to integrate the sexual dimension into what it means to be a human person. The left-wing Gnostics

and the right-wing Gnostics held one perception in common: they viewed the sexual dimension of humankind as the product of an evil creator. Each group saw human sexuality as something irrational, an aspect of human nature that could not be authentically integrated into human life.

THE DILEMMA Gnosticism PRESENTED TO EARLY CHRISTIANITY

At the time when Christianity was beginning to form an attitude toward marital sexuality, Christian leaders had to contend with a formidable adversary. The two Gnostic extremes caught those leaders in a pincer movement. On one flank, left-wing Gnosticism advocated promiscuity and the rejection of any sexual ethic. On the other flank, the right-wing Gnostics advocated the rejection of both marriage and the sexual dimension of the person.

Left-wing Gnosticism forced the church's leadership to react to the false problem of having to choose between acceptance and rejection of sexual promiscuity. The result was that some Christian leaders fell into the trap of declaring that desiring sexual pleasure was irrational. By so responding to that false problem, Christian leaders found themselves arguing against any enjoyment of sexual pleasure in marriage. Unfortunately, this argument would lead to a spirituality that focused on the renunciation of sexual pleasure.

When dealing with the threat from the right-wing Gnostics, Christian leadership also became entangled in problems. Right-wing Gnosticism's rigorist denial of any goodness in the marital act put the early church in the position of having to justify marital intercourse. Church leaders found themselves working out arguments that could defend the lawfulness of marital union between spouses. This process was further complicated by the fact that the majority of early Christian leaders favored virginity. And so the leaders had great difficulty in perceiving that the pleasurable activity involved in marital relations was good. To work out a strong defense of marriage and marital intercourse would have gone against their own high valuation of virginity.

Three Attitudes

At this point it can be said that in the early church there were at least three possible attitudes regarding marital sexuality. The Jewish attitude is summed up in the first two chapters of Genesis. This attitude of gratitude declares: "Praise God for making us male and female!" At the opposite end of the spectrum is the Gnostic perspective. Viewing Sophia as the evil God who created physical human bodies, the Gnostic believer expressed an attitude

of rejection: “Sexual beings are a mistake and should never have been!” Between these attitudes of gratitude for and rejection of God’s creative design lay a third attitude, an attitude of partial or conditional acceptance. This attitude sighs: “Yes, God created us male and female, but a sexless humankind would have been better.”

With 20/20 hindsight we realize that there was a way out of the double bind presented by the Gnostic perspectives. The early Christian leaders might have defeated the Gnostic attack by strongly affirming the lordship of God, who created the goodness of marital sexuality. That view entails the acceptance of marriage and the acts of sexual bonding as realities intended by God from the beginning (Gen.1:27–28; 2:18–25; Mark 10:2–12). But few of the fathers of the church did that.

THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH “DEFEND” MARRIAGE

The term “father” is the title given to those church leaders whose sermons, homilies, exhortations, teachings, and theological reflections, taken collectively, are regarded as the basis of orthodox Christian doctrine. Some of these early Christian leaders attempted to defend marriage from the Gnostic attacks by focusing on its procreative utility. The outcome of this approach was not very successful because many churchmen valued celibacy to such a degree that they were almost in agreement with right-wing Gnosticism’s rejection of marriage and marital intimacy.

Another drawback to the defense of marriage is found in the fact that many of the fathers favored Stoicism, the Greek philosophical outlook that stressed logic and reasoning while disdaining the affective dimension of human existence. Consequently, many fathers tended to regard marital intercourse “as a regrettable necessity to which the devout Christian ought to turn with reluctance—an unseemly performance, a cause of spiritual insensibility, and a hindrance to devotion.”⁶

Tertullian

The brilliant Tertullian (160–220), although married, perceived marriage as a state in which carnal desire could easily lead people away from God. His idea of a spirituality of sexuality can be seen in his *Exhortation to Chastity*. There he listed three forms of virginity. The ideal form was “virginity from one’s birth.” Next there was “renunciation of sexual connection,” a form of virginity undertaken after a man and a woman contracted marriage. The third form of virginity consisted in “marrying no more after the disjunction of matrimony

by death.”⁷ This final form of virginity was to be accomplished in two stages. In the first stage the husband would try to cut down marital activity to a minimum. Then, when his wife died, he would refrain from remarriage.

Tertullian advised widows “to love the opportunity of continence” and he viewed a second marriage as “repeating the servitude of matrimony,” a rejection of “the liberty offered by the death of one’s spouse.”⁸ Married couples had to live in a state of life where marital relations were expected. After the death of a spouse the survivor was spiritually better off because he or she was no longer subject to the Pauline requirement of rendering the “marriage debt.” Since second marriages were “detrimental to faith” and “obstructive to holiness,”⁹ it is safe to say that Tertullian saw scant spiritual goodness in being married.

Origen: Church Father and Christian Platonist

Born and raised in Alexandria, Egypt, Origen (185–254) was a brilliant Christian scholar. He had accepted Plato’s idealism, a philosophical outlook that considered objects perceived by our senses as pale shadows of what really exists in the eternal world of ideas. Accordingly, Origen regarded the tangible delights of touch, sight, and hearing as dull, physical sensations that distracted a person from the real joys of a more spiritual existence beyond the material world. The intimacy and pleasures of family life were, according to Origen, merely blurred echoes of those far more real delights reserved for “spiritual” persons who never succumbed to numbing sensual experience.¹⁰

In another step away from the attitude of acceptance of God’s creation of us as male and female, Origen mistakenly concluded that God never intended that human beings would engage in sexual intercourse. It seems that Origen proposed a dualism that despised the body while exalting the soul. Origen spoke of the virginal body as an appropriate “temple of God” and opined that “Adam had a body in Paradise; but in Paradise he did not ‘know’ Eve.”¹¹

Following in Origen’s Platonic footsteps, succeeding generations of theologians would continue to ignore the biblical assertion that God created men and women so they could unite sexually (Gen. 2:23–24). If the virginal body was a divine and eternal ideal, it would follow that a sexless spirituality would be the appropriate spirituality for Christian believers.

SAINT CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

St. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215), a “father of the church” and a married man, was one of the first Christian authors to defend marriage in a way

that directly challenged the right-wing Gnostic teaching that marital intercourse was evil. Arriving at Alexandria in Egypt about the year 180, Clement studied under Pantaenus, who was both a devout Christian and an enthusiastic Stoic philosopher. Clement also embraced Stoicism, but he differed with many of his celibate contemporaries on an important point. He thought that marital intercourse, if performed for procreation and not pleasure, was the Christian ideal. Thus, sometime toward the end of the second century, St. Clement prepared the groundwork for a spiritualized, Stoical view of marriage.

Founded by Zeno (ca. 334–262 BCE), Stoicism was a philosophical outlook that was highly esteemed by the elite of the Greco-Roman world. Stoics aimed at a balanced life through the strict exercise of reason. Clement wholeheartedly identified himself with the Stoic ideal and wanted Christians to approach marital intercourse “in the Stoic manner, as a conscious action, undertaken in the service of God.”¹²

While early church leaders thought it was better to avoid marriage, they did not believe that marriage was a corruption created by an evil God. So these churchmen sought to find a way out of the bind fashioned by the right-wing Gnostics who renounced marital relations as being evil and the left-wing Gnostics who held that sexual promiscuity provided revelatory experience. Clement believed that the rationally “controlled marriage” was the “middle position”¹³ that provided a way out of the Gnostic bind.

Clement’s “middle position” was straightforward: marital intercourse was justified by the intention to procreate a child. This view can also be viewed as a compromise between the attitudes of total acceptance and total rejection of the human sexual dimension. Clement arrived at this compromise by reworking St. Paul’s concession to the hardline Corinthian ascetics (1 Cor. 7: 5). Mistakenly thinking that Paul was imposing a reproductive rationale for marital intercourse, it appears that Clement interpreted Paul in the light of his Stoic principles. He concluded, “if the married couple agree to be continent [agree to abstain], it helps them pray; if they agree with reverence to have sexual relations, it leads them to beget children.”¹⁴

When some right-wing Gnostics read, “I have just married a woman and therefore I cannot come” (Luke 14:20), they concluded that marriage caused people to reject the invitation to the wedding feast of the Kingdom of God. Combining Stoic morality and Christian reverence for celibacy, Clement held that this text did not condemn marriage as such, but those married persons who sought sexual pleasure in marital intercourse. The person who said “I married a wife and therefore I cannot come” served as “an example to convict those who for pleasure’s sake were abandoning the divine command.”¹⁵ Having raised the Stoic rule to the level of “divine command,” Clement unknowingly constructed a barrier to the development of a theology of married life.

The Stoic Pattern Established in Christianity

Some right-wing Gnostics had argued that marital intercourse and procreation were evil because Paul had written: “Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: ‘It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman.’”¹⁶ Neither the Gnostics nor St. Clement realized that Paul was referring to an opinion held by certain Corinthian ascetics. Putting a Stoic interpretation on the text, Clement opined that Paul was advising the married to engage in the procreative act while renouncing the enjoyment of sexual pleasure. According to Clement, Paul meant to speak “not to those who chastely use marriage for procreation alone, but to those who were desiring to go beyond procreation, lest the adversary should arise a stormy blast and arouse desire for alien pleasures.”¹⁷

Thus, according to Clement’s treatise “On Marriage,” Satan was the source of a couple’s desire for sexual delight (“alien pleasures”). In time, Clement’s linking of “alien” sexual pleasure with Satan would become a major theme in the development of the church’s doctrine on marital intercourse.

Furthermore, when Clement considered the commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” he interpreted it as God’s commanding husbands to engage in intercourse “only for the purpose of begetting children.”¹⁸ Clement pointed out that in all the Jewish scriptures there was not a single instance in which “one of the ancients approached a pregnant woman.”¹⁹ Succumbing to his adoption of Stoicism, Clement held that the avoidance of sexual relations from the time one’s wife became pregnant to the time of the child’s weaning was “a law of nature given by God.”²⁰

Higher Moral Standards for Married Christians

St. Clement of Alexandria, as well as other fathers of the church, seems to have been overly influenced by his Greco-Roman culture. Stoic ideals and attitudes were firmly established in the philosophical vanguard of Greece and Rome. Christian leaders were trying to impress Greco-Roman society by demonstrating the high moral tone of their religion. It is not surprising that Christian bishops and theologians adopted the ideas and attitudes of those pagan philosophers who were “the best and the brightest” of the second and third centuries.

When it came to the Stoic rule of engaging in sexual intercourse only to produce children, some writers bragged that Christians were even more rational than the Stoics! Before Clement began his teaching career, others had attempted to demonstrate Christian one-upmanship in moral behavior. St. Justin (d. 165) had declared, “We Christians either marry only to produce children, or, if we refuse to marry, are completely continent.”²¹ In 177 Athen-

agoras addressed his “Supplication” to Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Employing agricultural imagery to make his point, Athenagoras declared, “As the husbandman, throwing the seed into the ground, awaits the harvest, not sowing more upon it, so the procreation of children is the measure of our indulgence in appetite.”²² In short, to be a good Christian, one had to be a good Stoic. Thus Clement asserted: “The human ideal of continence, I mean that which is set forth by Greek philosophers, teaches that one should fight desire and not be subservient to it so as to bring it to practical effect. But our ideal is not to experience desire at all.”²³

St. Clement’s stoically inspired outlook is also revealed in his moral imperative: “We should do nothing from desire.”²⁴ With hindsight we can see Clement’s mistake. He wanted to separate sexual desire from the marital act. This separation would lead to this conflicted conclusion: The man who marries should do so “for the sake of begetting children” while practicing “continence so that it is not desire he feels for his wife.”²⁵

THE LEGACY OF ST. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement advocated that the Christian husband should go about begetting “children with a chaste and controlled will.”²⁶ Here the basic flaw is a lack of balance. Stoicism had embraced humanity’s rationality while disdaining the emotional component of human living. Thus Clement and the Christian leaders who followed his perspective were unable to find any real value in the emotional or pleasurable aspects that are the normal accompaniments of the marital act. Clement rejected as “vulgar and plebeian” any efforts to seek pleasure in the marital act.²⁷ Although he praised the values of mutual assistance and support, he also held “that ‘voluptuous joy’ had no proper place in Christian life.”²⁸ In sum, “Christian couples will never have intercourse simply because they enjoy it and each other; they must make love only to beget a child.”²⁹

Clement of Alexandria was one of the most prolific writers in the first three centuries of the Christianity’s existence. The impact of his writings carried straight through the history of the Catholic Church. His rejection of sexual pleasure became embedded in the church’s developing doctrine regarding the sexual dimension of wedded life. As Peter Brown pointed out, his unyielding insistence that marital intercourse ought to take place only for the begetting of children blighted the blossom of married lovemaking.

In the years that followed, procreation became the all-important value. The other aspects that might accompany marital intimacy, such as pleasuring, companionship, sexual bonding, and mutual self-giving, were disregarded.

Christian teachers and theologians could not find any significance in marital intercourse when the couple was infertile or when the woman was pregnant or had reached menopause. In addition, such issues as sexual pleasure, sexual positions, frequency of marital relations, sexual foreplay, women's orgasms, and situations in which another pregnancy would seriously endanger a woman's health were not addressed.

It is ironic that the positive things Clement wrote about the spiritual life of married Christians never gained the attention of churchmen who lived afterward. Clement's efforts to demonstrate that married Christians were worthy to serve as leaders came to naught. By the year 300 there were about five million Christians living in the Roman Empire. However, a tiny minority of celibate leaders had "argued so vehemently" for sexual renunciation that Clement's strongly voiced advocacy of a spiritual life for the married was drowned out by those whose ideal was "the human body untouched by sexual experience."³⁰ Marriage became a second-class lifestyle for those Christians who were not able to "contain" their sexual desires.

NOTES

1. The church fathers were those writers who were the early defenders of the Christian faith. Some of the more well-known defenders of the faith, often called "apologists," were Ignatius of Antioch (d. 107), Irenaeus (130–200), Clement of Alexandria (150–215), Tertullian (160–220), and Hippolytus (d. 235).

2. Irenaeus, *The Pretended Gnosis*, 1.6, PG 7:506–10, cited in John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library), 90.

3. Irenaeus, *The Pretended Gnosis*, 1.6, PG 7:506–10, cited in Noonan, 90.

4. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 86.

5. Clement of Alexandria cited in John Ernest Leonard Oulton and Henry Chadwick, "On Marriage," art. 27, *Alexandrian Christianity, The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. II (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 52–53.

6. Sherwin Bailey, *Common Sense About Sexual Ethics: A Christian View* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 29.

7. Tertullian, "Exhortation to Chastity" in *Ante Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B. Eerdmans, reprinted 1972), 50.

8. Tertullian, "To His Wife," chapter 7, 43.

9. Tertullian, "To His Wife," 43

10. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 173.

11. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 175.

12. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 133.

13. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 81, 78.

14. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 81, 78.

15. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 90, 83.
16. 1 Cor. 7:1.
17. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 96, 85.
18. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 71, 73.
19. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 72, 73.
20. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 72, 73.
21. Justin, *Apology for Christians*, 1.29, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 101.
22. Athenagoras, *Legation on Behalf of Chrsitans*, 33, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 101.
23. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 57, 66.
24. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 58, 67.
25. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 58, 67.
26. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 58, 67.
27. Clement of Alexandria, "On Marriage," art. 107, 91.
28. James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 67.
29. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 67.
30. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 138–39.

Augustine: The Man Who Carved in Stone the Church's Conditional Acceptance of Marital Intercourse

With the exception of certain biblical authors, Augustine of Hippo is the most influential writer in the history of Christianity. He integrated Platonist philosophy with Christian thought and plumbed the depths of the union of God and the human soul. But Augustine's rejection of his own sexual experience and his doctrinal debates with the Manichees, Pelagius, and others, as well as his skewed interpretations of the book of Genesis, all combined to produce a distorted perspective on marital sexuality. Combining that distorted perspective with his developing theory of original sin, Augustine produced a systematic theology that gave the Catholic Church her dominant theological perspective on marriage. The trouble was that Augustine was unable to recognize that the erotic aspect of human sexuality is good.

AUGUSTINE'S "LOVE LIFE"

Augustine was born in North Africa in 354. His parents, recognizing their son's intellectual gifts, sent him to obtain an education in the art of public speaking, a common path to wealth and political power. Then, from 371 to 374, between the ages of seventeen and twenty, Augustine studied at Carthage where he thought of himself as being "in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust."¹

Although some regard the account of his youth in his *Confessions* as the product of a promiscuous life, it is more accurate to see Augustine as a normal young male. About the age of eighteen he entered into a stable sexual relationship with a woman. For twelve years, from 372 to 384, Augustine was faithful to his partner and she was faithful to him. Augustine then became a Manichaean believer and remained such for eleven years.

In 384 his mother Monica arranged a marriage with a young woman from an influential Roman family. Augustine then sent his concubine of twelve years back to northern Africa: “The woman with whom I had been living was torn from my side as an obstacle to my marriage and this was a blow which crushed my heart to bleeding, because I loved her dearly.”² Since it would be two years before his future bride was of legal age, Augustine took another mistress. Thinking of himself as “a slave of lust,” Augustine regarded his sexual desire as a sickness: “This meant that the disease of my soul would continue unabated.”³

When Augustine looked back on his twelve years of cohabitation with the woman he professed to love “dearly,” he perceived no goodness in their sexual relationship. He simply dismissed their long sexual partnership by stating that he chose her “for no special reason but that my restless passions had alighted on her.”⁴ Augustine moralized: “I found out by my own experience the difference between the restraint of the marriage alliance, contracted for the purpose of having children, and a bargain struck for lust.”⁵ This negative assessment of his twelve-year relationship seems to express the pessimistic attitude that would guide his theological speculations on marital sexuality.

CHRISTIAN AND THEOLOGIAN

In 384, at the age of thirty, Augustine went to teach in Milan, a thriving center of Christian Platonism. Augustine began the process of becoming a Christian and was baptized at the Easter Vigil in 387. Instead of marrying the young woman to whom he was engaged, Augustine became a monk and devoted himself to writing and study. In his book *On the Morals of the Manichees*, he attacked the religion he had professed for eleven years.

In 391 he became a priest. Five years later he became the bishop of Hippo. Between 397 and 400 Augustine wrote his *Confessions*. About 401 he produced his extremely influential treatise *The Good of Marriage*. Between 400 and his death in 431 Augustine wrote deep theological treatises, commented on the Scriptures, and engaged in various doctrinal controversies. Augustine’s opponents were the Manichees, the Donatists, Pelagius, Jovinian, Julian, and any other whom he deemed to be heretical. By the time Augustine died his writing achievements had surpassed all the fathers of the church, including Origen.

THE RELIGION OF MANI

Mani (216–277) was born in Babylon. By 240 he had combined elements of Persian dualism, Buddhist doctrines, Gnostic beliefs, Jewish legends, and

various Christian teachings into the Manichaean religion. In 277 Mani was put to death. Proclaiming its own scriptures and offering universal salvation, Mani's religion rivaled Christianity. Mani's followers claimed that they had a rational explanation for everything. In 372 Augustine's preoccupation with the origin of evil drew him into the Manichaean church where he remained for the next eleven years.

Manichaeism held that from the beginning there existed two opposing realms, light (goodness) and darkness (evil). Manichaeism was both dualistic and materialistic. It held that everything in the universe was composed of matter. The good matter was composed of light, which was clean, pure, bright, beautiful, and good. Evil was made of whatever was dark, dirty, and impure. In Mani's mind "sex and the dark were intimately associated"; his followers "regarded 'the lower half of the body' as the disgusting work of the devil, the very prince of darkness."⁶

According to Mani, there were three epochs or ages. The first epoch was the period in which light and darkness coexisted in separate parts of the cosmos. The second age began when the realm of darkness invaded the realm of light. Human existence began during the second age. In the future third age the two realms would be eternally separated. The purpose of Mani's religion was to bring about that third age.

According to the Manichaean mythology, light produced "primal man" to battle the invading darkness. But darkness defeated primal man, and the demons of darkness consumed his soul. Thus the demons ingested the five luminous elements—light, wind, fire, water, and air. Then the two master devils devoured all the lesser demons that had ingested the five luminous elements that were in the soul of primal man. This act of cosmic cannibalism enabled the two master devils to assimilate all the light that had been captured at the beginning of the second epoch.

Containing the luminous elements in their bodies, the two master devils copulated sexually, producing Adam and Eve. Thus the bodies of Adam and Eve were made of dark, evil matter.⁷ But Adam's body was not completely vile. Particles of light ended up in Adam's semen. To prevent light from eventually escaping from Adam, the devils tricked Adam and Eve into committing the evil deed of procreation. From that moment the particles of light would be passed from generation to generation through acts of intercourse and the resulting conceptions. The bodies of human beings would serve forever as dark prisonhouses for the particles of light.

Mani claimed to receive a revelation declaring that the human soul could become conscious of its primal origins in the kingdom of light. Since procreation was the "invention" of the two master devils, Mani's ethical system held that procreation was the worst possible sin. Salvation would come only

when the human race died out. Mani divided his Manichaean believers into two classes, the “elect” and the “hearers.” The elect lived their lives in strict abstinence from sexual intercourse, meat, and wine. The hearers were permitted to have sexual intercourse as long as they did not procreate children. To avoid conception the hearers were to abstain from intercourse during those times of a woman’s cycle when she was likely to conceive. Augustine was in this group of sexually active Manichaean hearers.

The Manichaean Challenge to Christianity

The confrontation between Gnosticism and early church leaders had contributed to Christianity’s adoption of the Stoic ethic. The utility of procreation justified the marital act. But just as church leaders were beginning to defeat the Gnostics, Manichaeism appeared on the scene. The new religion delivered a frontal attack on the Christian defense of marriage. In an ironic turnabout, the religion of Mani declared that the non-use of sexual intercourse was useful for it would bring about the extinction of the human race.

This Manichaean composite of dualism, Gnosticism, and Christian heresy presented the leaders of the early church with an opportunity to work out a new rationale for accepting the sexual dimension of marriage. That rationale was present in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Marital intercourse is good because God created us male and female and then blessed us with the gift of fertility. Jesus himself had expressed this attitude of total acceptance of God’s design. Furthermore, the author of Ephesians had compared the love expressed by husband and wife to Christ’s love for his church. But church leaders did not rethink their approach to marital sexuality. Augustine of Hippo was the principal reason why they did not.

Augustine: Opponent of the Manichees

Augustine’s *On the Morals of the Manichaeans* attacked his former co-religionists by arguing that marriage did not exist among Mani’s followers. Augustine’s rationale was the standard rule that had been adopted by church leaders—namely, that marital intercourse should be undertaken only for the purpose of procreating children. Since the Manichees abstained from sexual intercourse when the woman would be fertile, Augustine declared: “This proves that you approve of having a wife, not for the procreation of children, but for the gratification of passion.”⁸ It was a simple argument. Because the Manichaean “wife” did not try to conceive, she was not really a wife. Augustine summarized: “Where there is a wife there must be marriage. But there

is no marriage where motherhood is not in view; therefore neither is there a wife.”⁹

While the Manichees rejected procreation as an evil to be avoided, they approved of seeking of sexual delight as an acceptable purpose for sexual intercourse. Augustine reversed these two elements, arguing that sexual pleasure was the “evil” to be avoided while procreation was the only acceptable purpose. Without the procreative purpose the marital act was merely an act undertaken “for the gratification of passion.” Augustine’s conclusion would eventually become the Catholic Church’s basic doctrine regarding the marital act.

MARRIAGE: AN OBSTACLE TO RATIONAL LIVING

Writing as a Christian bishop, Augustine looked back at his experiences and concluded that every act of intercourse with his mistress was sinful because it was undertaken not for procreation but “for the gratification of passion.”¹⁰ Augustine found nothing spiritual, rational, or gracious in his acts of sexual relating with his partner. This negative view of sexual intercourse is exemplified in a passage from his *Soliloquies*, a series of imaginary dialogues between himself and a respondent called “Reason.” At one point “Reason” asked Augustine, “What about a wife? Would not it be nice sometimes to have a beautiful, modest, compliant woman, one who is well-read or whom you could easily teach, one without too much of a dowry . . . but with enough that she would not be bothersome to your leisure; would that not be nice?”¹¹

Replying to “Reason,” Augustine declared: “However much you wish to embellish her and pile on every good quality, I have decided that there is nothing I should avoid as much as sex.”¹² He opined that relations with a woman degraded the masculine soul: “For I know that nothing so debases a man’s soul as the charms of a woman and that bodily contact which is so much a part of having a wife.”¹³ The same sexual pessimism is found in Augustine’s parody of the words of Genesis 2:23—“and the two of them become one flesh.” He wrote: “In intercourse man becomes all flesh.”¹⁴

No Sex in Paradise

The accounts of God’s creation of human sexuality spoke of marital intercourse as a gift to be accepted with joy (Gen. 1:26; 2:18–25). Augustine consistently rejected the notion that God intended human beings to experience joy in sexual pleasure. For nearly forty years, from the publication of his work, *On the Morals of the Manichaeans* in 388, to the completion of his masterwork,

The City of God, in 426, Augustine had difficulty in understanding how sexual intercourse was related to God's plan for the human race.

Between 401 and 416 Augustine wrote *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. He initially speculated that Adam and Eve did not participate in sexual intercourse until after they had sinned and were driven from Paradise. Augustine wrote: "Why, then, did they not have intercourse until they had left Paradise?" He answered: "The reason is that soon after the creation of the woman, before they had relations, they committed the sin because of which they were destined to die."¹⁵ Augustine also speculated that the first man and woman were waiting for God's order to engage in intercourse.¹⁶ Augustine had falsely assumed that God created Adam and Eve without sexual desire for each other. On the basis of that assumption Augustine proposed that sexual desire was not an aspect of God's design for male and female: "For why should they not await God's authorization for this, since there was no drive of concupiscence coming from rebellious flesh?"¹⁷ With such thoughts Augustine concluded that sexual intercourse was "fundamentally alien to the original definition of humanity."¹⁸

Another Idea: Before Sin No Desire or Pleasure in Intercourse

Augustine next proposed that Adam and Eve *did* engage in some form of sexual relations while they were in Paradise but there was no experience of sexual pleasure. The nature of sexual intercourse changed only after Adam and Eve had sinned. Before Adam and Eve committed sin their sexual acts were physiologically under the control of their wills. Adam simply willed his erection; Eve willed her vagina to accept him. However, after they committed sin, their acts of sexual intercourse were corrupted by passion and desire. Thus, the erotic element of sexual desire existed not because of the way God created us male and female, but because of sin. Augustine described that sexual desire as "concupiscence."¹⁹

The biblical text "I will make him a helpmate" (Gen. 2:18) deeply puzzled St. Augustine. He could not figure out how a woman could be a helpmate to Adam. In the Garden of Paradise there was no need to till the earth, and, even if there were such a need, "a male helper would be better" than a weak woman. Augustine also thought that a male would better solve the problem of solitude: "How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together."²⁰

Augustine further speculated: "Surely no one will say that God was able to make from the rib of the man only a woman and not also a man if He had wished to do so."²¹ One could conclude that if God had created humans according to Augustine's speculation, helping companionship would have consisted in male friendship and no sex. However much Augustine wanted to

exclude the human sexual dimension from the Garden of Paradise, his quest was defeated by the biblical verse that referred to Eve as a “helpmate” (Gen. 2:18). Augustine yielded with these words: “I do not see in what sense the woman was made a helper for the man if not for the sake of bearing children.”²² A few pages later Augustine reasserted his conclusion: “I do not see, therefore, in what other way the woman was made to be the helper of the man if procreation is eliminated, and I do not understand why it should be eliminated.”²³ Genesis 2:18 persuaded Augustine to accept the idea that Adam and Eve had engaged in sexual intercourse before they had committed sin.

Thus Augustine parted company with those who thought there was no sex in Paradise. But Augustine then put forward a novel theological idea that has haunted western Christianity ever since. He proposed that the dynamics of sexual arousal and sexual desire did not exist before the first sin. Such was Augustine’s theory of how sexual desire or “concupiscence”²⁴ appeared on the human scene.

Augustine viewed concupiscence as the source of all addictions: money, power, success, pride, and especially sexual pleasure. Since concupiscence was seen as such, Augustine reasoned that it did not come from God. Therefore, concupiscence had to come from the first sin. Later on the bishop of Hippo conjectured that concupiscence is passed on to everyone through the original sin that infects all people. Augustine’s theory of a human nature corrupted by concupiscence became so deeply embedded in the minds of churchmen that it would take fifteen centuries before they recognized that spouses could passionately express their sexual love for each other without being guilty of “giving in” to lustful concupiscence.

Although the desire for sexual pleasure is normal and natural, Augustine’s youthful experiences and his eccentric interpretation of the Scriptures had convinced him that human sexual desire originated in sin. Thus he set the stage for his unwarranted assumption that God created human beings without sexual desire. It followed that, while in Eden, Adam and Eve did not engage in sexual intimacy out of desire for deep communion with one another, but only out of the desire for a third party, a child. If Adam and Eve had not sinned, they and all their offspring would have passionlessly engaged in sexual intercourse only to generate children. Augustine’s scenario for a romantic evening in Paradise would have had Adam asking, “Eve, my dear, shall we do something to increase the species tonight?”

The “Use” of Concupiscence

Genesis and Jesus had asserted that creation is good and both accepted marriage and sexual intercourse as aspects of God’s creation. However,

the church fathers began to defend marriage from the attacks of Gnostics, Manichees, and other heretical groups by asserting that marriage itself was good, but the sexual dynamic was not. Thus they split the one from the other by proposing that God did not intend that human beings would experience sexual pleasure in their marital acts. By the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine set in stone the Stoic doctrine that sexual intercourse had only one acceptable purpose: procreating children. We know that Augustine was aware that some people disagreed with the idea that procreation was the sole legitimate purpose of marital relations. He mentioned that in all his conversations with men who were married or had been married, he had never met a husband who claimed that he engaged in marital relations only when hoping to conceive a child.²⁵

According to Augustine's outlook on married sex, there was very little that was good in such activity and a lot that was bad. This produced a problem: If marital sex is morally tainted, then how can marriage be good? Augustine walked a high tightrope to show that marriage can be good even though it harbors concupiscence, one of the evil effects of the first sin. In two of his treatises, *The Good of Marriage* and *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine tried to demonstrate that marriage was good while showing that sexual desire was bad. So Augustine proposed this compromise: "For from the fact that incontinence [experiencing sexual pleasure] is an evil it does not follow that marriage is not good, even when by it an incontinent [sexually active] couple are united in the flesh."²⁶

Augustine justified his theological analysis of marriage and concupiscence by two maneuvers. First he developed new reasons that explained why marriage is useful. In his second maneuver Augustine made provision for the good use of the evil that is concupiscence.²⁷ The "good use" of concupiscence required husband and wife to budget their sexual appetites by using those appetites only when procreation was the purpose of their sexual union.

In *Marriage and Concupiscence* Augustine argued that a couple's desire for privacy during their marital intimacies was a demonstration of the couple's shame. Since people were not ashamed of what is good, the experience of shame served as an admission of the couple's sinful activity.²⁸ The cause of that shame was "the evil of the sex appetite."²⁹ However, Augustine conditionally salvaged the legitimacy of marital relations by distinguishing between shameful acts of intercourse on the one hand, and "the good of praiseworthy relations from which children are begotten" on the other.³⁰ His conditional acceptance of marital sexuality is revealed in this telling distinction: "Those who use the shameful sex appetite licitly are making good use of evil."³¹ The reference to the licit (lawful) use of "the shameful sex appetite" is Augustine's adaptation of the Stoic rule: One may rightly engage in

marital intercourse only for the sake of conceiving a child. Spouses engaging in marital relations for any other reason than procreation were “making evil use of evil.”³²

Even before Augustine devised his theology of concupiscence, earlier Christian authors had, “at least implicitly, connected sexuality with evil.”³³ Augustine not only argued against the possibility that sexual pleasure was an aspect of God’s creation, he also explicitly connected sexual pleasure with evil. This connection would make it all but impossible for succeeding generations of churchmen to develop a spirituality of marital sexuality.

AUGUSTINE WRITES *THE GOOD OF MARRIAGE*

About 401 Augustine began to respond to the writings of Jovinian and St. Jerome. Jerome was actively promoting virginity by demonizing marriage. On the other hand, Jovinian (d. 406) was a Milanese monk who had taught that people in the married state were equal in status to those who had embraced the state of virginity.³⁴ Jovinian’s teaching did not square with that of Bishop Ambrose of Milan. He taught that “[m]arriage is honorable but celibacy is more honorable; that which is good need not be avoided, but that which is better should be chosen.”³⁵

Pope³⁶ Siricius (384–399) also faulted Jovinian. Siricius was trying to rid the Catholic Church of married priests. He was of the opinion that those who celebrated the Eucharist ought to be free from “the stain” of sexual intercourse.³⁷ Basing his opinion on Romans 8:8, “those who are in the flesh cannot see God,” Pope Siricius concluded that virginity was superior to the married state. Because Jovinian disagreed with this hierarchy of holiness, he was deemed a heretic.

St. Jerome’s *Adversus Jovinianum* exalted the state of virginity by debasing the married state. He declared that the “dirt of marriage” could barely be washed away by blood that was shed in martyrdom.³⁸ Regarding marital acts, Jerome declared: “The activities of marriage itself, if they are not modest . . . so that the only intention is children, are filth and lust.”³⁹ “Dirt” is the word that summed up Jerome’s opinion of every marital act that lacked a procreative purpose. It might be noted that in his youth Jerome experienced a great deal of sexual promiscuity.

So it was that various churchmen attacked Jovinian for asserting that people in the married state were on equal footing with those who chose virginity. But no one accused Jerome of heresy when he expressed his detestation for marital intercourse. Augustine seems to have recognized that Jerome went too far. Augustine’s book *The Good of Marriage* may be seen as an attempt

to steer a course between Jerome's debasement of marriage and Jovinian's placing the married state on a par with vowed virginity.

Offspring: The "First Good of Marriage"

We saw that in the second and third centuries the fathers of the church defended marriage from the right-wing Gnostics by stressing the usefulness of sexual intercourse in procreating children. At the beginning of the fifth century Augustine came to the defense of marriage by adding the usefulness of fidelity and the usefulness of sacrament to the long-accepted usefulness of offspring. The heart of his book became the promotion of the three "goods" of marriage—namely, "offspring, fidelity and sacrament."⁴⁰

The first "good" or usefulness of marriage is offspring: "For what food is to the conservation of the man, this sexual intercourse is unto the conservation of the race."⁴¹ By comparing eating for survival with marital intercourse, Augustine denied the value of the sexual dimension of the relationship between husband and wife. Thus the conception of children would be "the one alone worthy fruit . . . of the sexual intercourse."⁴²

By restricting marital intercourse to one "worthy fruit," Augustine left a difficult legacy to married couples. No other aspect of the marital act could be described as "worthy." Therefore, when a husband engaged in marital relations during those times when his wife was pregnant, nursing, or menstruating, the husband or the wife or both were seen as seeking the unworthy fruit of sexual pleasure. Augustine set a disastrous precedent. From his day to the twentieth century most churchmen regarded marital intercourse as sinful whenever husband and wife "indulged" in marital intimacy without the intention to conceive a child.

Fidelity: The "Second Good of Marriage"

According to Augustine, there were two forms of marital intercourse, the necessary and the unnecessary. The only "necessary" marital intercourse was intercourse for begetting. Such "intercourse for begetting is free from blame, and itself is alone worthy of marriage."⁴³ "Unnecessary" or blameworthy intercourse was simply lust: "But that which goes beyond this necessity, no longer follows reason, but lust."⁴⁴

Fidelity was the second good use of marriage. Augustine found his scriptural warrant for the good of "fidelity" in that crucial seventh chapter of First Corinthians. Paul had written that "because of cases of immorality every man should have his own wife, and every woman her own husband. The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward

her husband” (1 Cor. 7:2–3). But Augustine misinterpreted Paul’s reference to marital duty as a concession to the “evil habit” of spouses who desired marital relations without the intention to procreate. Augustine derived that conclusion from his view that intercourse “for the purpose of satisfying concupiscence . . . is a venial sin” while “adultery or fornication . . . is a mortal sin.”⁴⁵ Thus a wife was not only useful for generating children but she was also useful for providing her husband with a certain kind of sexual outlet. She enabled her husband to commit light sins of intercourse for the purpose of experiencing sexual delight instead of committing the more deadly sins of seeking delight in fornication or adultery. The misreading of Paul had provided Augustine with a strange rationale for the good of fidelity: “Although evil habits impel them to such intercourse yet marriage guards them from adultery or fornication.”⁴⁶

Sacrament: The “Third Good of Marriage”

In Augustine’s day, marriage did not rank as a sacrament in the same sense that baptism or the Eucharist was. By “sacrament” Augustine meant that marriage was a sign of an unbreakable commitment. By reason of sacrament “it is unlawful for one who leaves her husband, even when she has been put away, to be married to another, so long as her husband lives.”⁴⁷ Functioning in this way, the good of sacrament prevented married persons from leaving their mates in order to marry someone else. Thus, “sacrament” was useful in stabilizing society.

In developing his view of the three goods of marriage, Augustine overlooked what many contemporary theologians see as another “good,” namely, the good of spouses sharing communion in sexual pleasure. Augustine saw marital delight as evil. Therefore he concluded that marital intercourse could be totally excluded from marriage without doing any harm to the marriage itself. Augustine found the three goods of marriage exemplified in the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph: “This is why I said the full number of the three goods of marriage is found in what I declared by the Gospel was a marriage: ‘Faithfulness, because no adultery; offspring, our Lord Christ; and sacrament, because no divorce.’”⁴⁸

Procreation Is Good, but Platonism Is Better

Augustine had his own hierarchy of moral values. Engaging in intercourse with one’s spouse because of sexual need and/or desire occupied the bottom rung of Augustine’s ladder of marital morality. This was a slight or “light sin.” Higher up was intercourse to generate children, exemplifying the good

use of the evil of concupiscence. Here there was no sin. Then came the top rung. Couples engaging in “angelic exercise” had “freedom from all sexual intercourse.”⁴⁹ Augustine proposed that “continence from all intercourse is certainly better than marital intercourse itself which takes place for the sake of begetting children.”⁵⁰ The good of offspring was expendable when the greatest good of avoiding marital intercourse was chosen!

Adapting Platonic modes of thought, Augustine offered married couples some suggestions for ridding the elements of sexual desire and sexual pleasure from their lives. He proposed that a person’s love of heavenly realities would develop in direct proportion to a person’s hatred of earthly realities. Since there would be no sexual intercourse in the next life, Augustine concluded the virtuous husband would do well to hate sexual union in this earthly life. The bishop of Hippo wanted the husband to “love” the spouse created by God while hating “the corruptible and mortal relationship and marital intercourse.”⁵¹ St. Augustine reiterated: “In other words, it is evident that he loves her insofar as she is a human being, but he hates her under the aspect of wifehood.”⁵²

AUGUSTINE: “THE FATHER OF PELVIC ANXIETY”

Augustine had devised the opposite of a spirituality of sexuality. He could not or would not see the point of the biblical refrain “and God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31). The idea of marriage as a partnership in which sexual tenderness played a role is totally absent from Augustine’s writings. In his opinion, married persons who loved passionately exceeded “the bounds of moderation” and heaped up “the uncleanness of a more bestial intemperance.”⁵³

Augustine wanted a strict control over the act of marital intercourse “lest there be indulgence beyond what suffices for generating offspring.”⁵⁴ Marital chastity demanded an end to spousal intercourse when a wife was “no longer able to conceive on account of age.”⁵⁵ In sum, the only time marital intercourse was good or lawful was the one instance when the married couple used their marriage bed as a place to conceive a child.

The Pelagian Controversy and Original Sin

Pelagius (350–425), a British monk teaching in Rome, had proposed an optimistic view of human nature that included human freedom and a capacity for doing good. Pelagius publicly disagreed with Augustine’s pessimistic portrait of humankind badly crippled by sin. In 415 Augustine attacked. By this time

in his life Augustine had become a battle-hardened foe of heretics. He had defeated the Manichees and crushed the Donatists. When Pelagius began to oppose Augustine's personal experience and interpretations of the Bible, Augustine set out to destroy this challenger.

Although Tertullian (d. 225) had used the term "original sin," Christianity had no specific doctrine of original sin from the first century through the fourth. The New Testament clearly stated that the purpose of baptism was to forgive the sins a person had committed prior to becoming a Christian. Contrary to Augustine, Pelagius had concluded that infants did not sin and therefore infants would not go to hell if they died without baptism.

The biblical core of St. Augustine's theory of original sin centered on the account of the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3) and St. Paul's assertion that "through one person sin entered the world" (Rom. 5:12). Although Genesis and the letter to the Romans did not use the term "original sin" and never referred to "a fall from previous grace,"⁵⁶ Augustine inserted his particular notion of original sin into these scripture texts. Thus he conjectured "that by his sin Adam fell from his original supernatural status, and that through human propagation, which involved concupiscence, the lack of grace was passed on to every human being descended from Adam."⁵⁷ In his confrontation with Pelagius, Augustine's emerging ideas concerning the effects of Adam and Eve's sin took on hard, clear connections involving sex, sin, and shame.

When he was a Manichaean, Augustine believed it was permissible to seek sexual pleasure as long as he avoided procreation. After his conversion to Christianity, Augustine reversed these two elements, rejecting sexual pleasure while affirming procreation. Ironically, part of Augustine's theory of original sin clearly manifests a reworking of Manichaean theology. According to that theology, the captured particles of light contained in human semen were passed on whenever a person was conceived. Reversing this mythology to suit his purposes, Augustine proposed that original sin was passed on to persons at their conceptions. When spouses conceived a child, they passed on the effects of Adam's original sin. Thus every human being received a human nature deformed by Adam's sin.

Eventually, Augustine's theology of original sin was "received," that is, accepted, as doctrine by the Catholic Church. His version of original sin helped to resolve three issues. First, his theory explained the increasingly frequent practice of baptizing infants. Secondly, his theory explained why concupiscence remained even after baptism. This sacrament removed original sin, but not its effects. Thirdly, Augustine's pessimistic theory of original sin provided a weapon that could be used to defeat Pelagius' optimistic teachings about the basic goodness of human nature.

Original Sin, Sex, and Shame

The account of Adam and Eve's recognition of their nakedness and their subsequent sewing of fig leaves to make loincloths (Gen. 3:7) led Augustine to conclude that the human genitals were the means of transmitting original sin. He asserted: "The truth, however, is, that we are ashamed of that very thing which made those primitive human beings ashamed, when they covered their loins, namely their genital organs."⁵⁸ The reason why people wanted privacy when engaging in intercourse, Augustine argued, was that the marital act is shameful because it is sinful.⁵⁹ Eloquently venting his disapproval of concupiscence, sex, and the human genital organs, Augustine scolded: "That is the penalty of sin; that is the plague and mark of sin; that is the temptation and very fuel of sin; that is the law in our members warring against the law of our mind; that is the rebellion against our own selves, proceeding from our very selves, which by a most righteous retribution is rendered us by our disobedient members."⁶⁰

Augustine had theorized that in Eden the sexual act was totally under the control of the wills of both Adam and Eve because they possessed "the highest tranquility of all the obedient members without any lust."⁶¹ Augustine thought that neither the man nor the woman needed the stirrings of sexual arousal to perform the act that would conceive a child. Therefore he concluded that the human experience of sexual arousal was the effect of the concupiscence that resulted from the first sin. Prior to that sin the man "would have sown the seed, and the woman received it, as need required, the generative organs being moved by the will, not excited by lust."⁶² Human sexual arousal was both a reminder of and a punishment for the first sin.

The False "Problem" of Sexual Pleasure

The "problem of sexual pleasure" is a false problem. It sprang from the fact that Augustine's arguments based on usefulness did not take into account the goodness of sexual delight. Seeing no utility in sexual pleasure, Augustine perceived sexual pleasure as a result of the first sin. Denying or at least restricting marital pleasure had to be virtuous and meritorious.

So, when Augustine spoke of concupiscence as a "good use of an evil," he meant that concupiscence (the desire for sexual pleasure) could serve as a lure to procreate. Augustine, as well as all the bishops and theologians who followed his thought, never welcomed marital pleasure at the front door. Acceptance of the pleasures of the marriage bed did not even enter by the back door. Rather, sexual pleasure in marriage took the form of elopement in reverse. Marital pleasure had to be sneaked into marriage by means of a ladder resting against the upstairs bedroom window. That ladder was Augustine's idea that although conjugal pleasure was an evil, it was a useful evil.

In his book *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, Augustine pointed out that concupiscence was comparable to a man's limp. A limping man could still reach his destination. Reaching that destination was good, but the limp was not good. In marital relations the destination was the good of procreation. But the pleasurable orgasm that enabled conception to take place was, like the limp, not good.⁶³ The pleasure of sexual spontaneity, like the man's limp, was a drag.

Two Unwarranted Assumptions

The gratuitous assumptions contained in Augustine's views on original sin significantly contributed to the attitude of sexual anxiety that would hinder the development of a spirituality of marital sexuality in western Christianity. Augustine's first assumption was that Adam and Eve did not participate in sexual intercourse, as we human beings know it, until after they had sinned.

Working with that speculation, Augustine theorized that in Eden the genital organs "would be set in motion at the command of the will; and without the active stimulus of passion, with calmness of mind and with no corrupting of the integrity of the body, the husband would lie on the bosom of his wife."⁶⁴ Perhaps Augustine thought that the force of gravity would have carried Adam's semen into Eve's womb. But, after the first sin, whenever married partners felt the desire for sexual union with each other, they were said to be experiencing the corrupting influence of lust at work in their sin-lighted bodies.

Augustine's second gratuitous assumption was his belief that the act of sexual intercourse was instrumental in passing on original sin. Augustine's proof text came from Psalm 51: "In iniquity I was conceived" (Ps. 51:7). Augustine looked at the psalmist's prayer of remorse and gave it a universal application: everybody was conceived in sin! Ignoring those texts of Genesis that asserted the goodness of sexual intercourse and its blessed fertility, Augustine made the assumption that every person after Adam and Eve was conceived in iniquity.

Implications

Because Augustine connected human sinfulness with human sexuality, his assumptions tainted every act of marital intercourse undertaken after Adam and Eve's sin. Augustine universalized the effects of that sin by including every person who would ever be conceived. As late as 1930 Pope Pius XI echoed Augustine's teaching in his *Casti Connubii*: "Indeed, the natural generation of life has become the path of death by which original sin is communicated to the children."⁶⁵

Augustine and the North African bishops condemned Pelagius and his followers in 416. In the following year Pope Innocent excommunicated Pelagius for implying that human beings were basically good and did not need the grace of God to attain salvation.

BISHOP JULIAN'S CRITIQUE OF AUGUSTINE'S THEORY OF CONCUPISCENCE

In 418 Bishop Julian of Eclanum, Italy, objected to Augustine's view that unbaptized infants shared in the guilt of Adam's sin and therefore deserved eternal punishment in hell if they died. Julian also disagreed with Augustine's views on marriage and concupiscence.

Julian had been a married cleric. When Julian read the pertinent texts of Genesis, he concluded that human sexual desire as experienced by the people of his day was no different from the sexual desire that accompanied men and women from the time that God had created them. Julian accused Augustine of being "an impenitent Manichee, more influenced than he himself realized by his decade under Mani's spell, hating the Creator's handiwork."⁶⁶

Julian disagreed with Augustine's claims that the source of concupiscence was sin and that the sinfulness of sexual activity was demonstrated by the fact that couples engaging in sex do not want to be observed by others. Julian's critique was simple and direct. He pointed out that Augustine's whole theory about concupiscence, sexual desire, shame, and the passing on of original sin through the human genitals was almost exclusively based on one biblical text, the text that referred to Adam and Eve making loincloths out of fig leaves (Gen. 3:7). But Julian saw sexual desire as "a drive in our bodies made by God."⁶⁷ Augustine's theory was wrong because it was based on the idea that the sexual drive was "placed deep within us by the Devil."⁶⁸ Julian pointed out that Augustine made his "whole doctrine stand or fall upon little more than the discreet behavior that surrounds the sexual act."⁶⁹

After Augustine said he wanted to know more about Julian's objections, Julian replied: "You ask me why I would not consent to the idea that there is a sin that is part of human nature. I answer: it is improbable. It is untrue. It is unjust and impious. It makes it seem as if the devil were the maker of men."⁷⁰ Julian also critiqued Augustine's theory because it destroyed "the freedom of the will . . . by saying that men are so incapable of virtue that in the very womb of their mothers they are filled with bygone sins . . . and, what is disgusting as it is blasphemous, this view of yours fastens, as its most conclusive proof, on the common decency with which we cover our

genitals.”⁷¹ Expressing an attitude of unconditional acceptance of God’s creative design, Julian accurately perceived the problems with Augustine’s theory.

Augustine Crushes Julian

Julian proposed that the sexual dynamic was a form of human energy that could be used for either good purposes or bad. Thus, sexual pleasure was “acceptable” in itself, and “censurable only in its excesses.”⁷² Bitterly rejecting Julian’s reasoning, Augustine declared: “You say: ‘The reason for the existence of the sexes is the union of bodies,’ and you want me to concede this to you. I do not concede it.”⁷³ Augustine was particularly upset with Julian’s claim that a married couple’s sexual desire is acceptable when “exercised honestly.”⁷⁴ Calling incontinence “the mother of all vices,” Augustine referred to St. Paul’s wanting more than mere avoidance of fornication but also “a certain moderation in marriage itself,” which would be attained by setting aside “times of prayer.”⁷⁵ Further rebuking Julian, the bishop of Hippo scolded: “You notice how you should understand with us in what disease of desire the Apostle was unwilling that one possess his vessel. . . . But to you lust seems culpable only toward one other than one’s wife.”⁷⁶

Augustine then accusingly asked, “Who, then, honors marriage more: you, when you deface its dignity by making it a blameless wallowing place of carnal concupiscence; or he who . . . recalls that the Apostle recommended times of prayer and abstinence from the pleasure of lust, and who does not wish husbands and wives to be given up to that disease whence original sin is contracted?”⁷⁷ In this response all the notes of Augustine’s pessimistic theme song were sounded. We see here Augustine’s theory of “original sin,” his distaste for the “disease” of desire, his condemnation of “the pleasure of lust,” and his revulsion for marital relations, which he called the “wallowing place of carnal concupiscence.”

On the other hand, Julian wanted to show that Augustine’s theology of original sin was deficient by having Augustine choose between two positions. Julian asked Augustine to state whether the parents, who might be baptized Christians, caused the original sin present in every infant or to state that the original sin was caused by the marital act itself. Logical as these two positions were, Augustine realized that he could not accept either of them without becoming a heretic himself. Refusing to answer, he clung to his elaborate theological system in which concupiscence and its accompanying sexual pleasure were the evil effects of the first sin that remained even after baptism.

Julian was driven from his diocese in 419. Nevertheless, he and Augustine continued to debate until 431, their bitter exchange of views only terminating with Augustine's death.

The Winner: Augustine; Losers: Married Folk

Augustine was something like a Jack-the-Giant-Killer of heretics. Clothed with the authority of orthodoxy, the bishop of Hippo had a powerful reputation and rhetorical skills to match. Julian, by opposing Augustine, had placed himself in a tenuous alignment with Pelagius' optimistic perception of human nature. Augustine had demonstrated that Pelagius was a heretic. The confrontation between Julian and Augustine proved to be decisive regarding who would have the final say about the purposes of marital intercourse. Julian, with his moderate view of the naturalness of marital sexuality, lost. Augustine's pessimistic interpretation of both the Bible and human nature won not only the day but also the millennium and more.

In the centuries that followed Augustine's death, western Christian leaders thought that the days of creative theologizing had been completed. Augustine, having totally defeated Pelagius and Julian, had crushed the kind of scholarly effort that reexamines accepted theories and conclusions. The decline of learning that had followed the decline of the Roman Empire in the west led to the conclusion that Augustine's huge literary output was an unsurpassable intellectual achievement.

It is one of those ironies of history that Augustine, the one who defended marriage against the attacks of both heretical Manichees and Catholic ascetics such as Jerome, became the father of the attitude of pelvic anxiety in western Christianity. Joseph Martos summed up that irony: Augustine "was the first and only patristic author to write exclusively about sex and marriage, and in the end he affirmed that marriage was good even though sex was not."⁷⁸

NOTES

1. Augustine, *Confessions* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1961), Book III, l. 55.
2. Augustine, *Confessions* VI, 15, 131.
3. Augustine, *Confessions* VI, 15, 131.
4. Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 2, 72.
5. Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 2, 72.
6. Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.
7. Details on Manichaeism can also be found in Robert Haardt, "Manichaeism," in Adolf Darlap, general editor, *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. III (New York: Herder and

Herder, 1969), 372–75; also John Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: New American Library, 1965), 137–44.

8. Augustine, *On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), chapter 18, 65, 86.

9. Augustine, *On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, 86–87.

10. Augustine, *On the Morals of the Manichaeans*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, 86–87; chapter 18, 65, 86.

11. Augustine of Hippo, *Soliloquies*, trans. Kim Paffenroth, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press, 2000), 38.

12. Augustine of Hippo, *Soliloquies*, 38.

13. Augustine of Hippo, *Soliloquies*, 38.

14. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons* 62.2, cited in John Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 159.

15. Johannes Quasten, Walter Burghardt, and Thomas Lawler, eds., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation. St. Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1982), Book IX, chapter 4, 8, 74.

16. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 75.

17. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 75.

18. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 399.

19. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, ed. Phillip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 1, 18, 21.

20. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 5, 9, 75.

21. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 5, 9, 75.

22. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 5, 9, 75.

23. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 5, 9, 77.

24. In his youth Augustine had read Virgil's classic work, *The Aeneid*. Cupid, the god of erotic passion, inflames the heart of Aeneas with sexual desire for Dido. "Concupiscence" is thus associated with Cupid and denotes ardent sexual desire. Today Cupid still survives in St. Valentine's Day cards, but reduced to an infantile winged figure with a tiny bow and arrow.

25. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Volume III, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 15, 406.

26. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 7, 12, 77.

27. Quasten, Burghardt, and Lawler, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book IX, 7, 12, 77.

28. Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 22, 291.

29. Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, 291.

30. Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, 291.

31. Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, 291.

32. Augustine, *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, 291.

33. Samuel Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 103.

34. Roy J. Deferrari, ed., "Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects," in *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), 3.

35. Paul Johnson, *History of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 109.

36. Historian Carol Ann Cannon would not use the title "pope" for a bishop of Rome before the year 1100. "Pope" was a common title for most bishops prior to that time.

37. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 358.

38. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus* in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. VI, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), Book I, 26, 366.

39. Jerome, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, in Joseph E. Kerns, S.J., *The Theology of Marriage* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 42.

40. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 32, 412.

41. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 18, 407.

42. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 1, 399.

43. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 11, 404.

44. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 11, 404.

45. Deferrari, "Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects," 6, 17.

46. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 6, 401.

47. Augustine, *The Good of Marriage*, 32, 412.

48. Roy Joseph Deferrari, ed., *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, trans. Matthew A. Schumacher, C.S.C. (New York: The Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957), 3, 21, 288.

49. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 8, 403.

50. Deferrari, "Saint Augustine: Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects," in *The Fathers of the Church*, 6, 17.

51. Roy J. Deferrari, ed., "Saint Augustine: Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount," trans. Denis Kavanagh, O.S.A., *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 11 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1951), 15, 41, 61.

52. Deferrari, "Saint Augustine: Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount," *The Fathers of the Church*, 62.
53. Deferrari, "Saint Augustine: Commentary on the Lord's Sermon on the Mount," *The Fathers of the Church*, 19, 28, 139.
54. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 3, 21, 43, 145.
55. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 3, 21, 43, 145.
56. Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1997), 580.
57. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 580.
58. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. V, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), Book 2, 22, 291.
59. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds, D.D. (New York: Random House, 1993 Modern Library Edition), Book 14, 17–18, 465–67.
60. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence*, Book 2, 22, 291.
61. Philip Schaff, ed., "Against Two Letters of the Pelagians," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. V, *Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971) chapter 35, 388.
62. Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIV, 24, 472.
63. Augustine, *Marriage and Concupiscence*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Book 1, 8, 266–67.
64. Augustine, *The City of God*, 475.
65. Michael J. Byrnes, trans., *Papal Teachings* (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), 226.
66. Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*, 120.
67. Julian, *Opus Imperfectum* 3, 142: 1303, cited by Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 412.
68. Julian, *Opus Imperfectum* 3, 142: 1303, cited by Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 412.
69. Julian, *Opus Imperfectum* 3, 142: 1303, cited by Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, 413.
70. Augustine, *Against Julian* 3, 14, 28, cited in Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 121.
71. Augustine, *Against Julian* 3, 14, 28, cited in Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, 121.
72. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 4, 2, 7, 171.
73. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 3, 7, 16, 120.
74. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 3, 14, 28, 131.

75. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 2, 7, 20, 80.
76. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 2, 7, 20, 80.
77. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine against Julian*, 2, 7, 20, 80–81.
78. Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1982), 416.

Monks, Theologians, Bishops, and Popes Disparage Marital Intercourse

ISIDORE, BISHOP OF SEVILLE

Between the end of the Patristic Age in the 600s and the rise of the universities in the 1100s the Catholic Church developed various forms of legislation on marriage. That legislation was based on the theology of marriage that had been articulated by Augustine in such treatises as *The Good of Marriage* and *Marriage and Concupiscence*. During the six centuries following Augustine's death, churchmen basically repeated what the fathers had written.

Isidore (ca. 560–636) is one of those special theologians honored with the title of “doctor of the church.” Like Augustine, Isidore believed that marriage as God intended it to be was different from marriage as it now existed. It seems that Isidore's standard for evaluating “true marriages” was the Stoic rule. In a true marriage “couples seek not pleasure but offspring.”¹ Neither pleasure nor spontaneity was useful: “Therefore when a person is more sexually active than [is] needed for . . . procreation, he sins.”² St. Isidore's theology of marriage was a repetition of Augustine's. It seems that both theologians wanted spouses to ask each other this question: “How far can we go in limiting the bodily expression of our affection for each other?”

“CONFESSION”: AN IRISH INNOVATION

During the sixth and seventh centuries the Irish monks introduced the practice of making the sacrament of reconciliation more available to Christians. For nearly three hundred years, from the fourth century through the sixth century, the leaders of the Catholic Church taught that grave sins committed after

baptism could be forgiven only once. Putting off the reception of forgiveness until they were on their deathbeds, many Christians were never reconciled.

Following the lead of St. Patrick, European missionaries went to Ireland in the fifth and sixth centuries. The converted Irish did not wholeheartedly embrace the church's moral norms. So the Irish sinned, hoping to receive the church's ritual of forgiveness on their deathbeds. Seeing the need to innovate, the Irish monks developed a new form of granting forgiveness. It consisted in listening to a person's recitation of sins, prescribing a "penance" to be performed, and then praying for the sinner's forgiveness. The monks allowed a private act of penance or "satisfaction" as a substitute for the traditional imposition of a humiliating public penance. Thus the sacrament of reconciliation could be received as many times as the penitent asked for forgiveness.

The Penitential Manuals/Sanctions for Sins Related to Marital Intercourse

The monk who heard the penitent's confession of sins needed to know what kind of penance or satisfaction to require from the repentant sinner. Small manuals called "penitentials" were written. These manuals listed the various kinds of sins and the penance to be performed for each particular sin. The assigned penance was usually a number of days, months, or years of fasting on bread and water on certain days of the week, usually Wednesdays and Fridays.³ There could be no reception of the Eucharist until the penance was completed. The amount of penance prescribed corresponded to the gravity of the sin. A light sin would require only a few days or weeks of fasting; a grave or serious sin would require months or years.

The penances prescribed for sins related to marital intercourse demonstrate a further development of the negative attitude toward marital relations. The penitential manual of Pseudo-Bede (written about 750) prescribed seven years of fasting for using a contraceptive potion while prescribing only four years of fasting for the murder of a layperson.⁴

TIMES WHEN MARITAL INTERCOURSE WAS FORBIDDEN

The monks saw certain biblical passages as imposing sexual abstinence on the married. God had commanded Moses to tell the Hebrew people that they must refrain from sexual intercourse for three days prior to the covenant agreement at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:9–15). The monks were also aware of St. Paul's recommendation of a period of sexual abstinence so that husband and wife could pray (1 Cor. 7:3–5). So the monks introduced another innova-

tion into the western church—namely, specific periods of time when married couples had to refrain from marital relations.

Finnian, a sixth-century Irish monk, wrote a confessor's handbook that required spouses to abstain from marital intercourse during the forty days before Christmas, the forty days before Easter, the forty days after Pentecost, and every Saturday or Sunday night.⁵ Finnian held that abstention from marital intercourse was obligatory on the basis of twin premises: 1) marriage without abstinence was sinful, and 2) God did not give marriage for the purpose of lust but only for the purpose of procreating children. Finnian declared that "marriage without continence is not lawful, but sin."⁶ As his rationale Finnian gave "the authority of God" who permitted marriage "not for lust but for the sake of children, as it is written, 'and the two shall be in one flesh,' that is, in unity of the flesh for the generation of children, not for the lustful concupiscence of the flesh."⁷ Finnian also concluded that couples should practice sexual abstinence from the time a child was conceived until after the child was born.

The next generation of penitential manuals added even more periods of sexual abstinence. The Irish *Penitential of Cummean* (seventh century) added Wednesdays and Fridays, time-honored penitential days, to the growing number of days on which marital intercourse was forbidden. In addition to Finnian's idea that sexual abstinence should be practiced during the entire period of a woman's pregnancy, Cummean also found a biblical justification for adding days of sexual abstinence to the period after the child's birth. According to the book of Leviticus, Moses had declared that it took thirty-three days for a woman's blood to be purified after she gave birth to a boy and sixty-six days for her blood to be purified after giving birth to a girl (Lev. 12:1–5). Cummean concluded that Christian husbands and wives ought to refrain from sexual relations for the corresponding number of days after the birth of a male or female child.⁸

Theodore, an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon monk, was not to be outdone by the Irish in the imposition of days of sexual abstinence on husband and wife. Theodore declared that spouses should also abstain from sexual relations for three nights before receiving the Eucharist. Theodore's penitential manual introduced another significant innovation. He declared that there should be sanctions applied to those spouses who did not observe the times of sexual abstinence: "Whoever has sexual relations at these times must do penance for twenty days."⁹ Engaging in marital intercourse on Sunday was also punishable, but the prescribed penance was only for one to three days.

Egbert, another Anglo-Saxon monk, authored his penitential book about fifty years after Theodore. After borrowing heavily from Theodore's work, Egbert increased the penalties for those spouses who had marital relations

on the forbidden days from one to three days to “forty days, or thirty, or twenty.”¹⁰

FORBIDDEN FORMS OF MARITAL INTIMACY

The authors of the penitential manuals also outlawed certain sexual positions because they were “not natural.” While interrogating penitents, confessors might say: “The natural manner is that, if a man has intercourse with a woman he always take the superior position, with the woman lying below. Have you acted otherwise?”¹¹

It was also a sin to enter one’s wife from behind. When the penitential books mentioned these sins, the commonly assigned penance was forty days of fasting on bread and water. According to Egbert, if spouses regularly used the sexual position in which the wife did not place herself below her husband, the penance to be given to both was three years of fasting on bread and water. It appears that Egbert thought that such dorsal intercourse might impede conception.¹²

The idea of having to abstain from marital relations on Sundays and holy days was probably derived from St. Paul’s concession to the Corinthian ascetics that allowed them to abstain from sexual relations in order “to be free for prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5). By the end of the eighth century the writers of penitential books had turned Paul’s concession upside-down. In the place of a married couple’s choosing to abstain in order to pray, church leaders began to forbid marital relations on days designated as times for prayer.

The penitential handbooks had instructed the confessors and the confessors instructed the married laity. Having no say in such matters, the married were simply informed that they sinned if they made love during a period of required abstinence; they sinned if they engaged in relations using forbidden sexual positions; and, finally, they sinned if they enjoyed sexual pleasure in their acts of marital intimacy.

POPE GREGORY THE GREAT SPEAKS OUT

By the early Middle Ages many churchmen had developed a marital spirituality teaching that prayer and marital sex were mutually exclusive. Marital intercourse was regarded, for all practical and theological purposes, as indulging in lust. Caesarius, bishop of Arles (470–543), proposed that newly married couples avoid entering a church for a period of thirty days after their marriage.¹³ Pope Gregory the Great, one of only three popes to have earned

the title of “great” after his name, was elected bishop of Rome in 590. Gregory adopted Augustine’s rule that marital intercourse is sinful unless it was undertaken for the purpose of procreating a child. Gregory even surpassed Augustine’s rigorist perspective by declaring that, if husband and wife experienced any pleasure “mixed” with their act of intercourse, they “transgressed the law of marriage.”¹⁴

When it came to marital intimacy, Pope Gregory was also more rigorous than Augustine. Even if the husband and wife had the intention to procreate a child in their act of marital intercourse, any experience of pleasure “befouled” the couple’s intercourse.¹⁵ It appears that the only sinless act of marital intercourse was one in which the husband and wife intended to conceive a child while managing to avoid feeling sexual pleasure.

The archbishop of Canterbury wrote a letter asking Pope Gregory whether a husband, after engaging in marital intimacy, must wash and wait for a period of time before he could enter a church. Pope Gregory is reported to have replied, “Sexual pleasure can never be without sin.”¹⁶ However, while sexual pleasure could never be free of sin, some theologians thought that marital intercourse might be free of pleasure. It was a case of less being more: the less pleasure, the more spiritual goodness.

It is doubtful that Pope Gregory actually wrote that “sexual pleasure can never be without sin.” Nevertheless, from the late sixth century until well into the twentieth, churchmen had accepted as fact Pope Gregory’s recorded answer to the archbishop of Canterbury’s question. Thus, for twelve centuries this pope’s alleged negative assessment of marital intimacy served to strengthen the theological conviction that each act of marital intercourse was associated not with goodness, but with sin.

OTHER MEDIEVAL CHURCHMEN DISPARAGE MARITAL INTERCOURSE

Because early medieval writers perceived sexual activity as driven by lust, they disapproved of sexual activity even in marriage. The church historian, Venerable Bede (673–735), stated that in the first age of the world humankind was propagated by the union of men and women. However, in “the last age of history” God has “taken manhood from the flesh of the Virgin . . . to prove that He loves the glory of virginity more than marriage.”¹⁷

St. Paul stated that a married couple could engage in prayer or intercourse without the one interfering with the other (1 Cor. 7:1–5). But Venerable Bede saw this text as a reminder “that prayer is hindered by the marital duty, because as often as one renders the debt to his wife he is unable to pray.”¹⁸ We

see in Bede's declaration two contending themes introduced by the church fathers. On the one hand, marriage in its ideal and hypothetical condition was good. But, on the other hand, marriage in its actual historical condition was viewed as "wounded and sick."¹⁹

Referring to one of the legends associated with the wedding feast at Cana, Alcuin reported that the bridegroom at that wedding feast was none other than John the beloved apostle. Having seen the miraculous power of Jesus in his changing water into wine, John left his bride in order to follow Jesus. Of course, John did so before consummating his marriage, thus preserving his virginity.²⁰

In 866, Pope Nicholas I wrote a letter to Boris, prince of Bulgaria. To provide a rationale for abstaining from marital relations on Sundays and holy days, Nicholas the Great wrote: "If we must abstain from worldly labor on Sundays, how much the more must we be on our guard against fleshly lust and every bodily defilement."²¹ As did Pope Siricius in the fourth century and Pope Gregory I in the sixth century, this ninth-century pope was of the opinion that St. Paul's condemnation of "the sins of the flesh" was aimed at sexual pleasure.

What about those few who claimed that sexual pleasure was good because God created it? Bishop Halitgar set them straight by declaring: "God did not create men and women so that they might enjoy carnal desire or live in the delights of the flesh."²² To strengthen his argument, Halitgar repeated Augustine's assumption: "And if there had been no transgression of God's command, no one would experience carnal pleasure in the intercourse of the married."²³ The bishop then summed up his perspective: "Carnal pleasure is an uncleanness of the body which comes from uncontrolled lust and the weakness of the soul which gives in to the sin of the flesh."²⁴

FORBIDDING MARITAL RELATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER RECEIVING THE EUCHARIST

The negative attitude toward marital relations expressed by Pope Nicholas I and Bishop Halitgar was also manifested in the opinions of other early medieval theologians who thought that sexual relations somehow made spouses ritually "unclean." Sexually active married people were sometimes discouraged from entering a church or from receiving the Eucharist. Jonas, bishop of Orleans from 818 to 843, scolded married folk for "irreverently coming" to church after engaging in marital relations.²⁵ Not only were these married folk "so indiscreet as to come up as far as the altar," lamented Jonas, but they also received "the body and blood of Christ."²⁶ Jonas warned those soiled with the

“uncleanness” of their marital activity: “Let them understand that they should only enter Christ’s church and receive His body and blood with a clean body and a pure heart.”²⁷

Those churchmen who commented on marriage saw that state of life as little more than a remedy for concupiscence. Whenever the state of consecrated virginity and the state of marriage were compared, they seemed to fall into one of two categories, the nice or the naughty. Such words as “continent,” “clean,” “pure,” “chaste,” “angelic,” “holy,” “decent,” “heavenly,” “virginal,” “spiritual,” and “virtuous” referred to the state in which sexual activity is absent. In the state where sexual activity was present one finds such descriptive words as “incontinent,” “lustful,” “earthly,” “unclean,” “dirty,” “impure,” “lewd,” “tainted,” “carnal,” “fleshly,” and “defiling.”

LOVE AND MARRIAGE?

A shift in perspective began to take place in the eleventh century when some liturgical books and wedding sermons began to mention the mutual friendship, affection, and love that should exist between husband and wife. In certain monastic settings the ancient Roman idea of marital affection (*affectio maritalis*) was given “new emotional overtones.”²⁸ While many authors continued to view marriage as spiritually problematic, a few began to consider the significance “of the body in the life of the person” and to explore the capacity of married sexuality for revealing God’s love.²⁹ In a rare instance of an assertion of the neglected biblical perspectives on sexuality, Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) proposed that “woman was created expressly as an incentive for happiness and friendship” and that “from the very beginning nature impressed upon human minds the emotional desire for friendship and affection.”³⁰

Though churchmen did not recognize that marital intercourse could express spousal love, Aelred opined that a kiss might serve as a sign of affection between husband and wife.³¹ St. Bernard of Clairveaux (1090–1153) used the image of the kiss between spouses to express the mystery of the Incarnation and the love that unites the three Persons of the Trinity.³² Employing the imagery found in the Song of Songs, St. Bernard wrote about the way people could learn to love God more deeply.³³ However, the understanding of “love” and its expression was limited to the perception of marriage as an indissoluble union, not as a bodily act of sexual self-giving.

The disconnection between spousal love and the expression such love in marital intercourse was especially manifest in the emerging medieval ideal of the sexless or “spiritual marriage.” Following the Roman tradition and

the Augustinian emphasis on the idea that consent, not intercourse, makes the marriage, theologians began to speak of “spiritual marriage” as the ideal form of marriage. Certain writers set out to glorify the depth of love existing between spouses who had renounced marital intercourse. Stories about loving spouses in sexless or spiritual marriages appeared in the pious literature of the time. In one story the bones of a spouse who had lived in a spiritual marriage moved over to make room for her husband’s recently deceased body and in another story a wife’s corpse was embraced by her departed husband’s arm when she was placed in the tomb.³⁴ It was said that such couples perceived their lives of sexual abstinence as an anticipation of heaven. The message is clear: Holiness and love may be related, but sexual intimacy and holiness were not.

Speculation concerning the nastiness of marital intercourse went hand-in-glove with the idea that married folk who disliked sexual contact were holier persons for doing so. Denying their “vile” bodies, they had embraced a state of spiritual holiness. Ida of Boulogne (1040–1113) endured rather than enjoyed marital relations.³⁵ Another heroine of sexual disgust was Waletrude, who “abhorred sexual relations, though she loved her husband in a spiritual way.”³⁶

THE LEGACY OF SIX CENTURIES OF PENITENTIAL MANUALS

Between 550 and 750 the Irish monks gave the Catholic Church their innovative penitential manuals. Later handbooks derived most of their sexual content from those early handbooks. When it came to marital relations, married couples had to take into account the reason why they were initiating sexual intercourse, the manner in which they were performing their intercourse, and the time when they were permitted to have intercourse. In addition to the days of required abstinence, there were days on which sexual abstinence was simply recommended. The married were encouraged to abstain from sexual union on Thursdays in memory of Jesus’ arrest in Gethsemane, on Fridays in honor of Jesus’ death on the cross, and on Saturdays in honor of Mary, Jesus’ virgin mother.³⁷ On Sundays, the married might well forego marital union in honor of the Resurrection and they could do the same on Mondays in memory of those who had died. When Tuesday finally arrived, pious couples may have well shouted, “Tonight’s the night!”

From 550 to 1150, the penitential lists of sins and their legislated sanctions had the effect denying any spiritual value that might be found in marital intercourse. The church fathers, the authors of the penitential books, bishops, popes, and doctors of the church had ignored a key theme in the letter to the

Ephesians—namely, the theme of husband and wife becoming two in one flesh. For more than a thousand years “not a single scholar attempted a painstaking analysis of Ephesians 5:21–32.”³⁸ Thus from the second century to the twelfth no significant church leader had addressed Paul’s words about the “great mystery” in which the love of husband and wife is compared with the love of Jesus for his church. Instead, St. Clement embraced Stoicism, Augustine invented his idea of concupiscence, and Finnian introduced sanctions against sexual intimacy. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the sanctions introduced by Finnian were beginning to be codified in the great collections of canon law.

Thanks to the efforts of monks and churchmen, the range of acceptable marital activity was extremely narrow. Punishment was meted out to spouses when they engaged in marital intercourse for the wrong reasons or when they embraced each other at the wrong times or when they enjoyed each other in the wrong manner or when they loved each other too passionately or too often. When the use of the penitential handbooks came to an end in the twelfth century, canon law became the next vehicle for handing on the church’s grudging acceptance of marital relations. In the meantime, ascetically minded churchmen strove to impose celibacy on all clerics because marital intercourse was more and more viewed as a contamination of the priestly office.

NOTES

1. Isidore, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, cited in Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 243.
2. Isidore, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, 243.
3. Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code 550–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 62.
4. John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 204.
5. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 24.
6. Anthony Kosnik, ed., *Human Sexuality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 250.
7. Kosnik, *Human Sexuality*, 250.
8. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 25.
9. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 25.
10. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 26.
11. Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 219.
12. Noonan, *Contraception*, 204.
13. Glen Olsen, “Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court,” in *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study*, ed. Glen W. Olsen (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 152.

14. Pope Gregory, *Pastoral Rule* 3.27, PL 77:102, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 187.
15. Pope Gregory, *Pastoral Rule*, 187.
16. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials*, 36.
17. Venerable Bede, *Hexaemeron*, Book I, PL 91:31, cited in Joseph E. Kerns, S.J., *The Theology of Marriage* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 104.
18. Venerable Bede, *Super Epistolas Catholicas Exposito: In Primam Epistolam Petri*, PL 93:55, as cited in Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 242.
19. Bede, *Super Epistolas Catholicas Exposito*, 251.
20. Alcuin, *Commentarium in Joannem*, Book 1, chapter 2, verse 8, PL 100:771–772, cited in Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 247.
21. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 140.
22. Halitgar, *De Vitiis et Virtutibus et de Ordine Poenitentiarum Libri Quinque*, chapter 16, PL 105:668, cited in Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 243.
23. Halitgar, *De Vitiis et Virtutibus*, 243.
24. Halitgar, *De Vitiis et Virtutibus*, 243.
25. Jonas of Orleans, *De Institutione Laicorum*, Book II, chapter 11, PL 106:188, cited in Kerns, *The Theology of Marriage*, 123.
26. Jonas of Orleans, *De Institutione Laicorum*, 123.
27. Jonas of Orleans, *De Institutione Laicorum*, 123.
28. Teresa Olsen Pierre, “Marriage, Body and Sacrament in the Age of Hugh of St. Victor,” in *Christian Marriage*, 256.
29. Pierre, “Marriage, Body and Sacrament in the Age of Hugh of St. Victor,” 256.
30. Jonas of Orleans, *De Institutione Laicorum*, 184.
31. Jonas of Orleans, *De Institutione Laicorum*, 184.
32. Jean Leclerque, *Monks on Marriage: A Twelfth Century View* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 80–82.
33. Leclerque, *Monks on Marriage*, 73–74.
34. Olsen, “Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court,” 186.
35. Olsen, “Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court,” 149.
36. Olsen, “Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court,” 149.
37. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), 133, note 3.
38. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 268.

The Law of Clerical Celibacy Embodies the Bias Against Marital Intimacy

EARLY ATTEMPTS TO IMPOSE CELIBACY ON MARRIED CLERGY

When the followers of Jesus of Nazareth began preaching the good news, most of the apostles and missionaries were probably married. Deacons and deaconesses, presbyters, and bishops served the local churches, and many of them were married.¹ Marital intercourse had not yet been associated with sinful lust.

The idea that celibacy was a duty of the priestly state was gradually introduced. The process of outlawing clerical marriage began in 309 and was only completed in 1139. The arguments made against the marriage of clerics tell much about the development of the Catholic Church's attitude of pelvic anxiety. The first attempt to impose a requirement of celibacy upon clerics took place at a provincial synod meeting in Elvira, Spain, in 309. In canon 33 nineteen bishops and twenty-six presbyters declared that married priests and bishops should permanently refrain from marital relations: "Bishops, presbyters, and deacons and all other clerics having a position in the ministry are ordered to abstain completely from their wives and not to have children."²

The crux of canon 33 was the prohibition against engaging in "the sexual act."³ The synod's attempt to impose celibacy implied that marital relations between clerics and their wives produced a ritual impurity that made clerics unfit for presiding over the holy Eucharistic liturgy.⁴ At the Council of Nicaea in 325 Bishop Hosius of Cordoba proposed that the decrees of the local council of Elvira become the norm for the universal church. Although this suggestion was not then accepted, some local church councils began to ask: Could priests and prelates sleep with their wives, or did their priestly office oblige them to avoid the contamination of sex?⁵

THE DEVELOPING EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY AND THE DEMAND FOR CLERICAL CELIBACY

By the end of the fourth century the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharistic liturgy began to gain wide acceptance. This led to the application of various Old Testament norms for ritual purity. A key biblical passage came from the book of Leviticus: “When a man has an emission of seed, he shall bathe his whole body in water and be unclean until evening. . . . If a man lies carnally with a woman, they shall both bathe in water and be unclean until evening” (Lev. 15:16–18). However, Jewish priests rarely served at the altar of sacrifice. But Christian priests were different. So St. Ambrose of Milan proposed that priests “should live in a state of perpetual continence” since they served at the altar all their lives.⁶ Ambrose admonished his priests to “continue in a ministry which is unhampered and spotless, one which should not be profaned by conjugal intercourse.”⁷

While Judaism did not regard intercourse as a sin, sexual relations did render a man ritually unclean. That meant he could not participate in Israel’s cultic life for a prescribed period of time, usually a day. Using such biblical stipulations as his warrant, Pope Damasus I (366–384) declared that marital intercourse was incompatible with presiding at the Eucharistic ritual.⁸ Pope Siricius (384–399) had as his rallying cry, “Those who are in the flesh cannot see God.”⁹ In 392 this pope wrote a letter to Bishop Anysius stating that “Jesus would not have chosen birth from a virgin, had he been forced to look upon her as so unrestrained as to let that womb . . . be stained by the presence of male seed.”¹⁰ Siricius also declared that the only persons worthy of serving at the altar were those who were forever free of “the stain” of intercourse.¹¹

Pope Leo I (440–461) also seems to have accepted a dualistic split between bodily and spiritual existence. Thus deacons were to remain married, but they were instructed to avoid marital intercourse in order to grow in holiness. Referring to 1 Corinthians 7:29, Pope Leo declared: “Therefore, so that a spiritual bond may grow from the physical marriage, [deacons] may not send their spouses away and must live as though they had none, whereby the love of the married couple remains intact and the conjugal acts cease.”¹²

EARLY PROHIBITIONS

Encouraged by the preference for virginity in the Christian scriptures, pushed by the bias against sexual pleasure, and adopting the view that the Eucharis-

tic liturgy was a sacrifice, various local church councils began to take action against married clergymen. These councils asserted that the priestly office obliged prelates and priests to avoid the contamination of sex. In 541 the Fourth Synod of Orleans ordered that “the bishop must treat his wife as his sister.”¹³ The same synod held that “the people must not respect but scorn the priest who cohabits with his wife, for in the place of being a doctor of penitence he is a doctor of libertinage.”¹⁴ This synod also decreed that every married priest or deacon was to have a companion cleric who would follow him everywhere and have a bed in the same room where the married cleric slept.¹⁵ In the course of each week seven subdeacons or lectors had to take their nightly turns in order to maintain their anti-sexual surveillance of the married clerics.

Meeting in 583, the Synod of Lyon’s first canon decreed that married priests could not live together with their spouses. In 589 the Synod of Toledo issued canon 5, another declaration that married clerics may not live with their wives. It was difficult to enforce the prohibition against priests sleeping with their wives. However, in the centuries to come churchmen would use these synodal statements as proof-texts to establish clerical celibacy as the norm in the western church.

CELIBACY FOR BISHOPS

Bishops were the first clerics required to live as celibates. Gregory of Tours (538–594), author of the *History of the Franks*, described how Bishop Urbicus of Clermont-Ferrand tried to observe the new rule of episcopal celibacy. Conforming to the legislation, Urbicus placed his wife in a convent. But it was said that one night the devil turned the bishop’s wife into a second Eve and she found herself inflamed “with desire for her husband.”¹⁶ Pounding on the door of her husband’s lodgings, she shouted, “Bishop! Why do you scorn your lawful wife? Why do you shut your ears and refuse to listen to the words of Paul, who wrote: ‘Come together again, that Satan tempt you not.’ I am here! I am returning to you, not as to a stranger but to one who belongs to me.”¹⁷

Moved either by the urgency of her desire or by the appropriate biblical citation, the bishop admitted her to his bedroom where they had marital relations. It turned out that their marital encounter produced a daughter. But the bishop and his wife were never again intimate and the daughter grew up and became a nun. Eventually, all three were laid to rest side by side,¹⁸ thereby demonstrating that “all’s well that ends well.”

RESISTANCE TO A MARRIED CLERGY INCREASES

In the European cities those in clerical orders were a social group distinct from the laity by means of their clothing, education, and special duties. In towns and villages, however, priests had little formal education and lived lives similar to those of farmers and village craftspeople. Priestly duties were basically liturgical, consisting of baptizing infants, presiding at funerals, and offering the Eucharistic liturgy. Since there was little source of livelihood in these sacramental functions, these priests cared for their families by farming or plying a trade. Most people “were probably served by married clergy.”¹⁹

But marriage for the lower clergy had been discouraged for centuries. During the eleventh century certain clerical leaders began to “cleanse” the Catholic Church by conducting an all-out campaign against clerical marriage. That campaign was aided by the fact that some lay lords, bishops, and pastors “had only the faintest interest in Christian goodness, and even less in the advance or even preservation of learning.”²⁰ In some cases, church lands and property had been passed on as inheritance. The leaders of the attack on clerical marriage seem to have been motivated by both the desire to liberate church property from the control of laypersons and by their abhorrence of priests engaging in marital intercourse. In Milan, Italy, some promoters of clerical celibacy began invading the houses of married priests in order to drive away their wives.

A backlash to those harsh tactics developed. Guibert, the cardinal archdeacon of Milan, defended the married clergy by pointing out “that sin pertains to the individual, not to sex. For sex is holy.”²¹ But the opponents of clerical marriage attacked on two fronts, one economic and the other doctrinal. The economic argument involved such practical matters as the costs involved in supporting a priest’s family with food, shelter, and clothing. On the doctrinal front, the advocates of clerical celibacy utilized teachings of the church fathers and the statements of those bishops and popes who taught that sinfulness and lust corrupted marital relations. With nearly nine centuries’ worth of negative assessments on marital intercourse to draw from, the opponents of clerical marriage painted a dreary portrait of the ministry of the married clerics, mired as they were in the unholy activities of the marriage bed.

Peter Damian (1007–1072), cardinal-bishop of the diocese of Ostia, Italy, proposed that, since the Virgin Mary delivered the infant Jesus, only virgin priests ought to bring him forth on the Eucharistic altar.²² Damian thought that any married priest who had marital intercourse with his wife “became impure and his impurity contaminated every liturgical action he performed, sullied the sacred vessels that he touched, and defiled the sacred words that he spoke.”²³ While one might object that St. Peter himself was married, Damian

echoed St. Jerome's condemnation of sexuality by declaring, "Peter washed away the filth of marriage with the blood of his martyrdom."²⁴

The argument against a married priesthood was simple: Marriage entailed sex and sex was inseparable from lust. So Peter Damian could easily depict married priests as persons betraying their high calling because "they lived as married men, amid the reek and screams of sniveling brats, side by side with a smirking, randy wife, [and] bedeviled by daily temptations to unclean thoughts, words, and deeds."²⁵ Later on the leadership of the Catholic Church declared Peter Damian a saint and a doctor of the church.

Humbert, one of Peter Damian's contemporaries, was Pope Leo IX's apostolic delegate to the eastern church in Byzantium (present-day Istanbul). Condemning the eastern church for allowing the tradition of a married priesthood to continue, Humbert depicted the eastern rite priests in these words: "Young husbands, just now exhausted from carnal lust, serve the altar. And immediately afterward they again embrace their wives with hands that have been hallowed by the immaculate Body of Christ. That is . . . an invention of Satan."²⁶ It is not surprising that Cardinal Humbert played a key role in the schism of the Eastern Orthodox Church from the Roman Catholic Church.

CANON LAW PROHIBITS CLERICAL MARRIAGE

Although the tradition of clerical marriage had existed in both the eastern and western branches of the Christian church from the time of the apostles, much of church law was inconsistent. Then, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the advocates of priestly celibacy began to make their case by selecting only those laws that favored clerical celibacy. The resulting collections of authoritative statements favoring clerical celibacy were then offered as proof that, if married men were ordained, they must thereafter cease to have carnal intercourse with their wives.

In 1022 the Synod of Pavia passed a law prohibiting clerics from cohabiting with their wives or concubines under pain of deposition. In 1031 the Synod of Bourges ordered the wives of clerics to leave the towns where their cleric-husbands lived.²⁷ Pope Leo IX (1048–1054) outlawed clerical marriage in 1049. In 1059 Pope Nicholas II decreed that the laity were not to participate in any liturgy that was presided over by a priest who lived with his wife.

Pope Gregory VII (1073–1085) gave his ultimatum in 1074. If a married clergyman did not separate from his wife, he was to be deposed. After this ultimatum other synods and local councils passed similar legislation. In 1089 Pope Urban II decreed that all clerics who continued to live with their wives were to be removed from office. If, after being warned by a bishop, clerics

did not comply, the pope gave secular rulers permission to make slaves of clerical wives.²⁸

In 1123 the bishops at the First Lateran Council decreed that after a cleric was ordained a subdeacon, deacon, or priest, he could not validly marry. At the Synod of Clermont in 1130 Pope Innocent II decreed that marital intercourse was incompatible with holy men and their holy actions. The pope's argument was: "[S]ince priests are supposed to be God's temples, vessels of the Lord and sanctuaries of the Holy Spirit . . . it offends their dignity to lie in the conjugal bed and live in impurity."²⁹

Repeating the decrees of the First Lateran Council, the Second Lateran Council (1139) decreed "that those in the orders of subdeacon and above who have taken wives" were to be removed from their positions because "it is unbecoming that they give themselves up to marriage and impurity."³⁰ Thus the decrees of the First and Second Lateran Councils changed clerical marriage into a crime against canon law.

SUMMARY

Ever since a faction of Corinthian ascetics proposed the idea that "[i]t is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Cor. 7:1) the goodness of marital intercourse had been questioned. From the second century onward, certain churchmen began to link marital relations with lust. Then St. Augustine provided a new basis for the disapproval of marital intercourse by teaching that sexual desire was nothing more than lustful concupiscence that was the result of Adam and Eve's sin. As succeeding generations of churchmen accepted Augustine's conclusions, it was inevitable that a priest who lived with his wife would be regarded as a man polluted by lust. The canon lawyers and the advocates of clerical celibacy living in the eleventh and twelfth centuries firmly established the institution of clerical celibacy in the Catholic Church.

The opponents of clerical marriage taught that a priest had to be a man set apart by his holiness. One aspect of that holiness was the renunciation of the unholy and carnal activities of marriage. Thus the law of priestly celibacy became another contributing factor to the Catholic Church's failure to perceive that marital sexuality is good and holy for God created it so.

NOTES

1. Note the advice given to Timothy and Titus in the pastoral letters, especially 1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6ff.

2. Samuel Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality: The Emergence of Canon Law at the Synod of Elvira* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), 130.
3. Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality*, 100.
4. Laeuchli, *Power and Sexuality*, 108.
5. Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 58.
6. Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 483.
7. Ambrose, *On the Duties of Ministers*, I, 50, cited in Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 483.
8. P. Delhaye, "History of Celibacy," *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1967), 372.
9. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 358.
10. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 5.
11. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 358.
12. Pope Leo I, *Epistles*, cited in Maureen Fiedler and Linda Rabben, ed., *Rome Has Spoken* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 128.
13. Synod of Orleans (541), Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, 58.
14. Synod of Orleans (541), Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, 58.
15. Synod of Orleans (541), Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, 58.
16. Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, 59.
17. Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, 59.
18. Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, 59.
19. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 488.
20. Theodore Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 264.
21. Glen Olsen, "Marriage in Barbarian Kingdom and Christian Court," in Glen W. Olsen, ed., *Christian Marriage: A Historical Study* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 157.
22. Peter Damian, *On the Dignity of the Priest*, in Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 108.
23. Peter Damian, *Against the Intemperate Clerics*, in James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 214.
24. Peter Damian, *On the Perfection of Bishops*, in Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 108.
25. Peter Damian, *Against the Intemperate Clerics*, c. 7, in Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society*, 215.

26. Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 107.
27. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society*, 218.
28. Fiedler and Rabben, *Rome Has Spoken*, 129.
29. Fiedler and Rabben, *Rome Has Spoken*, 130.
30. Fiedler and Rabben, *Rome Has Spoken*, 130.

Canon Law Sees Nothing Spiritual in Marital Intimacy

FROM PENITENTIAL MANUALS TO CHURCH LAW

The new academic discipline of canon or church law developed in the new centers of learning that arose during the Renaissance. Those portions of canon law that dealt with marriage had their origins in the penitential handbooks first developed by the Irish monks. Those handbooks manifested the low esteem for marital intimacy that was found in the writings of the church fathers, particularly those of St. Augustine. However, the monastic code that replaced Augustine's theological synthesis was far more severe.

In the eleventh century the gloomy teachings of the Stoics, the church fathers, and the monks began to be incorporated into the new collections of church law. In the year 1010 Bishop Burchard of Worms (d. 1025) produced his law code, the *Decretum*, which can be traced back to the eighth-century penitential manuals attributed to Bede and Egbert. But Bishop Burchard's ecclesiastical legislation imposed severe penances on spouses who had relations during the times when sexual intimacy was forbidden. To have intercourse with one's wife after it was clear that she had conceived was deemed a sin. The penance was ten days of fasting. However, if a husband had relations with his wife after the child stirred in her womb, the penance was extended to twenty days of fasting on bread and water. If the husband had relations with his wife after she had delivered her child but before she was purified (thirty-three days for a boy, sixty-six for a girl), he had to atone with twenty days of fasting on bread and water.¹

Burchard's *Decretum* prohibited sex on Sundays. If the husband "stained" himself by lying with his wife during the forty days of Lenten fasting, an additional forty days of fasting were imposed.² Marital intercourse was forbidden

during the twenty days leading up to Christmas, on the twenty days before Pentecost, on fast days, on the feast days of the Apostles, and on any other major feast day.³ By means of such penances the *Decretum* declared that the spiritual life was the antithesis of marital sexuality.

GRATIAN: THE “FATHER OF CANON LAW”

In 1140 Gratian (d. 1160), a scholar of canon law at the University of Bologna, gave the Catholic Church his textbook, *A Concordance of Discordant Canons*. Among the four thousand church laws that he codified were numerous canons that incorporated the anti-sexual attitudes of church fathers, the penitential handbooks, theologians, and other churchmen. Thus, Gratian’s collection forbade husband and wife to have marital intercourse on those days that were designated as times of prayer. In the course of eleven centuries St. Paul’s concession to the Corinthian ascetics (1 Cor. 7:5) had evolved into legislation obligating married couples to abstain from marital relations on days designated as days of prayer. Those days included the day of the birth of Jesus and any other feast days, fast days, processional days, and days on which a person was performing penance.⁴ If one or both partners were planning to receive the Eucharist, they had to abstain from marital relations between three to seven days prior to taking this sacrament.⁵ Adding up the days on which couples committed sin by engaging in marital intercourse, one finds a total of nearly one hundred fifty days (and nights) of the year. Indeed, the Catholic Church had wandered far from its Jewish heritage that proclaimed that it was a special blessing to join “the holiness of the Sabbath with the holiness of marital sex.”⁶

Gratian’s *Decretum* became the standard textbook for canon law in universities throughout Europe. From the twelfth century to the publication of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, Gratian’s codification was the standard text wherever canon law was taught. Since Gratian basically followed Augustine’s marital doctrine, Gratian’s code became a major vehicle for the continuous transmission of Augustine’s attitude of pelvic anxiety as well as his promotion of the Stoic rule that the intention to conceive a child was the only non-sinful purpose for engaging in marital intercourse.

THE CODE OF CANON LAW AND MARITAL INTIMACY

The late medieval reformers, “even more than the penitential authors and earlier patristic authorities, were intent on limiting marital sex . . . as severely

as they could.”⁷ Since Gratian regarded Augustine as the great authority on marriage and marital intercourse, Gratian did much to perpetuate the idea that marital intercourse was both a result and a source of sin. His *Decretum* repeated Augustine’s rule: Engaging in marital intercourse “beyond the intention of generating” is a venial sin.⁸ But Gratian went beyond Augustine’s severity by declaring: “Those who copulate not to procreate offspring but to satisfy lust seem to be not so much spouses as fornicators.”⁹ In this ambiguous statement Gratian gave the impression that, lacking the procreative purpose, couples engaging in the marital act might well be committing a grievous sin.

There were other ambiguities. Gratian cited St. Jerome’s denunciation of spouses who engaged in marital relations during pregnancy. In his denunciation of lustful spouses, Jerome quoted with approval the remark of the Stoic philosopher, Sextus: “He who is too ardent a lover of his wife is an adulterer.”¹⁰ Such a conclusion was based on the Stoic view of what was reasonable or “natural.” After a farmer sowed his field with seed, it would be unreasonable, that is, “unnatural,” to sow new seed in that same field. Gratian’s reference to a husband’s being “too ardent a lover” suggested that whenever he had marital relations at a time when conception was unable to take place, such as it is during a woman’s pregnancy, he was committing mortal sin. Thus the Stoic rule became imbedded in church law.

HUGUCCIO THE COMMENTATOR

The canon lawyers who came after Gratian took upon themselves the task of interpreting and explaining the *Decretum* in their commentaries. Huguccio, “the chief of Gratian’s commentators,” drew inspiration for his commentary from the teachings of both St. Jerome and St. Augustine. Although Gratian only implied that seeking pleasure in marital relations was seriously sinful, Huguccio turned those implications into explicit assertions. He taught that it “is mortal sin” for spouses to seek sexual relations “in order to sate one’s lust or satisfy one’s pleasure.”¹¹

Huguccio listed four reasons why a married couple would want to have sexual relations. First, the husband and wife might want to procreate a child. Second, the couple might have relations to pay the marital debt as outlined by Paul in First Corinthians. Third, married folk might have intercourse in order to avoid the temptation to commit adultery. Fourth, the couple might seek marital relations for the sake of sexual pleasure.¹² The fourth case constituted a mortal sin. Since Huguccio thought that every act of marital intimacy was sinful, married persons committed a venial sin even when engaging in marital

intercourse for any of the first three reasons! His rationale was simple: Since marital relations always had some degree of pleasure, every marital act had some degree of sinfulness.

Six centuries earlier, Pope Gregory I (540–604) had stated that sexual pleasure was sinful. Repeating Pope Gregory’s analysis, Huguccio contended that marital intercourse “can never be without sin, for it always occurs and is exercised with a certain itching and a certain pleasure; for in the emission of the seed, there is always a certain excitement, a certain itching, a certain pleasure.”¹³ Accordingly, whenever a spouse experienced sexual pleasure, that spouse committed a light or venial sin. Whenever a spouse engaged in intercourse for the sake of experiencing sexual pleasure, he or she committed a mortal sin. That meant that if a spouse died before confessing the sin of seeking sexual pleasure in the marriage act, he or she would be condemned to hell.

There was only one way in which a husband could avoid sin while engaging in marital intercourse. If he refrained from orgasm while engaging in sexual intercourse only to satisfy his wife, he did not sin. However, even if the husband managed to refrain from ejaculating, he would still be guilty of sin if he had felt any kind of pleasure during this restricted marital activity.¹⁴

Following Huguccio

While pleasure might be “tolerated” in marital acts undertaken to conceive a child, sexual pleasure in non-reproductive sex was deemed to have no place in the “natural order.” Thus “the twelfth-century commentators on Gratian’s *Decretum* elaborated for the first time in great detail this Stoic model of marital sex, still very much alive in Roman Catholic thought.”¹⁵

Pope Innocent III (1198–1216), described as “one of the most important and powerful popes in the entire history of the Church,”¹⁶ might well have been Huguccio’s best student. Pope Innocent repeated Pope Gregory’s old opinion that branded marital intercourse as sinful, shameful, and defiling: “Who does not know that conjugal intercourse is never committed without itching of the flesh, and heat and foul concupiscence, whence the conceived seeds are befouled and corrupted?”¹⁷ Since the pope’s opinion matched those of such heretics as right-wing Gnostics, Manichees, and Cathars, John Noonan noted that Innocent III had to be writing as “a private theologian” when he expressed his opinion on the foul and corrupting aspects of marital intercourse.¹⁸ Private opinion or not, such comments manifest a widespread ecclesiastical perspective that sees nothing spiritual, holy, or noble in the acts of sexual union between spouses.

DOES CONSENT OR INTERCOURSE MAKE A MARRIAGE?

As the Roman Empire crumbled, the role of deciding on questions of the validity of contested marriages was passed on to leaders in the western church. The key question became: If marriage was a sacrament, then what or who made marriage a sacrament? Two traditions had developed. The Roman tradition held that the consent constituted the marriage. The Germanic tradition held that sexual intercourse constituted the marriage.

In the ninth century Hincmar of Reims (ca. 806–882) wanted to “Christianize” sexual consummation. To that end he suggested that carnal intercourse constituted the sacrament of marriage. But the reform-minded theologians of the eleventh and twelfth centuries opposed Hincmar’s theory. St. Peter Damian (1007–1072) vehemently objected to the idea that a marriage depended on sexual intercourse for its validity: “If indeed marriage is made by coitus, then every time a man makes love to his wife no doubt they get married all over again.”¹⁹ Thus did Peter Damian overlook the sacramental nature of the marital act. Each act of sexual union is in truth a sign of the permanent union that husband and wife entered into when they exchanged their wedding vows. Contemporary theologians see a significant relationship between the marriage act and, in the words of Peter Damian, “being married all over again.” It can be said that every marital act expresses in deed the initial commitment that bride and groom made to each other on their wedding day. On that day the groom took the bride for his wife and the bride chose the groom to be her husband. Every time husband and wife engage in the unitive act by which they become “two in one flesh,” they can be said to be renewing their marriage vows.

Gratian viewed the consent exchanged by bride and groom as obligating the two persons to marital intercourse. Theologian Peter Lombard disagreed with Gratian. Lombard saw the couple’s consent as obligating both parties “to a life in marital union with its rights and duties yet to be itemized.”²⁰ Thus, if the parties wanted, they could agree to exclude sexual relations from their marriage! Lombard wanted to protect the “validity” of the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph as well as the validity of those “spiritual marriages” in which the two parties agreed to forsake marital intercourse in order to live a more holy (i.e., sexless) married life. Lombard’s distinction led to the Catholic Church’s accepting the concept of the “virginal marriage,” a paradoxical situation brought about by a couple’s decision to marry each other while also deciding to forego their mutual claims to the exercise of the “marriage debt” (see 1 Cor. 7:3).

Pope Alexander III (1159–1181) worked out a compromise between the two theories. He decreed that a marriage takes place by consent, but he also

held that until a marriage was consummated by marital intercourse, the marriage was incomplete and could still be dissolved by the authority vested in the papacy.

THE “MARRIAGE DEBT”

A “debt” is a legal term meaning that something is “owed” to another. Once again the seventh chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is the source of another key concept in the Catholic Church’s ever-developing theology of marriage. When the Corinthian ascetics were trying to obtain approval for abstaining from all sexual relations in marriage, Paul spoke of the sexual obligations spouses owed to each other (1 Cor. 7:1–7). In the twelfth century marriage came to be viewed as a contract. Taking the Pauline text literally, canon lawyers “put the notion of debt in the center of the sex life of married couples.”²¹ For the next eight centuries the priests who heard the confessions of the faithful often asked which party requested payment of the marital debt and which partner owed the marriage debt. Churchmen would also debate the gravity of the sin of “refusing” to pay the marital debt.

Rolandus, seemingly a more perceptive canon lawyer, held the unusual view that the spouse who paid the marital debt at his or her partner’s request was performing a virtuous action.²² His fellow canon lawyers rejected his view, holding that paying the debt merely avoided the mortal sin of refusing the debt. Huguccio held that both partners always sinned no matter what. The reason Huguccio gave was this: The spouse that requested intercourse sinned by asking for something that was at least venially sinful. The spouse who complied with the request to render the marital debt would sin because pleasure in the marital act was inevitable.

NEW DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE

Duns Scotus (1266–1308), a member of the Franciscan order, took the ideas of Hugh of St. Victor (1090–1141) and then incorporated some of the thinking of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). He thus provided a definition of marriage that would stand from the thirteenth century to the twentieth: “Marriage is an indissoluble bond between a man and a woman arising from the reciprocal exchange of authority over the other’s bodies for the procreation and proper nurture of children.”²³ In essence this made the wedding ceremony a public contract in which bride and groom agreed to give each other the right to use his or her partner’s genital organs for the purpose of procreating

children. Scotus' definition of marriage guided the Catholic Church until the latest revision of the Code of Canon Law in 1983.

SUMMARY

Medieval churchmen possessed a dualistic mentality that perceived human beings as having a "lower" or animal nature and a "higher" or spiritual nature. Churchmen often demeaned marital intercourse by associating marital intercourse with the "lower" aspect of human nature. By stressing the opposition between the lower nature and the higher nature, churchmen asserted that holiness was related to an absence of sexual experience. If there was such a thing as "the joy of sex," the church's lawmakers said that such joy should be avoided because it was sinful.

Such was the process through which many Christians came to see their bodies as a hindrance to living their "spiritual" lives. This dichotomy led some medieval theologians to ask whether the Holy Spirit could be present to husband and wife during marital intercourse. St. Augustine's idea that in intercourse the man becomes "all flesh" found its medieval counterpart in Gratian's statement, "the presence of the Holy Spirit is not given at the time when conjugal acts are undertaken."²⁴

NOTES

1. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 150.

2. Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 138, 150.

3. Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*, 138, 150.

4. Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 98.

5. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire*, 98.

6. Rabbi Michael Gold, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?* (Philadelphia, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 75.

7. James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 182–83.

8. Gratian, *Decretum* (2.32 ante 3), cited in John Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 241.

9. Gratian, *Decretum* (2.32.2.1), 241.

10. Gratian, *Decretum* (2.32.4.5), 241.

11. Huguccio, *Summa* (2.32.2.2), cited in Noonan's *Contraception*, 241.

12. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 281.

13. Huguccio, *Summa* (2.32.2.1), as cited in Noonan's *Contraception*, 241–42.

14. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 281–82.
15. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 287.
16. Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997), 209.
17. Innocent III, *On the Seven Penitential Psalms*, 4, cited in Noonan's *Contraception*, 242.
18. Noonan, *Contraception*, 242. Speaking or writing as “a private theologian” means that the pope did not intend to include this idea as part of the “magisterium,” that is, as an aspect of official church teaching.
19. Peter Damian, *De tempore celebrandi nuptias* 1, cited by Brundage in *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 189.
20. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 290.
21. Phillippe Ari'ès and Andre' Be'jin, *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, trans. Anthony Forster (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1985), 117.
22. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society*, 282–83.
23. Theodore Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 326.
24. Gratian, *Harmony of Discordant Canons* (2.32.2.4), cited in Payer, *The Bridling of Desire*, 101.

Marriage Recognized as a Sacrament

THE CATHARS ATTACK MARRIAGE

The Manichaean heresy, dormant for some six hundred years, rose again to challenge the Catholic Church in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. Calling themselves “the pure ones,” the Cathars, also known as Albigensians, believed that “every pleasure of the flesh was sinful,” and so they “saw marriage as a kind of systematic debauchery.”¹ The Cathars’ rallying cry was that familiar citation mistakenly attributed to Paul: “It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor. 7:1). Adopting Jesus’ statement that in the age to come there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage (Luke 20:34), “the pure ones” declared that they were already living in that new age.

Also adopting other Manichaean beliefs, the Cathars perceived sexual intercourse as the act that led to the ultimate evil, the conception and imprisonment of a soul in corrupt human flesh. Like the Manichees, Cathars believed that the non-use of sex was useful because non-use prevented procreation. Thus the Cathars challenged the Catholic Church’s long-established position that marital intercourse was justified because it brought children into the world.

Catholic leaders opposed the Cathars by resorting to the usual heresy-fighting weapons: citing the Old Testament, appealing to Christ’s words on divorce and adultery, and ceaselessly repeating the anti-Gnostic text that “everything God created is good” (1 Tim. 4:1–5). Church leaders echoed the Stoic rule promoted by Clement of Alexandria that marital intercourse is acceptable when undertaken for procreation.² Augustine’s arguments were again rolled out since his book *The Good of Marriage* had earlier “saved marriage” from Manichaean attack.

MARRIAGE: COULD IT BE A SACRAMENT?

St. Paul, writing that widows were free to marry provided they did so “in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39), had contributed the earliest Christian principle on marrying. About the year 110, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch stated that “those who are married should be united with the consent of their bishop, to be sure that they are marrying according to the Lord and not to satisfy their lust.”³

During the early centuries of the Christian era, believers had married civilly according to the laws of the Roman Empire. By the fifth century the clergy began to participate in the marriage ceremony. By the eighth century weddings held in churches were becoming more numerous.⁴ However, such a negative bias against marital intimacy had been in development since the early centuries of the church’s existence that only in the twelfth century did theologians begin to think about marriage as a sacrament in the same sense that baptism and the Eucharist are sacraments.

Peter Abelard

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) thought of marriage as “merely remedy,” that is, as a bulwark against being controlled by sexual desire. Like Peter Lombard, Abelard held the view that marriage was a sacrament different from every other sacrament because marriage did not confer the gift of sanctifying grace that makes a person holy through union with God.⁵ Thus Abelard’s opinion followed the Augustinian tradition. Marriage was not “a means of Grace,” but a “remedy for concupiscence for those unable to remain celibate.”⁶ Separating marriage from the other sacraments, Abelard perceived sacramental marriage as an institution yielding a very low-grade giftedness that might keep marital intercourse from being sinful.

When Abelard fell in love with his student, Heloise, he married her. Perhaps that led him to realize that marital intercourse was both beneficial and natural.⁷ But Abelard met hostility when he offered a liberal interpretation of Augustine’s ideas concerning original sin, concupiscence, and marital intercourse. Abelard had argued that if Christians married for the general purpose of procreating children, then marriage excused “those acts of intercourse which occur without this intention.”⁸

St. Bernard of Clairveaux (1090–1153) bitterly opposed Abelard’s interpretations. Bernard was a Cistercian abbot, a preacher of the Second Crusade, a confidante of popes, and a spiritual writer of great merit. Concluding that Abelard’s ideas were too dangerous to let stand, Bernard had Abelard’s liberal interpretation of Augustine’s theology condemned at the Council of Sens in 1140.⁹

Hugh of St. Victor's Theory of Marriage

Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1090–1141) provided a systematic analysis of marriage that influenced such great scholastic thinkers as Peter Lombard and St. Bonaventure. Hugh, like other medieval theologians, possessed a religious sentiment that “shrank from the thought that the mother of Jesus, after his birth, had endured the contamination of carnal intercourse or the degrading pleasures of the conjugal bed.”¹⁰ In order to protect Mary’s dignity while still maintaining that she was married to Joseph, Hugh of St. Victor wrote his treatise, *On the Virginity of Mary*. Hugh wanted to justify two points of belief. First, Mary deliberately chose to remain a virgin for the whole of her life. Second, she was truly married to Joseph. Hugh demonstrated the reasonableness of these two assertions by making some clever distinctions.

Hugh distinguished two consents in marriage—the consent to marry and the consent to grant sexual intercourse to the spouse who asks for it. The first consent, the consent to marry, constituted the marriage. But the second consent, the granting of the marriage debt, was not necessary. The man and woman consenting to marry could choose to forego making the second consent. Thus the “obligation to have intercourse does not bind spouses who have not made the second kind of consent explained above, even though they are married for having made the first consent.”¹¹ Thus Hugh argued that Mary and Joseph were truly married even though they never participated in marital intercourse.

Hugh’s argument for the validity of the marriage of Mary and Joseph ended up supplying the Catholic Church with two forms of marriage. In one form the couple first consented to marry and then selfishly consented to have marital relations. In the other form the couple exchanged consent but then agreed to forego all marital intercourse in order to love each other selflessly. Having idealized the virginal marriage of Mary and Joseph, Hugh of St. Victor concluded that holiness in a marriage was proportional to the degree that marital intercourse was absent. Thus those who married without agreeing to forego marital intercourse were choosing the unholy and unspiritual form of marriage.

The marriage of Mary and Joseph also represented the ideal, for in this marriage the holy couple combined the excellence of virginity with Augustine’s three goods of marriage: offspring (Jesus), fidelity (no adultery), and stability (no divorce). To a great extent the marriage of Mary and Joseph “became the pattern to which all Christian marriage must conform; consequently it was inevitable that consent should be regarded as the essential, and [sexual] consummation an incidental, element in the formation of matrimony.”¹²

Peter Lombard: Author of *Sentences*

Throughout the twelfth century sacramental theology continued to develop through the process of analysis and debate. While teaching in Paris, Peter Lombard (ca. 1095–1160), bishop and doctor of theology, produced his *Sentences*. While recognizing the sacramental status of matrimony, Lombard downgraded its status by teaching that sacramental marriage was a mere remedy for sin, not a cause of grace.¹³

Here is how Lombard reached his conclusion about the lack of grace in marriage. To begin with, St. Paul had stated that those who married served God with a divided heart (1 Cor. 7:32–35). Thus it was difficult for medieval theologians to see marriage in terms of any grace-giving goodness. Then, following in the footsteps of the fathers of the church, those same medieval theologians interpreted Paul as teaching that people should marry only if they could not quash the fires of sexual desire (1 Cor. 7:8–9). Furthermore, the “common wisdom” of the fathers and medieval theologians held that the desire for sexual pleasure was basically uncontrollable. It followed, therefore, that marriage was seen as serving as the God-given remedy for avoiding sins of masturbation, fornication, and adultery.

In addition, there were three other reasons why marriage was “merely remedy” for sin. First, marriage arrangements involved financial exchanges; second, marriage existed before the coming of Jesus; and third, marriage almost always included sexual intercourse. The presence of sexual intercourse was the chief reason for holding that marriage could not be a cause of grace.¹⁴

Connections: Augustine and Bonaventure

When medieval theologians and canonists speculated on the sacramental status of marriage, they first looked at God’s institution of “natural marriage.” Then they speculated on why and when Jesus elevated marriage to sacramental status. All the while they strove to conform their thinking to the traditional views expressed by the fathers of the church, particularly St. Augustine. All this was a difficult balancing act and most of the time it was the goodness in marital intimacy that was dropped.

St. Bonaventure (1217–1274) provided another example of the way scholastic theologians expanded the domain of theological understanding while staying within the perimeters set up by the fathers of the church. As medieval theologians were wont to do, Bonaventure used ingenious distinctions thought up by earlier theologians. He distinguished between “two institutions of marriage”—namely, marriage as a vocation and marriage as a remedy for concupiscence. Next, he distinguished between the two moments of institu-

tion, the first institution of marriage taking place before Adam and Eve's sin and the second taking place after they had sinned. God's institution of marriage as a "dutiful vocation" came before the first sin. Augustine had focused on the biblical statement that God had given Eve to Adam as a helpmate (Gen. 2:18) and concluded that the only way Eve could be a helpmate was by bearing children. Bonaventure agreed and declared that the moment in which God gave Eve to Adam was the moment in which God created marriage as a "dutiful vocation."

Next Bonaventure speculated on Augustine's notion of concupiscence. Both men thought that prior to the first sin there was no sexual arousal and no pleasure-filled climax in the process of conceiving a child. But after Adam and Eve had sinned, sexual intercourse became infected with lustful concupiscence. So Bonaventure proposed a second moment of the institution of marriage—namely, marriage as a remedy for concupiscence. Thus God had instituted marriage in a two-step process, one step taken before the sin of Adam and Eve and the other step taken after their sin.

Bonaventure's theory left no legitimate theological rationale for sexual enjoyment. So he concluded that "the generative act is a sin unless it is excused."¹⁵ But there was only one way marital intercourse could be "excused": The two spouses were obliged to think of nothing but the goal of their marital act—namely, the conception of a child. The partners would avoid sin "only if this motive lasts from beginning to end, so that the mind is not turned aside to anything else."¹⁶ Such control, Bonaventure speculated, was "very difficult."¹⁷ Even if husband and wife began their sexual activity for the purpose of conceiving a child, they could still find themselves offending God by sinfully taking delight in their act of sexual union.

Bonaventure and other churchmen agreed that there had to be some real "usefulness" in each and every act of marital intercourse. The only acceptable (non-sinful) usefulness was procreation. While it is true that fidelity, Augustine's second good of marriage, was also useful, initiating intercourse for the purpose of preserving fidelity was not judged to be "excusable." So the partner seeking sexual relief committed a venial sin in requesting intercourse with his or her spouse. The "good news" was that the requesting spouse might be avoiding a mortal sin of adultery by committing only a light sin to preserve fidelity.

Augustine's third good of marriage was "the good of sacrament." Marriage signified the indissoluble union of Jesus and his church. But Jesus had been sinless. Marital intercourse and its fleshly pleasures were associated with sin. Operating within such established biases, it was all but impossible for a canonist or theologian to propose the idea that sexual intercourse between a husband and wife might be a sign of Jesus' love for his body, the church.

SUMMARY

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries marriage came to be viewed as a sacrament, but the Catholic Church had not yet determined that there were seven sacraments. Most theologians regarded marital intercourse as a venially sinful endeavor when not undertaken for the purpose of conceiving offspring. The reasoning behind this view was grounded in the tradition that marriage's most characteristic behavior, sexual intercourse, seldom escaped being sinful and that such sexual behavior was, according to Augustine's theory of original sin, "the conveyor of inherited sinfulness."¹⁸

St. Augustine's thinking about marriage had dominated the theology of marriage during the eight centuries following his death. The thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, to whom we turn next, would dominate Roman Catholic thinking from the thirteenth century to the twentieth.

NOTES

1. Theodore Mackin, *What Is Marriage?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 177.
2. John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 234.
3. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Polycarp* 5, cited in Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1982), 407.
4. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 413–14.
5. Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 303.
6. Peter J. Elliott, *What God Has Joined. . . . The Sacramentality of Marriage* (New York: Alba House, 1990), 88.
7. James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 187.
8. Peter Abelard, *Problems of Heloise*, 42, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 238.
9. Noonan, *Contraception*, 238–39.
10. Derrick S. Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 138.
11. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 294.
12. Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought*, 139.
13. Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, cited in James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, revised edition (Nashville: Abington Press, 1990), 175–76.
14. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 428.
15. Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Four Books of Sentences*, d. 31, a. 2, q. 1, cited in Joseph Kerns, *The Theology of Marriage* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 58.
16. Kerns, *The Theology of Marriage*, d. 31, a. 2, q. 1, 63.
17. Kerns, *The Theology of Marriage*, d. 31, a. 2, q. 1, 63.
18. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 304.

St. Thomas Aquinas: Modifications and Qualifications

MARRIAGE: BOTH GRACE AND SEXUAL PLEASURE?

Using Aristotelian philosophy as theology's "handmaid," Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) wrote his long introduction to theology, the *Summa Theologica*. Working with an analytical format, Aquinas would choose a topic, present a question related to that topic, list objections, give his own opinion on the question, and then reply to the objections. In this manner Aquinas approached the topic of marriage.¹

St. Thomas Aquinas' mentor, St. Albert the Great (1200–1280), thought that it was "highly probable"² that marriage conveyed sanctifying grace. Thomas agreed, proposing that the natural state of marriage was capable of being elevated to sacramental status in Christ. That grace came in the form of divine help that enabled married couples to use their generative organs to achieve the primary end of marriage, which was the begetting of children: "Since in matrimony man receives by Divine institution the faculty to use his wife for the begetting of children, he also receives the grace without which he cannot becomingly do so."³

Some theologians maintained that sacraments could "effect" or "bring about" what they signified only through Jesus' redemptive sufferings. Those theologians argued that marriage "is not a sacrament" because, having pleasure annexed to it, marriage "does not conform man to Christ's Passion, which was painful."⁴ Aquinas insightfully replied to that objection: "Although Matrimony is not conformed to Christ's Passion as regards pain, it is as regards charity, whereby He suffered for the Church who was to be united to Him as His spouse."⁵

Thus Aquinas saw the suffering and death of Jesus not only in terms of pain but also in terms of love, as expressed in Ephesians 5:25–32. If Jesus' passion was a sign of his love (charity) for the church, then marriage was indeed conformed to Jesus' passion. A sacrament, being a sign, must signify something. According to Aquinas, the love of husband for wife and wife for husband signified the love (charity) that Jesus had for his church. This linking of the love of husband and wife with the love of Jesus and his church might have opened up a fresh approach to the understanding of love being expressed through marital intercourse. But Aquinas missed that opportunity. One reason for the disconnection between marital intercourse and the expression of love was the medieval theory that marital intercourse was not an essential aspect of marriage. In answering the question, "Whether carnal intercourse is an integral part of this sacrament?" Aquinas replied: "A sacrament by its very name denotes a sanctification. But matrimony is holier without carnal intercourse. . . . Therefore carnal intercourse is not necessary for the sacrament."⁶ This reply tells us much about why it would be a long journey toward a spirituality of marital sexuality. Sanctity or holiness was deemed to be located in the absence of marital intercourse. Churchmen had placed the flesh (the carnal) in direct opposition to sanctity (the spiritual/the holy). "Matrimony is holier without carnal intercourse," wrote Aquinas. This was a view far removed from the assertions of Genesis and Jesus. God's creation of male and female (Gen. 1:27) and Adam's joyful shout (Gen. 2:24) were expendable. The implication seems to be that a sexless humankind would have been a better creation.

THE PURPOSES OF MARITAL INTERCOURSE

Influenced far more by Aristotelian philosophy than by Platonism, Aquinas renamed Augustine's three "goods of marriage" by referring to them as the three "ends" or "purposes of marriage." Aquinas next divided the three ends into "primary" and "secondary." Offspring, Augustine's "first good of marriage," was recast as "the procreation and the education of children." This combination came to be known as "the primary purpose of marriage." As a result of Aquinas' recasting of the good of offspring as the "principal end," the distinction between the primary and secondary ends of marriage dominated the discussion of marriage in the Catholic Church for the next seven hundred years.⁷

Rendering the "marital debt" was a secondary purpose of marriage. The traditional teaching had been that the partner requesting the "marital debt" committed a venial sin while the partner who yielded to the request com-

mitted no sin. Raising the question whether fidelity, the secondary end of marriage, could justify or “excuse” a couple’s engaging in sexual intercourse, Aquinas gave a positive answer. He based his conclusion on the Pauline precept, “Let the husband render the debt to his wife.”⁸ Justice demanded that husband or wife give his or her partner what was owed—namely, the act of marital intercourse.

Such a reply left an opening to other questions: What if, in giving what was owed, the spouses acted not out of justice but out of love? Would such a sexual act be meritorious? Aquinas held that any merit in the marital act depended upon the intentions of both husband and wife to conform themselves to the primary and secondary purposes of marriage. Therefore, the spouses engaging in marital relations performed a meritorious act only if they had one of two intentions: “For if the motive for the marriage act be a virtue, whether of justice that they may render the debt, or of religion, that they may beget children for the worship of God, it is meritorious.”⁹

Thus, the marital act would be virtuous on the condition that both partners intended to procreate a child or to render the marriage debt. However, the marital act would be sinful if motivated by sexual desire. Whether the sin would be serious or not also depended on the husband’s motives. Aquinas explained: “But if the motive be lust, yet not excluding the marriage blessings, namely that he would by no means be willing to go to another woman, it is a venial sin; while if he exclude the marriage blessings [the goods of fidelity and sacrament], so as to be disposed to act in like manner with any woman, it is a mortal sin.”¹⁰

SEXUAL PLEASURE: GOOD OR EVIL?

St. Albert disagreed with Augustine’s theory that there was no sexual pleasure before the first sin. Albert proposed that the sexual activity of Adam and Eve in Paradise would have been accompanied with even more pleasure than was presently experienced by human beings.¹¹ Speculating that Adam and Eve had experienced “greater purity of nature and greater sensibility of the body,”¹² Aquinas agreed with his mentor. This speculation might have led to an important breakthrough if he had concluded that the less intense pleasure in earthly marriages was also good. But Aquinas was unable to break away from Augustine’s teaching that sexual pleasure was one of the results of Adam and Eve’s sin.

St. Albert had also proposed that Adam and Eve’s sin had weakened the reasoning ability of human beings. In that weakened condition human beings were not able to enjoy sexual pleasure without temporarily losing sight of

God, the first good.¹³ Thus the evil in the sexual is that it “effectively distracts the mind from the contemplation of God.”¹⁴ Aquinas refined that idea by proposing that the evil in sexual relations was located in the husband’s loss of rational control at the moment of orgasm.¹⁵

When Aquinas spoke of the loss of control over the physical dynamics of intercourse, he was agreeing with some of Augustine’s speculations in *The City of God*. Augustine had singled out the human genitals as the chief locus of the effects of original sin. Aquinas noted “that the infection of original sin is most apparent in the movements of the members of generation, which are not subject to reason.”¹⁶ Aquinas also thought that a man’s lack of rational control over his arousal and orgasm was the result of “the infection of original sin.”¹⁷ Although all aspects of the human soul were seen as “corrupted by original sin,” the three aspects pertaining to human sexual response were most deeply infected—namely, “the generative power, the concupiscible faculty and the sense of touch.”¹⁸ The sense of touch was “the most powerful incentive to concupiscence.”¹⁹ Thus, Aquinas linked an integral aspect of marital intimacy, the physical touching of one another’s bodies, with the effects of original sin. This lack of appreciation for sexual pleasure, thoroughly embedded in a systematic theology of original sin, would basically express the church’s view of marital sexuality for the next seven centuries.

Debates about Sexual Pleasure

Following Augustine’s line of thought, popes, bishops, canonists, and theologians considered it their duty to warn husbands about the evils of ejaculatory pleasure. William of Auxerre (d. 1231), for example, had distinguished between enjoying pleasure and “suffering pleasure.”²⁰ Deeply influenced by western Christianity’s adoption of the Stoic outlook, William taught that a holy man is displeased when he feels any pleasure in the act undertaken to procreate children. Peter Cantor and his student, Cardinal Courcon, agreed with William. Although intercourse might have been initiated for the good purpose of procreating, Cantor and Courcon assumed that the husband committed venial sin by yielding to the “delight of the flesh.”²¹

But, to his credit, Aquinas disagreed. If husband and wife were motivated by the intention to procreate or to render the marriage debt, they acted meritoriously, even if they experienced pleasure in the marital act. Using Aristotelian categories of thought, Aquinas pointed out that it would be irrational for married people to “detest” what was good. Despising sexual pleasure in the act of marital intercourse “is impossible, since according to the Philosopher . . . the same judgment applies to pleasure as to action, because pleasure in a good action is good, and in an evil action evil.”²² At last, after more than

a thousand years of churchly theologizing on marital intercourse, someone clearly stated that the pleasure experienced in the marital act could be good! Pleasure simply followed the performance of certain actions. If the action was good (virtuous), a person need not worry about rejecting the resulting pleasure.

It was common for churchmen to contend that sexual pleasure reduced the male to an animal state. This had been Augustine's conclusion: "[I]n intercourse man becomes all flesh." While Aquinas agreed with his predecessors that there was a loss of rational control in the purely "animal act" of sexual intercourse, he added a distinction. In marital intercourse spouses exercised reason *before* engaging in marital relations. Thus they were acting rationally before they experienced the loss of reason in orgasm. Thomas Aquinas thus dismissed the idea that the "perfect" use of the marital act required husband and wife to reject sexual pleasure.

But then, taking away with his left hand what he had given with his right, Aquinas asked "[w]hether it is a mortal sin for a man to have knowledge of his wife, with the intention not of a marriage good but merely of pleasure?" He answered that this marital act would be a mortal sin because "such a man is said to be too ardent a lover of his wife, because his ardor carries him away from the goods of marriage."²³

Aquinas and the medieval theologians were skilled in the art of making precise distinctions. Thus they distinguished "seeking" pleasure from "experiencing" pleasure. It was thought that seeking sexual pleasure was an activity proper only to animals, not human beings. Therefore, *seeking* sexual pleasure was "beneath" human nature because this was to seek something human beings had in common with animals. According to this medieval reasoning, sexual pleasure could not be seen as an authentic human good. Authentic human good could only be found in those activities that were directed toward "higher" or "rational" ends or purposes. It was rational to engage in sex for the end or purpose of procreation. But acting for the sake of sexual pleasure was not rational because the act lacked a rational purpose. It was a sin to act "irrationally."

Experiencing sexual pleasure was a different matter. According to Aquinas, when spouses sought those purposes that were properly human (i.e., the procreation of children or the rendering of the marriage debt), the accompanying *experience* of sexual pleasure was not sinful. In such a context the experience of sexual pleasure was justified because the spouses were seeking the purposes of sexual intercourse as had been determined by human reasoning. Following such principles, a husband had to make some very fine-tuned distinctions when he found himself becoming sexually aroused. He needed to ask himself if he was about to "use" his wife as his wife with the intention

to procreate a child, or was he only intending to seek sexual enjoyment with her? If the latter, he committed a mortal sin. If he only intended to procreate a child, there was no sin. If he was intending both conception and pleasure, he committed a venial sin.

“NATURE” GOVERNS MARITAL INTERCOURSE

If it was “natural” for a couple to engage in intercourse for the sake of conserving the human species, then engaging in sexual intercourse without the purpose of conserving the human species was “unnatural.” Aquinas wrote: “Whoever, therefore, uses copulation for the delight which is in it, not referring the intention to the end intended by nature, acts against nature.”²⁴ Aquinas reached this conclusion because he thought that God had willed only one function for the marital act—namely, the biological function of reproduction.

For that same reason Aquinas also concluded that it would be “against nature” for a husband and wife to engage in marital relations for the sake of friendship. “Nature” designated that which is essentially needed. While procreation is essentially needed, friendship between the procreating partners is not essentially needed. Therefore, friendship between spouses was superfluous.²⁵ This is a strange conclusion, but it echoes another medieval idea: Marriage could be a marriage even when husband and wife agree to forego all acts of intercourse.

Couples would also act “unnaturally” if they engaged in sexual relations for the “sake of health.” Some thirteenth-century theologians speculated that a married couple could rightly engage in intercourse to relieve stress or tension on the grounds that sexual relations were good for the health of husband and wife. Aquinas disagreed: “Although it is not evil in itself to intend to keep oneself in good health, this intention becomes evil if one intends health by something that is not naturally ordained for that purpose; for instance, if one sought only bodily health by the sacrament of baptism; and the same applies to the act of coitus.”²⁶

Aquinas’ mentor, St. Albert, taught that to depart from the “natural position” for human intercourse, the husband on top of his wife, was to become like the “brute animals.”²⁷ Applying a Stoic perspective, Aquinas elaborated on that concept. “By not observing the natural manner of copulation, either as to undue means, or as to other monstrous and bestial manners of copulation,” the married couple committed sin by going “contrary to the natural order of the venereal act as becoming to the human race.”²⁸ Intercourse with the man behind the woman was also “unnatural” because it was deemed proper to animals, not humans.

Problems in Aquinas' Biological Perspective

From a strictly biological point of view, Aquinas was correct in asserting that the function of intercourse was reproduction. But human organs may have more than one biological function. The human tongue functions as an organ for eating. But the tongue also functions as an organ for speaking. Should it be "unnatural" to use our tongues for the purpose of speaking when they were obviously intended for eating? Might marital intercourse also have a relational purpose that enables spouses to express their affection for each other? Aquinas never addressed that question because he assumed that human sexual behavior was appropriate to human beings as animals. He viewed the essence of animal sexual behavior as being purely generative.

It is problematic to hold that a particular bodily organ has one exclusive function. But, following the Stoics, churchmen had proposed that the seeding of fields and the reproductive behavior of animals were valid paradigms for marital behavior. From the thirteenth century through the twentieth, Aquinas' concept of a "natural" fixed essence of animal sexual behavior that was purely generative was the foundational principle of the Catholic Church's theology of marital intercourse.

FRIENDSHIP AND MARITAL INTERCOURSE

Following Aristotle's comments on friendship, Aquinas made some astute observations on the nature of the love of friendship. "Perfect love," wrote Aquinas, "is that whereby a man is loved in himself, as when someone wishes a person some good for his own sake; thus a man loves his friend."²⁹ However, Thomas Aquinas did not see that sexual intercourse between married spouses could be instrumental in fostering the love of husband for his wife and the love of wife for her husband. Instead, Aquinas drove a wedge between the love of friendship and marital loving.

Augustine's pejorative concept, "concupiscence," had soured Aquinas' thinking on sexual relations between spouses. Therefore, Aquinas divided love into two categories, the love of friendship and the love of concupiscence.³⁰ Love of friendship was true love but "love of concupiscence" was perceived as selfish and therefore had nothing to recommend it to theology's fond embrace. In treating the relation between love and marital intercourse Thomas Aquinas could have chosen the road not yet taken. But he decided, with some modification, to take the well-traveled highway of Augustine's sexual pessimism.

It had taken the western church's theologians nearly eight hundred years to transform Augustine's third good, *sacramentum*, or "stability" (once mar-

ried neither partner could marry anyone else), into “sacrament” in the same sense that baptism is a sacrament. Noting that marriage is a sacred sign of the union of Christ and his church, St. Thomas concluded: “And so a good of marriage is called sacrament.”³¹ Augustine’s three “goods” of marriage became Aquinas’ three “ends” of marriage: “The first end [procreation] is found in marriage in so far as man is animal, the second [fidelity] in so far as he is man, the third [sacrament] in so far as he is believer.”³²

SUMMARY

The belief that the Word was made flesh (John 1:14) is foundational for Christianity. Surprisingly, two of the greatest minds in the history of the Catholic Church, Sts. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, thought that the seeking of pleasure in marital intercourse was an insult to God, the “Supreme Lord of our body.”³³

Although Hinduism and Buddhism taught that human embodiment is illusory, the religions of the East developed an entirely different attitude toward human sexuality. The leaders of the eastern religions developed “yogic exercises to perfect the body as spiritual instrument and tantric ritual to relate sex to spirituality.”³⁴ Until the twentieth century there is little “awareness of God’s presence in sexual relationship” in the western Christian tradition.

NOTES

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (*Supplementum*), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947). The *Supplementum* is an arrangement of Aquinas’ material on marriage from his *Commentary on the Sentences*. After Thomas died, Reynaldo of Piperno took Thomas’ writings from the *Commentary on the Sentences* and arranged it according to the method used in the *Summa Theologica*. I am assuming that Reynaldo was generally faithful in transmitting the gist of Thomas’ thought. What is taken from the *Supplementum* will be attributed to Thomas throughout this chapter.

2. Peter J. Elliott, *What God Has Joined. . . The Sacramentality of Marriage* (New York: Alba House, 1990), 89.

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 42, art. 3, commentary 2717.

4. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 42, art. 1, obj. 3, 2715.

5. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), reply obj. 3, 2715.

6. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 42, sed contra. 2, 718.

7. Michael Lawler, *Marriage and Sacrament: A Theology of Christian Marriage* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 61.

8. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 41, art. 4, 2, 714.
9. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 41, art. 4, 2, 714.
10. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 41, art. 4, 2, 714.
11. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), 134.
12. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 98, art. 2, 494.
13. Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought*, 134.
14. Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought*, 134.
15. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 34, reply obj. 1, 737.
16. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 83, art. 4, sed contra, 961.
17. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 83, art. 4, sed contra, 961.
18. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 83, art. 4, commentary, 961–62.
19. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 83, art. 4, commentary, 961.
20. William of Auxerre, *Summa Aurea*, Fol. 288r, cited in John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 242.
21. Abellan, *En Fin*, 106, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 242.
22. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 49, art. 6, commentary, 2, 742.
23. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III (Suppl.), q. 49, art. 6, commentary, 2, 742.
24. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Books of the Sentences*, 4.33.1.3, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 293.
25. Theodore Mackin, *What Is Marriage?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 179–80.
26. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Four Books of the Sentences*, 4.31.2.2, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 294.
27. Albert the Great, *On the Sentences*, 4.31.24, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 293.
28. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 154, art. 11, commentary, 1, 825.
29. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 17, art. 8, commentary, 1, 247.
30. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 28, art. 1, 709.
31. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 65, art. 1, 2, 808.
32. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 65, art. 1, 2, 808.
33. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 153, art. 3, obj. 2 and reply, 1, 812.
34. Mary Ann McPherson Oliver, *Conjugal Spirituality* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 81–82.

Some Attempts to See Other Values in Marital Intercourse

MORAL THEOLOGY AND MARRIAGE

Moral theology deals with human choices, values, and actions. Since the first centuries of Christianity's existence, theologians and leaders had based their view of human nature on both Zeno's emotion-denying Stoicism and Plato's dualistic vision of the world of sense perception and the ideal world of eternal forms. But these philosophical preferences led to the perception of human emotions as dangerous threats to both spiritual and rational living. During the thirteenth century Aquinas had joined Aristotle's rationalism to the Stoic view of the human person. But still the affective dimension of the person continued to be discounted.

Richard Middleton (d. 1307), an English Franciscan priest, was the first significant theologian to propose that seeking pleasure in the marital act was morally acceptable. Middleton made three important points. First, he disagreed with Augustine's opinion that seeking pleasure in marital relations was a matter of yielding to concupiscence. Middleton held there is an important difference between satiating concupiscence and seeking moderate marital pleasure.¹ Thus there was no sin in a couple's seeking moderate delight. Second, Middleton followed through on Aristotle's thinking in a way that Thomas Aquinas did not. If, as Aristotle had taught, the regulation of delight is virtue, then seeking delight cannot be evil in itself.² If husband and wife decided to enjoy marital relations, they would commit no sin in doing so. Third, Middleton proposed that seeking intercourse with one's spouse is an act of chastity. As long as husband and wife had at the back of their minds the idea that they would not be enjoying sexual relations without the decency of marriage between them, they were acting in accord with the virtue of chastity.³

But the church's leaders could not rid themselves of Augustine's view that sexual pleasure came from concupiscence, a result of Adam and Eve's sin. So Middleton was ignored.

A MONK'S OPINIONS

Dennis (1402–1471), a Carthusian monk, held that engaging in the marital act for enjoyment had to be sinful because this teaching was “common and more secure and more consonant with that of Augustine.”⁴ Responding to a request for some instruction on living the Christian life as married persons, Dennis wrote *The Praiseworthy Life of the Married*. He said that when the marital act was performed for the sake of procreation or to pay the marital debt, the act was good.

Dennis also offered ideas regarding certain aspects of married love: “The love of husband and wife should be ‘multiple, special, cordial.’ They should love each other with a spiritual love, desiring each other’s salvation; they should love each other with a natural love as fellow creatures; they should love each other with a social love, as human beings who share each other’s lives.”⁵ But Dennis still had a problem: Should married people “love each other with a carnal love?” Referring to the traditional opinion, Dennis answered: “It appears that they should not, because carnal love is entirely unclean and tainted with sin, as the theologians say.”⁶

But he also knew that certain theologians were of the opinion “that married couples can love each other blamelessly with carnal love.”⁷ Perhaps carnal love might be legitimate because God “joined” pleasure to the marriage act. Even so, such enjoyment had to be yoked with its “proper aim,” that is, procreation or rendering the marriage debt.⁸ Committing himself where Aquinas had waffled, Dennis consistently applied Aristotle’s analysis of pleasure. If an act was good, then the pleasure that followed the act was also good. Dennis concluded: “Therefore the pleasure from a good and virtuous act is good; and to the extent that it is good, it can be desired.”⁹

Dennis’ opinion that sexual pleasure can be both desired and good might have served as a breakthrough in Catholic moral reasoning. But Dennis belonged to an insignificant monastery and he wrote *The Praiseworthy Life of the Married* for a small audience of acquaintances. His writing changed nothing. While churchmen paid scant attention to his work, Dennis must be recognized as one of the first writers to present an analysis of marital relations that clearly went beyond the limitations placed by the Stoic rule and Augustine’s sexual pessimism.¹⁰

MARTIN LE MAISTRE

Unlike Dennis the Carthusian, who came and went without much notice, Martin Le Maistre (1432–1481) was noticed and then rejected. Teaching at the University of Paris, Le Maistre boldly challenged both the sexual pessimism of the church fathers and the overly rationalist analyses of the purposes of marital intercourse made by Aquinas and other late medieval theologians.

Le Maistre's book, *Moral Questions*, was published posthumously in 1490. While Martin's approach seems like simple "common sense," his contemporaries regarded his thought as being too radical.¹¹ Using the Aristotelian concept of virtue as the means between two extremes, Le Maistre defined "conjugal chastity" as "a mean between immodesty and insensibility."¹² Thus Le Maistre steered a course between two unacceptable alternatives. "Immodesty" applied to those married persons who could be accused of loving each other with the passion of adulterers. "Insensibility" was the fault of those who stoically tried to avoid the feelings of sexual pleasure. Le Maistre modestly asserted that "not every copulation of spouses not performed to generate offspring is an act opposed to conjugal chastity."¹³ Challenging Augustine, Aquinas, and most churchmen, Le Maistre declared that spouses could act virtuously when they engaged in marital intercourse for other reasons besides the procreation of a child.

And so Le Maistre offered his non-sinful reasons for engaging in marital intercourse: the case of a spouse's response to a request for the rendering of the marital debt; the debated case of having relations to avoid the temptation to commit adultery; and the case rejected by St. Thomas Aquinas—namely, the seeking of bodily health. To these Le Maistre added a new purpose, that of "calming the mind." He wrote: "It sometimes happens that the desire of lust is so vehement, and so disturbs the mind, that a man is scarcely master of himself."¹⁴

Le Maistre recognized the legitimacy of strong sexual feelings when he reasoned that married people could morally engage in sexual intimacy to calm the mind. He was one of the first theologians to break away from the attribution of sexual longings to mere carnal lust. He also proposed that it was lawful for spouses to respond to their sexual feelings. There was no sin in a husband's having sexual relations with his spouse "given to him for the sake of solace and remedy."¹⁵

Thus, Le Maistre directly challenged traditional theological conclusions by denying that it was a venial sin to undertake marital intercourse to avoid fornication. He also denied that it was a mortal sin to engage in marital relations for the sake of obtaining pleasure. Le Maistre had confronted more than

a thousand years of theological consensus about the sinfulness of marital relations by stating, “It isn’t so.” But it would take another five hundred years before the Catholic Church would agree with this theologian.

Responding to objections that might be raised, Le Maistre said that Augustine’s objection to seeking pleasure in marital relations was aimed at “immoderate” and “unnatural” intercourse. When it came to the traditional teaching that seeking pleasure in marital intercourse was serving lust, Le Maistre declared: “This is not to serve lust, but to place lust under the yoke of reason.”¹⁶ He also noted that the traditional doctrine was a danger to people’s salvation. Some moral theologians were telling husbands that giving into sexual desire for their wives was almost as sinful as indulging in sex with any woman at all!¹⁷ Finally, he argued against those theologians who said that sexual intercourse with one’s pregnant wife was sinful. Some wives are “immediately made pregnant.” When that happens, the strict moralists “expose to the danger of mortal sin whoever seeks the debt.”¹⁸

With such reasoning Le Maistre might have helped believers escape from centuries of negative thinking about marital intimacy. Unfortunately, his *Moral Questions* “did not . . . make a dent on scholastic theology.”¹⁹

JOHN MAJOR: ANOTHER REJECTED MORAL THEOLOGIAN

A Scottish theologian, John Major (1470–1550), took note of Le Maistre’s ideas. In surveying the ancient authorities and their opinions on the legitimate use of marital intercourse, Major concluded that many of the church’s doctors, bishops, saints, and theologians were “far too rigid.”²⁰ Not at all awed by Augustine, Major stated that the saints “must be interpreted narrowly where they speak extremely.”²¹ Noting Huggucio’s opinion that all experience of sexual pleasure in the marital act was at least venially sinful, Major concluded that the idea was “most absurd.”²²

Summing up his argument regarding the non-sinfulness of marital intercourse, Major stated: “Whatever men say, it is difficult to prove that a man sins in knowing his own wife for the sake of having pleasure.”²³ To emphasize his point, he said that it was no more a sin to engage in marital intercourse for the pleasure in it than “to eat a handsome apple for the pleasure of it.”²⁴ However, Major would not take this opinion to the public. He stated that his views were not “for the crowd” and suggested that married people might learn about his views in private counseling or from priests in the confessional.²⁵

ANTI-PLEASURE TRADITIONS REASSERTED

For the next hundred years the ideas of Le Maistre and Major were met with hostility. Both men were unable to cite any precedent for their ideas in the writings of the church fathers or other medieval theologians. Furthermore, the debate concerning the ideas of Le Maistre and Major focused on the legitimacy of marital relations undertaken for the purpose of experiencing pleasure.²⁶ Since sexual pleasure had long been associated with lust, sin, and Satan, it was not surprising that the winners of the controversy were those who sided with the conclusions of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Teaching at the University of Salamanca, Dominic Soto (1494–1560) was also Spain's imperial theologian. Attacking Major's opinion that it was no more a sin to engage in marital relations for the sake of pleasure than to eat a handsome apple for the pleasure in it, Soto argued that eating for pleasure constituted a futile or purposeless act. Thus such eating was a venial sin. Engaging in marital intercourse for pleasure was also an act without sufficient purpose. Soto pointed out that the degree of sinfulness in seeking intercourse for pleasure was far more serious than that of eating for pleasure. Intercourse upset a man's reason far more than eating did.²⁷

Soto also attacked Le Maistre's idea that marital intercourse fell under the category of virtue in the sense that "conjugal chastity" was a mean between immodesty and insensibility. On the contrary, said Soto, virtue dealt only with those actions that were pleasing to God. For many centuries churchmen had consistently taught that engaging in marital intercourse without a procreative purpose was displeasing to God because it was sinful. Soto declared that it would be most rash to accept the ideas of Le Maistre and Major because Augustine, Aquinas, and "all theologians" stood against these two upstarts.²⁸

SUMMARY

It was true: "All theologians" stood against the idea that acts of marital intimacy were pleasing to God. Churchmen had created a false problem when they sought to find "excuses" or reasons that would permit spouses to engage in marital intercourse without committing sin. Churchmen were unable to see that the pleasure accompanying marital intercourse is good simply because marital intercourse is good. As the author of the first chapter of Genesis noted, "God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good" (1:31). Jesus himself had looked at God's design for man and woman and

had unconditionally accepted that design (Mark 10:6–9). But the eyesight of most Christian leaders was not as sharp.

NOTES

1. John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 355–56.
2. Noonan, *Contraception*, 356.
3. Noonan, *Contraception*, 356.
4. Dennis the Carthusian, *On the Sentences*, 4.31.1, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 366.
5. Noonan, *Contraception*, 367.
6. Dennis the Carthusian, *The Praiseworthy Life of the Married*, art. 8, cited in Theodore Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 500.
7. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 500.
8. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 500.
9. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 500.
10. Noonan, *Contraception*, 368.
11. Noonan, *Contraception*, 370.
12. Noonan, *Contraception*, 370.
13. Martin Le Maistre, *Moral Questions II*, fol. 48v, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 370.
14. Le Maistre, *Moral Questions II*, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 370.
15. Le Maistre, *Moral Questions II*, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 370.
16. Le Maistre, *Moral Questions II*, fol. 50r, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 371.
17. Le Maistre, *Moral Questions II*, fol. 50r, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 372.
18. Le Maistre, *Moral Questions II*, fol. 50r, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 372.
19. Noonan, *Contraception*, 373.
20. John Major, *On the Sentences*, 4.31, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 374.
21. Major, *On the Sentences*, 4.31, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 375.
22. Major, *On the Sentences*, 4.31, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 375.
23. Major, *On the Sentences*, 4.31, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 375.
24. Major, *On the Sentences*, 4.31.1, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 375.
25. Major, *On the Sentences*, 4.31.1, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 375.
26. Noonan, *Contraception*, 386.
27. Noonan, *Contraception*, 387.
28. See Dominic Soto, *On the Sentences*, 4.31.1.3, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 387.

The Council of Trent: Motives for Marrying and Motives for Abstaining from Marital Intercourse

OVERVIEW

Responding to the Protestant Reformation, Catholic bishops met in the cities of Trent and Bologna between the years 1545 and 1563. Those bishops mandated better education of clergy, called for the establishment of seminaries, and produced a definitive summary of Catholic doctrine, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*. Intended to guide Catholic pastors and teachers, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* “became the sourcebook of religious instruction in the Catholic Church.”¹

Although the sixteenth century was a time of renewed interest in the study of the Bible, the bishops at Trent neither encouraged biblical studies nor did they “provide a biblically orientated catechism.”² Thus, the Catholic Church missed an opportunity to reexamine the interpretation of those scripture passages that had often provided the basis for her negative views on marital intimacy.

THE CATECHISM’S TREATMENT OF MARRIAGE

The treatment of “the Sacrament of Matrimony” opens with a putdown of marriage, stating that a life of sexual abstinence would be better. The authors of the *Catechism*, lacking awareness of the historical context in which St. Paul wrote, directed all pastors to have as “their most earnest wish” what St. Paul wanted for the Corinthians: “‘I would that you all were even as myself’ (1 Cor. 7:7), that is, that all would observe the virtue of continency.”³ The *Catechism* then directed pastors to explain marriage in such a way that lay people would not be “deceived by a false appearance of marriage.” Such a false view of marriage would lead the laity to “stain . . . their souls with turpitude and wicked lusts.”⁴

The conclusion of medieval theologians regarding the non-necessity of marital intercourse in a true marriage were combined with Augustine's speculations about Adam and Eve's sexual experience in Eden. Thus the *Catechism* asked parish priests to teach the faithful that "consummation is not necessarily required to constitute a true marriage; for it is *quite certain* [emphasis added] that our first parents, before their fall, when, according to the holy Fathers, no consummation took place, were joined in real marriage (Gen. 2:22)."⁵ Such assertions as these passed along the negative attitude toward marital intercourse. A thousand years before the meetings at Trent, the church fathers had speculated that sexual consummation did not take place in the Garden of Eden. Other ecclesial authorities repeated those speculations. The speculations became traditions. Finally, the authors of the *Catechism* concluded that it was "quite certain" that there was no sexual "consummation" before our first parents sinned.⁶ The connection between sexual intimacy and sin was again reaffirmed.

Would the bishops have some good words to say about marital communion? In the tenth question/topic the *Catechism of Trent* treated the way God had created human beings as male and female (Gen. 1:26). God intended that man and woman would become "two in one flesh" (Gen. 2:21–24).⁷ The *Catechism* noted that Jesus cited these very words of Genesis when he spoke about divorce (Matt. 19:6). However, the *Catechism* then ignored saying anything about the God-intended goodness of marital intercourse that enabled man and wife to become two in one flesh. Instead, the authors focused on the indissolubility of the sacrament of marriage: "Not only did God institute marriage, but he also, as the holy Council of Trent declares, rendered it perpetual and indissoluble; for the Savior says: 'What God hath joined together, let no man separate'" (Matt. 19:6).⁸

In the twelfth topic one finds the statement that human population had increased to such a degree that the obligation to procreate (Gen. 1:27) was no longer in effect. Since that was the case, there was no real need for people to marry. So the bishops recommended virginity to all: "For, now that the human race is increased, not only is there no law rendering marriage obligatory on any one, but, on the contrary, virginity is highly extolled and strongly recommended in the Sacred Scriptures to every one, as superior to the marriage state."⁹

REASONS OR CAUSES FOR MARRYING

The authors of the *Catechism* listed the reasons why people might marry. The first "natural" reason is the mutual support through which "each, assisted by the help of the other, may more easily bear the ills of life, and support the weakness of old age."¹⁰

The second reason for marrying “is the desire for procreation.”¹¹ The *Catechism*’s authors accepted the “instruction” of Tobit’s angelic guide as if it were inspired scripture. Using the words that Jerome had placed on Raphael’s lips to condemn sexual desire as “lust,” the *Catechism* stated: “Hear me and I will show thee who they are over whom the devil can prevail. For they who in such manner receive matrimony as to shut out God . . . and to give themselves over to their lust, as the horse and mule . . . over them the devil hath power.”¹² Seeking sexual delight in marital intercourse was wrong on two counts. First, sexual passion shut God out of the lives of husband and wife. Secondly, sexual desire reduced the spouses to the animal state.¹³ There was but one motive that freed the couple from sin—namely, the procreative purpose.¹⁴

The third end or reason for marrying was to have a remedy for concupiscence. Using the traditional misinterpretation of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the bishops’ *Catechism* declared that marriage was a refuge for those who could not control their sexual appetites: “He who is conscious of his own weakness, and is unwilling to bear the conflict of the flesh, may use the remedy of marriage to avoid sins of lust; on which the Apostle writes: ‘Because of fornication let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband.’”¹⁵

Couples who desired to marry “piously and religiously” should have at least one of the three preceding reasons. But they might also have certain additional motives for marrying, such as “the desire of leaving an heir, wealth, beauty, illustrious descent [and] congeniality of disposition.”¹⁶ Thus there were three natural reasons for marrying and five “non-repugnant” reasons for marrying.

The motive of marrying someone for love was not mentioned. By tradition “love” had been associated with such sinful and unholy things as sexual concupiscence, passion that was too ardent, and/or adultery. Noteworthy is the fact that the *Catechism* ignored the mention of love even when referring to the marriage of Jacob and Rachel. According to the Tridentine bishops, Jacob married his wife for the “non-repugnant” motive of desiring beauty: “[F]or the Patriarch Jacob is not reprehended in the Sacred Scriptures for having chosen Rachel, allured by her beauty, in preference to Leah (Gen. 29).”¹⁷ The bishops ignored the assertions that “Jacob had fallen in *love* with Rachel” (Gen. 29:18) and that “Jacob served seven years for Rachel, yet they seemed to him a few days because of his *love* for her” (Gen. 29:20).

SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

When the bishops did speak of “love,” they did not speak of an embodied love, i.e., love that is both symbolized and physically expressed in the act

of marital intercourse. Rather, they referred to a sacramental love, i.e., marriage as a permanent union that reflected the indissoluble love of Jesus for his church. Thus marriage, but not intercourse, is described as a “holy union of man and wife.”¹⁸

In question/topic 23, Augustine’s “goods of marriage” are called the “three advantages” of marriage: “The faithful are moreover to be taught, that there are three advantages of marriage—offspring, faith, the sacrament—which alleviate, by compensating for, those disadvantages which the Apostle points out in these words: ‘Such shall have tribulation of the flesh’ (1 Cor. 7:28); and by which sexual intercourse, which, without marriage, would be deservedly reprobated, becomes an honorable union.”¹⁹

In treating fidelity, Augustine’s second good of marriage, the *Catechism* demonstrated the church’s traditional attitude of conditional acceptance. Acts of marital intercourse ought to exclude sexual passion: “Matrimonial faith also demands, that husband and wife be united by a certain singular, and holy, and pure love, a love not such as that of adulterers, but such as that which Christ cherishes towards the Church.”²⁰ Then the bishops rolled out the old Stoic distinction between those rational husbands engaging in marital intercourse for procreation and those adulterous husbands seeking sexual enjoyment with their wives! For the first time in the Catholic Church’s history the Stoic putdown of sexual pleasure in married love was expressed in a doctrinal statement promulgated by pope and bishops. Since Jesus did not love with selfish passion, so spouses ought to do the same.

The married were to be given two lessons of instruction. First there was the lesson that was “to be specially impressed on the mind of the faithful”—namely, that “marriage is not to be used from motives of sensuality or pleasure, but that its use is to be restrained within those limits which, as we have above shown, are prescribed by the Lord.”²¹ But the limits “prescribed by the Lord” were the prescriptions found in the ancient Stoic message of marital restraint adopted by the fathers of the church more than a thousand years earlier. Driving the point home, the *Catechism* offered its scriptural proof: “They [the married] should be mindful of the exhortation of the Apostle: ‘They that have wives, let them be as those who have not’” (1 Cor. 7:29).²²

Here is another example of churchmen’s overlooking the context of Paul’s declaration. The use of such proof-texts might be called “cherry-picking the Scriptures.” When Paul wrote “they that have wives, let them be as those who have not,” he was not urging married couples to abstain from marital relations. Rather, in light of his belief in an imminent Second Coming, Paul wanted his fellow believers to take a loose hold on the things of this life. The Tridentine authors then drove home their mistaken interpretation by citing the ancient Stoic bromide: “A wise man ought to love his wife with judgment,

not with passion. . . . There is no greater turpitude than that a husband should love his wife as he would an adulteress.”²³

The *Catechism*’s second instruction stated: “The faithful are also to be taught sometimes to abstain from the marriage debt, in order to devote themselves to prayer and supplication to God.”²⁴ “In particular” the specific times for sexual abstinence were “for at least three days previous to receiving the holy Eucharist, and oftener during the solemn Fast of Lent.”²⁵ Abstinence from marital communion with one’s spouse was deemed the proper way to enter into sacramental communion with Jesus.

Next, the *Catechism* listed the good effects that were to be achieved by abstaining from marital intercourse. By foregoing their sexual embraces husband and wife would “find the blessings themselves of marriage augmented by a daily increasing accumulation of divine grace.”²⁶ Secondly, abstinence would better enable husband and wife to live “in the pursuit and practice of piety.”²⁷ Thirdly, upon becoming good Stoics, the spouses would find that their rejection of unruly sexual passion would enable them to spend their lives “tranquilly and placidly.”²⁸

One might wonder about the suggestion that avoiding marital intercourse brings about “a daily increasing accumulation of divine grace.” Why would sexual abstinence in marriage bring a couple into a deeper union with God? Perhaps to think this way is to be unable to see God’s presence in sexual relationship. After some fourteen centuries of rather negative theologizing on marriage, that is not surprising. Since the next ecumenical council would not be held until 1869, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* would be the only authoritative Catholic teaching on marriage and marital sexuality for the next three centuries.

NOTES

1. Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 501.

2. William Bausch, *Pilgrim Church* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989), 272–73.

3. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. Very Rev. J. Donovan, D.D. (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1829), Question I, 291.

4. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 291.

5. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 7, 294.

6. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 7, 294.

7. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 10, 294–95.

8. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 11, 295.

9. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 12, 295.

10. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 13, 295–96.
11. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 13, 296.
12. This text was based on Jerome's Vulgate, which was the official Catholic translation for more than a thousand years. Jerome, on his own initiative, had added these words to the Greek text, attributing them to the angel Raphael.
13. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 13, 296.
14. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 13, 296.
15. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 14, 296.
16. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 14, 296.
17. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 14, 297.
18. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 15, 297.
19. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 23, 301.
20. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 24, 302.
21. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 33, 305.
22. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 33, 305.
23. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 33, 305.
24. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 34, 305.
25. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 34, 305.
26. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 34, 305.
27. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 34, 305.
28. *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Question 34, 305.

A New Development: Spousal “Affection” Related to “Love”

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS, MARTIN LUTHER,
AND ST. AUGUSTINE

On the eve of the Protestant Reformation, Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) “proposed a reform of theology that might have affected the Catholic understanding of the marital sacrament profoundly.”¹ Having studied both the fathers of the church and the Holy Scriptures, Erasmus realized that significant doctrinal conclusions had been based on skewed interpretations of the Bible.² So he urged scholars to go back to the original biblical languages and to examine the scriptures in terms of what their authors were trying to communicate to their original audiences. The Catholic Church’s doctrinal approach to marital sexuality might have taken a more positive turn if Erasmus’ ideas about biblical interpretation had received a hearing. Unfortunately, the placing of some of his writings on the church’s index of forbidden books dissolved whatever influence Erasmus might have had on Catholic thinking.

On the other hand, Martin Luther (1483–1546) accepted Augustine’s opinion that original sin was the origin of sexual passion and pleasure (concupiscence). He believed that in Paradise “the act of begetting would have been a most sacred one without any passion of lust such as there is now.”³ It was a case of Augustinian *déjà vu*. Luther wrote that “the clear indications of original sin” are found in that “hideousness inherent in our flesh, namely, the bestial desire and lust.”⁴

THE CATHOLIC TURN FROM AUGUSTINE

Martin Luther's pessimistic views on marital relations offered the Catholic Church another opportunity to revise her own pessimistic understanding of marital intercourse. Meeting at the Council of Trent (1545–1563), the bishops' adoption of the systematic theology of Thomas Aquinas amounted to a subtle turn away from Augustine's approach to marital morality. For several generations this turn from Augustine became a weak trend among those theologians who wrote about marriage during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Robert Bellarmine (1542–1611), Jesuit theologian and Italian cardinal, demonstrated the subtle shift from Augustine's theory of original sin and its lust-producing concupiscence. Not only was Bellarmine's teaching on marriage "at least as detailed and careful as any in his time," but also, judging from the frequency with which his writings on marriage were cited, his writing "was then taken as an exemplary proponent of the Catholic teaching."⁵

Although Bellarmine agreed with Augustine's view that the sin of Adam and Eve had brought about disordered concupiscence, Bellarmine did not think that their sin affected the dynamics of human sexuality. If Bellarmine's view had been accepted, then human sexual dynamics, including sexual desire and sexual pleasure, could be recognized as being in accord with God's intended design for men and women. But Augustine's sexual pessimism was well entrenched in the mindset of western Christianity and so this recognition did not take place.

In 1602 Thomas Sanchez (1550–1610), a Jesuit moral theologian, published his comprehensive work, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*. Sanchez broke new ground when he proposed that married persons in the state of grace could be presumed to have a virtual intention of referring their deeds to God.⁶ Therefore, when husband and wife intend "only to copulate as spouses," there was no sin involved.⁷ Sanchez's conclusion was revolutionary. Starting with a general outlook of Christian spouses seeking to do their best to love God, Sanchez had moved beyond the Stoic rule, beyond Augustine's demand for a procreative intention, and beyond most of the centuries-old debate regarding lawful purposes for initiating marital intercourse.

But one difficult question remained: Was it sinful to engage in marital relations "for pleasure alone"? Sanchez conceded that seeking pleasure "alone" was venially sinful. Such an act was "a perversion of order" because it turned the consequence of an act into an end or purpose of the act.⁸ Nevertheless, a Christian couple generally seeking to do the will of God would not be acting "for pleasure alone" when they exercised their marital rights.⁹ This opinion was never publicly discussed, so married persons never heard about it.

Sanchez also disagreed with the common opinion that a husband committed a mortal sin if his passionate kissing and caressing of his wife led to “pollution” (ejaculation). “Embraces, kisses, and other touchings customary among spouses to show and to foster mutual love,” even though there was risk of excitation to the point of ejaculation, were not mortally sinful.¹⁰ Sanchez’s reasoning is significant: Spouses could rightly engage in such sexually stimulating kisses and embraces provided that they had an “urgent cause” for doing so. A spouse’s need to “show and foster mutual love” was a sufficiently “urgent cause.”¹¹ So it was that at the beginning of the seventeenth century a Catholic theologian made a tenuous connection between sexually exciting actions and a couple’s manifestation of love for each other. Sanchez had recognized the value of physically expressed marital affection.

LAXISM

Soon, however, Bellarmine, Sanchez, and others were accused of fostering “laxism.” Such was the pejorative term given to an approach that favored greater liberty for individuals in deciding moral issues. The movement away from Augustine’s rigid approach to morality produced a counter reaction. Theological schools at Verdun, Malines, and Paris came under the influence of teachers and writers who invoked St. Clement of Alexandria, St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and St. Thomas Aquinas in order to assert that the only non-sinful act of marital intercourse was intercourse undertaken for the purpose of procreation.¹² The severe reaction against lenient ideas concerning marital sexuality culminated in “Jansenism.” Cornelius Jansen (1585–1638), bishop of Ypres and theologian at the University of Louvain, became the new champion of Augustine’s pessimistic views regarding sexual morality.

The majority of hardline Belgian and French theologians were particularly influential in seminaries where men were studying to become diocesan priests. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Augustinian approach was particularly dominant at Louvain in Belgium and Douai in France, schools where English and Irish students studied for the priesthood.¹³ The Irish priests trained on the continent brought a grave sexual pessimism back to Ireland. In the nineteenth century the Irish clerics would bring that same pessimism to the United States.

Charles Billuart (1685–1757), a Dominican scholar at the theological school in Douai, Belgium, exemplified the moral rigorism of the eighteenth-century theologians. He vigorously insisted that the procreative purpose was the one morally acceptable purpose for a couple’s initiating intercourse and

that people who were old and sterile could marry “intending to live chastely or using marriage by only returning but not demanding the debt.”¹⁴

ST. FRANCES DE SALES AND “THE DEVOUT LIFE”

Since few married people lived up to the rule concerning intercourse only for procreation, marriage could hardly be thought of as a holy state of life. But then Francis de Sales (1567–1622), spiritual director, author, and bishop of Geneva, wrote his *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1607). With his influence spanning more than three centuries of Catholic thinking about marriage, de Sales became the most widely read author “of all the Catholic writers who turned their attention to marriage in the generations from the Council of Trent until well into the present [twentieth] century.”¹⁵

Francis de Sales proposed this simple but unusual thesis: Lay people could live holy or “devout” lives. He added nothing new to the traditional teaching, but he made a contribution to the Catholic Church’s developing theology of marriage. Thus, when evaluating “the measure that the common husband-wife relationship in Roman Catholicism changed from that of pledged duty to tender affection,” the bishop of Geneva can be credited as “the ecclesiastical writer who more than all others inspired the change.”¹⁶

“Instructions for Married Persons”

Francis de Sales opened his “Instructions for Married Persons” by citing St. Paul: “*Matrimony is a great sacrament, but I speak in Christ, and in the Church* (Eph. 5:32).”¹⁷ De Sales stated that marriage was honorable “in all things, because its origin, its end, its advantages, its form, and its matter are all holy.”¹⁸ In spite of such high praise for the sacrament of matrimony, Bishop de Sales could not escape yielding to the ancient bias against sexual pleasure. The bishop proposed three kinds of love: “O you that are married; I tell you not to love each other with a natural love, for it is thus that the turtles love; nor do I say love one another with a human love, for the heathens do this; but I say to you, after the great Apostle, *Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the Church* (Eph. 5).”¹⁹ Being spiritual but not sexual, Christ-like love was the ideal. Bishop de Sales thus embraced the traditional dualism that divided the person into body and spirit.

But the bishop had good news: “It is also God, O my friends! Who, with His invisible hand, has tied the knot of the holy bond of your marriage, and given you to one another.”²⁰ If it was God’s will that a particular man and a particular woman marry each other, it followed that their married state would

also be an expression of God's will. This implied that married couples no longer had to regard themselves as persons who had chosen the low road of a halfhearted way of living the Christian life. In Francis' opinion, marriage could be a state in life in which wife and husband could "cherish each other with a holy, sacred, and divine love."²¹

Referring to Augustine's third good, stability (sacrament), Francis wrote: "The first effect of this love is an indissoluble union of your hearts."²² However, St. Francis was unable to recognize the marital act as both symbol and expression of the love of husband and wife for each other. So he wrote: "Now this union is not understood principally of the body, but of the heart, of the affection, and of the love."²³

Commenting on the account of the creation of Eve from Adam's side (Gen. 2:18-24), the bishop exhorted husband and wife to love each other "cordially" and "tenderly."²⁴ They were to love "with a respectful love," with a love "full of reverence," and "with charity, tenderness and complacency."²⁵ However, such expressions of tender love between husband and wife would not include marital intercourse.

If husband and wife were to demonstrate affection for each other, they had to do so only by means of "pure" caresses: "Love and fidelity joined together always produce familiarity and confidence; and therefore the saints have used many reciprocal caresses in their marriage; caresses truly affectionate, but pure, tender, and sincere."²⁶ Francis de Sales did not encourage married couples to caress each other in sexual intercourse. While giving his approval of a couple's celebrating the anniversary date of their wedding, he wanted the couple to celebrate that anniversary in prayer, not in the marriage bed. "For my part," he wrote, "I should approve of the reviving of this custom, provided it were not attended with preparations of worldly and sensual recreations; but that the husband and wife should confess and communicate on that day, and, recommend to God, with a more than ordinary fervor, the happy progress of their marriage."²⁷

"Of the Sanctity of the Marriage Bed"

Chapter 39 clearly manifested de Sales' tendency to separate holy marital love from sexual marital love. Disapproving sexual pleasure, the bishop declared: "The marriage bed ought to be undefiled, as the Apostle says (Heb. 13:5), that is to say, exempt from uncleanness, and all profane filthiness."²⁸ Then, echoing Augustine's wrongheaded theory of sin as the origin of sexual desire (concupiscence), de Sales stated: "Holy marriage was first instituted in the earthly paradise, where, as yet, there never had been any disorder of concupiscence, or of anything immodest."²⁹

Bishop Francis also referred to Augustine's comparison of eating and carnal intercourse in his *The Good of Marriage*: "For what food is to the conservation of the man, this sexual intercourse is unto the conservation of the race." De Sales explained: "There is some resemblance between lustful pleasures and those that are taken in eating."³⁰ That resemblance is due to both pleasures having a "relation to the flesh, though the former by reason of their brutal vehemence are simply carnal."³¹ It was de Sales' opinion that the degree of carnality in a person's action depended upon the degree of pleasure accompanying the action.

Anticipating or looking forward to engaging in the marital act was characteristic of "a base and abject spirit."³² Neither did Bishop de Sales want couples to bask in the afterglow of marital intercourse. Such base activity would be "to amuse ourselves afterwards with the pleasure which we took in eating, keeping it alive in our words and imagination, and delighting in the recollection of the sensual satisfaction we had in swallowing down those morsels."³³ Those husbands who delighted in the memory of their sensual satisfaction were no more than "scullions of a kitchen, *who* as St. Paul says, *make a god of their belly*."³⁴

In his concluding remarks St. Francis de Sales resorted to the ancient example of that noble beast, the elephant. Drawing upon the writings of certain fathers of the church, he viewed the elephant's behavior as the model for honorable marital activity. "The elephant" he wrote, "although a gross beast, is yet most decent and most sensible of any other upon earth."³⁵ Providing "a specimen of the elephant's chastity," de Sales reported that the male elephant only couples with his mate "but at the end of every three years . . . but so privately that he is never seen in the act."³⁶ Francis then proposed that the modest dispositions of the elephant might "serve as lessons to married people."³⁷

"Yes" to Affection, "No" to Enjoyment

Francis de Sales believed that marriage was holy because it was God who called men and women to the married state. Even more to this saint's credit was his affirmation of the value of affectionate human love. But St. Francis de Sales could only go so far. He was unable to bridge the chasm that existed between the expression of chaste affection and the experience of marital pleasure. Like most ecclesiastical leaders in the history of the western church, his acceptance of the holiness of nuptial commerce was basically a conditional acceptance. Marital relations could prove dangerous: "In like manner, nuptial commerce, which is so holy, just and commendable in itself and so profitable to the commonwealth, is nevertheless in certain cases dangerous to those that exercise it."³⁸

The development of the church's attitude toward marital relations had produced a form of sexual alienation. That alienation had been projected into a number of New Testament passages. Thus Francis de Sales used the oft-cited verses in 1 Corinthians 7:29–31 to make a case for the rejection of sexual pleasure. Citing “*they who have wives, be as though they had none*” and “*Let those that use the world . . . be as though they used it not*,”³⁹ Francis stressed that making use of something, in this case the use of wives by their husbands, did not mean enjoying what one uses. De Sales asserted, “It is a great evil of man, says St. Austin [Augustine], to desire to enjoy the things which he should only use.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, people “should enjoy spiritual things, and only use corporal, of which when the use is turned into enjoyment, our rational soul is also changed into a brutish and beastly soul.”⁴¹

To his credit, St. Francis de Sales attempted to build a bridge between the expression of physical affection and living a life of faith. As he did so, he was hampered by the ancient dualism that the Catholic Church had adopted from the Stoics and the Platonists. Through the centuries marital intercourse had been discussed in terms of the two “p-words,” procreation and pleasure. Intercourse for procreation was acceptable, but intercourse for pleasure was not. Such a distinction prolonged the sexual schizophrenia that had been projected into Christian marriage for nearly fifteen centuries. Instead of helping couples integrate body, mind, and spirit, this conditional acceptance drove a wedge between faith and feelings. Nevertheless, the bishop of Geneva had begun to grope his way toward a new vocabulary, a new way of speaking about marriage in terms of affection, tenderness, and love. In Francis de Sales' seventeenth-century work, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, married people could find the beginnings of a more positive spirituality of marriage and marital affection.

NOTES

1. Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), 399.

2. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 443.

3. Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works*, Vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 116.

4. Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 1, 118.

5. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 436.

6. Thomas Sanchez, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*, 9.8, as cited in John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 390.

7. Sanchez, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*, 9.8, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 390.

8. Sanchez, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*, 9.11, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 390.

9. Sanchez, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*, 9.11, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 390.

10. Sanchez, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*, 9.45.33, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 390.

11. Sanchez, *The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony*, 9.45.37, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 391.

12. Noonan, *Contraception*, 383–84.

13. Noonan, *Contraception*, 384.

14. Charles Billuart, *The Summa of St. Thomas Accommodated to Contemporary Academic Customs*, “The Goods and Acts of Marriage,” reply to objection 5, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 384.

15. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 502.

16. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 503.

17. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, revised and corrected by Rev. J. M. Leler, Ph.D. (Totowa, N.J.: The Catholic Book Publishing Company, 1946), 313.

18. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 313.

19. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 314.

20. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 314.

21. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 24.

22. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 315.

23. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 315.

24. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 316.

25. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 316–17.

26. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 319–20.

27. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 324.

28. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 325.

29. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 325.

30. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 325.

31. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 325.

32. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 328.

33. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 328.

34. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 328.

35. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 329.

36. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 329.

37. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 329.

38. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 329.

39. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 329–30.

40. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 330.

41. de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, 330.

Confessing Sins Related to Sexual Activity

THE DISCIPLINE OF MORAL THEOLOGY

The Council of Trent (1545–1563) established a seminary system throughout the Catholic nations of Europe. In the seminaries candidates for the priesthood took courses in philosophy, theology, and administering parishes. The candidates also needed to learn how to make judgments about the gravity of sins committed by those seeking forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation (penance). Those preparing to “hear confessions” were taught how to make a detailed examination of a specific action by inquiring into the intentions of the person as well as the circumstances accompanying the particular act. By weighing all aspects of the act, the priest-confessor would then make a judgment regarding the gravity of a person’s sins.

ST. ALPHONSUS LIGUORI: MORAL THEOLOGIAN

Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787), author of *Moral Theology*, steered a course between the rigorist Jansenists on the one hand, and the laxists on the other. The Jansenists regarded God as a stern, almost tyrannical judge; the laxists put forward a notion of God who asked very little of his creatures. Like St. Francis de Sales, Liguori encouraged people to live holy and devout lives. He was raised to sainthood in 1839 and declared a doctor of the church in 1871.

In 1679 Pope Innocent XI’s Congregation of the Holy Office censured the opinion that it was not sinful to initiate intercourse “solely for pleasure.”¹ Thus, by the late seventeenth century, the acceptable purposes for engaging

in marital intimacy still remained procreation, rendering the marital debt, and the avoidance of possible adultery. But did the Holy Office's 1679 censure mean that spouses could seek sexual pleasure as long as they included one of the acceptable purposes for engaging in marital intercourse?

Liguori saw nothing sinful in seeking sexual pleasure along with other ends, as long as husband and wife were *not principally* seeking pleasure. Even more significantly, he did not require that husband and wife have an intention to procreate a child whenever they had sexual relations. For reasons of poverty, for example, a couple would not sin when they engaged in marital intercourse *without* the intention to conceive a child. Furthermore, a poverty-stricken husband and wife could actually *hope* that a particular marital act *would not produce a child*.²

"Love" Not Yet Recognized

Liguori held that a person could "decently" marry to reconcile family members or bring peace or preserve the honor of one's family or for reasons of health or for "similar things."³ Could marrying for love be included in the "similar things"? And if marrying for love was included, would that justify having sexual relations for the purpose of expressing love for one's spouse? Liguori's answer to both these questions was "No." Since "love" did not constitute an intrinsic, or essential or accidental end for marrying, neither could "love" be regarded as an acceptable motive or purpose for engaging in marital intercourse.

A New Issue: "Cooperation with Sin"

In the eighteenth century moral theologians began to discuss whether a spouse could morally cooperate in a marital act when there would be an attempt to prevent conception. While Alphonsus Liguori saw no moral evil in spouses engaging in sexual relations while hoping that they would not conceive a child, he held that engaging in the marital act while taking steps to prevent conception was sinful.

In the eighteenth century "coitus interruptus" was a common attempt to prevent conception. In the act of interrupting coitus, the husband withdrew his penis and ejaculated outside his wife's vagina. Moral theologians called this practice "the refusal to keep the vessel." Ejaculating "outside the fit [proper] vessel" [the vagina] constituted the mortal sin of "onanism." The sin was named after Onan who, according to Genesis 38:1–11, sinned by spilling his seed on the ground. God struck Onan dead for doing so. According to churchmen that was God's punishment for practicing contraception.⁴

Related to the practice of avoiding conception by the use of coitus interruptus was the issue of “cooperation” in sin. If, in the course of a marital act, the husband ejaculated outside his wife’s vagina, did she also commit sin? Liguori’s conclusion was lenient and sympathetic. The woman did not sin if she had “a just and serious reason” for participating in the marital act.⁵

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

The possibility of “good faith” regarding coitus interruptus was a problem for priests who heard confessions. Many husbands and wives did not realize that moral theologians had concluded that coitus interruptus was sinful. Should confessors tell those seeking reconciliation that coitus interruptus was a grave sin? Liguori reasoned that such couples were “in good faith” and that priests should not make matters worse by telling their penitents something that would cause them to suffer.

Liguori proposed this course of action. If a priest thought that the penitent, *after* being informed of the sinfulness of coitus interruptus, *still might not cease* performing that act, then the priest was not to disturb the conscience of the penitent. The confessor should not put his penitent “in bad faith.”⁶ Liguori’s advice to priests hearing the confessions of the married might be called the policy of do-not-ask-and-do-not-tell—unless you think that asking and telling would spiritually benefit the person who was confessing. Liguori’s “good faith” solution would stand for a little over a hundred years.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONFESSIONAL PRACTICE

The “Sacred Penitentiary” was the Vatican bureau that dealt with questions involving the administration of the sacrament of penance. If a bishop had a question about the administration of this sacrament in his diocese, he would submit his query to the Roman Penitentiary and then wait for a reply. During the nineteenth century there were a number of significant inquiries made about the sin of coitus interruptus. In 1816 the vicar of Chambéry asked about a wife’s obligations if she knew from experience that her husband would practice coitus interruptus.⁷ The Roman Penitentiary replied: If, by refusing intercourse to her husband, the woman feared “serious detriment to herself,” she could engage in marital relations without committing sin even though she knew her husband would ejaculate outside her vagina.⁸

In 1822 an anonymous petitioner asked: Could a woman lawfully have intercourse with her husband who usually acted “in the wicked manner of Onan,” if by refusal to cooperate she would experience either her husband’s

cruelties or his deserting her for a prostitute? The Penitentiary proposed that the wife who feared “beating, death, or other serious cruelties” could “offer herself passively” to her husband.⁹

In 1842 John Baptist Bouvier (1783–1854), bishop of Le Mans, France, wanted a clarification regarding the Penitentiary’s decisions of 1816 and 1822. The bishop pointed out that the degree of harm that a wife feared for not cooperating with her husband was a fear that varied from woman to woman. “Passing quarrels would be unbearable to a timid woman instructed in refined conduct and accustomed to civility” but for other women, such as peasants, “even some blows do not weigh much.”¹⁰ The Penitentiary replied by repeating the answer it gave in 1822.

VEILED REFERENCES TO THE MARITAL ACT AS AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE

Bishop John Baptist Bouvier authored the *Dissertation on the Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue and Supplement to the Treatise on Marriage*. In his book he noted that some of the married laity thought that marital intercourse was decent and that the marital act “favored mutual love.”¹¹

A similar veiled reference to the relationship between the marital act and the expression of spousal love appeared in the work of Rev. Thomas Gousset (1792–1866). Published in 1853, Gousset’s *Moral Theology for the Use of Priests and Confessors* noted that the first obligation of married persons is related to the principle purpose or end that God has given to marriage: “That end consists in preserving the marital union, concord, and mutual love.”¹² Gousset then described spousal love as “a tender love, a love pure and chaste, a love resembling the love of Jesus Christ for his Church.”¹³ Was Gousset referring to love in the sentimental, non-sexual sense as did St. Francis de Sales? Or was Gousset referring to love sexually expressed in the marital act? Since Gousset’s description of love is so brief, it is not clear what he meant.

In 1845 a development took place that would preoccupy Catholic leadership and moral theologians for the next 150 years. Felix Pouchet reported that conception in female mammals took place during a specific period of time after menstruation had begun. As a result of this study some doctors concluded that there were several days each month during which a woman was infertile and therefore conception could not take place. Relying on this minimal bit of information, some couples began to engage in sexual relations only on those days when the woman might be infertile.

Concerned about this new development, Bishop Antoine de Salinis, the bishop of Amiens, wrote to the Roman Penitentiary. He wanted to know if these married people should be “disturbed” about having relations on putative infertile days. In 1853 the Penitentiary answered: “Those about whom you ask are not to be disturbed provided they do nothing by which conception is prevented.”¹⁴ Twenty years later genuine controversy erupted. Relying on Pouchet’s theory regarding ovulation, Auguste Lecomte, a Louvain theologian, concluded that married couples could lawfully choose to have intercourse during the sterile period if they had “reasonable and proportionate cause” for limiting the number of offspring.¹⁵ Lecomte hoped that the use of the “sterile period” would solve the problem faced by married couples when they found themselves having to choose between conceiving more children and practicing coitus interruptus.

ROME REJECTS LENIENCY

But it seemed to some that Lecomte’s acceptance of seeking intercourse during the sterile period was an abandonment of the primary purpose of marital intercourse. Not long afterward the Catholic Church began to wage war against all forms of birth regulation. The first battles were related to what was taking place in the confessional. In 1876 Rev. Maurus Nardi’s *Dissertation on Conjugal Onanism* attacked Liguori’s lenient approach that allowed confessors to act as both healers and judges. Nardi wanted confessors to interrogate married persons about their sexual acts in order to extinguish the “good faith” of penitents who were practicing coitus interruptus.¹⁶

In 1886 the Roman Penitentiary decreed that generally confessors *should not abstain from asking penitents* about their sexual practices even if some people would have their good faith disturbed.¹⁷ Thus in 1886 the Penitentiary rejected the conclusions of Alphonsus Liguori and overturned its tolerant responses made in 1822 and 1842.

With the Penitentiary’s 1886 rejection of Liguori’s position, all priest-confessors found themselves to some degree obligated to discover whether or not a penitent practiced some form of birth control. Finding out that the penitent did try to prevent conception, the priest was required to inform that person that he or she was committing mortal sin and that he or she would not be forgiven until ceasing to do so. Such a rebuke destroyed any “good faith” the person might have had. It would not be long before popes, bishops, and theologians would make it clear that any form of preventing conception was a grave sin.

NOTES

1. Henricus Denzinger and Adolfus Schonmetzer, S.M., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Barcelona: Herder, 1976), no. 2109, 458.
2. St. Alphonsus Marie de Liguori, *Opera Moralia IV, Theologia Morallis* (Graz: Akademische Druck-U. Verlagsanstalt, 1954), Book 6, 927, 109.
3. Liguori, *Opera Moralia IV*, Book 6, 883, 65.
4. See Genesis 38:1–11. Leverite law required the nearest relative of a childless widow to father a child in the name of the departed relative so that his family line would continue. Onan was struck dead for refusing to conceive a child with his brother's widow. Moralists focused not on the violation of the Leverite law (Deuteronomy 25:5) that brought God's wrath upon Onan but upon the spilling of his seed outside "the fit vessel." As a result moralists misinterpreted Genesis 38 and so regarded Onan's act as either a sin of contraception or as a sin of masturbation.
5. Liguori, *Opera Moralia IV*, Book 6, 947, 128.
6. Liguori, *Opera Moralia IV*, Book 1, numbers 4 and 5, 4; number 36, 17–18.
7. John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 474.
8. Hartmann Batzill, ed., *Decisiones Sanctae Sedis de Usu et Abusu Matrimonii*, second ed. (Rome, 1944), 11–12, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 475.
9. Batzill, *Decisiones Sanctae Sedis de Usu et Abusu Matrimonii*, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 474–75.
10. John Baptist Bouvier, *Dissertation in Sextum Decalogi Praeceptum et Supplementum ad Tractatum de Matrimonio*, eighteenth ed. (Paris: Notre Dame, n.d.), 2.1.3.4, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 476.
11. Bouvier, *Dissertation in Sextum Decalogi Praeceptum*, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 477.
12. Thomas Gousset, *Théologie morale à l'usage des curés au des confesseurs* (Paris: Chez Jaques Le Coffre et Cie Libraries, 1853), Tome 2, 593.
13. Gousset, *Théologie morale à l'usage des curés au des confesseurs*, 593.
14. Batzill, *Decisiones Sanctae Sedis de Usu et Abusu Matrimonii*, 130, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 522.
15. Noonan, *Contraception*, 522–24,
16. Maurus Nardi, *Dissertatio de onanismo conjugali* (Toulouse, 1876), 84, quoted in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 8 (1876), 650, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 494.
17. Batzill, *Decisiones Sanctae Sedis*, 27–29, as cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 496.

Pope, Bishops, Theologians, and Canon Law Stress Procreation as the Primary Purpose of Marriage

POPE LEO XIII

In 1880 Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) promulgated *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* (The Design of Divine Wisdom), the first papal encyclical devoted entirely to marriage. Repeating some of the ideas of the church fathers, the pope did not present a pretty picture. Marriage had been corrupted *after* creation had been completed and thus the marriages of Gentiles were exposed “to floods of error and . . . the most shameful lusts.”¹ Hebrew husbands were described as running “headlong with impunity into lust, unbridled and unrestrained” while their wives were “sunk so low as to be reckoned only as a means for the gratification of passion, or for the production of offspring.”²

After noting that the primary purpose of marital intercourse was to produce children, the pope proposed that spouses shared an obligation “to have such feelings for one another as to cherish always very great mutual love.”³ “Love” was also cited as one of the ways in which the lives of husbands and wives “might be made better and happier.”⁴ Such “great mutual love” developed “in many ways: by their lightening each other’s burdens through mutual help; by constant and faithful love; by having all their possessions in common; and by the heavenly grace that flows from the Sacrament.”⁵ Nothing was said about love expressed through the marital act.

BELGIAN, GERMAN, AND FRENCH BISHOPS SPEAK OUT

By the early years of the twentieth century the Catholic Church had developed a standard confessional practice regarding the sin of contraception. Catholics

who chose to have intercourse while taking steps to avoid the primary purpose of marital intercourse were refused absolution (forgiveness) in the sacrament of reconciliation. Considered “habitual sinners,” those who “practiced birth control” were barred from the reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist (Holy Communion).

Addressing their priests in 1909, the Belgian bishops condemned the “most evil sin of Onan” in every form of birth control.⁶ The bishops then instructed priests to teach the laity to avoid a materialistic understanding of life. Once again the out-of-context citation from Paul’s letter was to be brought to the attention of the faithful. Priests were to remind husbands that “those who have wives should use them as if they had them not” (1 Cor. 7:29–30).⁷

Some married couples attempted to justify limiting their offspring on the grounds that they would have more children than they could feed.⁸ Citing the words of Jesus that we should not be anxious about what we would eat or how we would be clothed (Matt. 6:31), the Belgian bishops asked husbands and wives to put their faith in divine Providence.⁹

It could be the case that some husbands would fear that further pregnancies would endanger the health of their wives.¹⁰ In such cases, priests were instructed to point out the advantages of modern medical care. However, if another pregnancy was truly a serious danger to the wife’s health or life, the husband and wife, by mutual consent, should courageously abstain from the marital act.¹¹

In their 1913 pastoral letter the German bishops declared: “It is serious sin to will to prevent the increase of the number of children, so that marriage is abused for pleasure alone and its principal purpose knowingly and willingly frustrated.”¹²

The French bishops joined the crusade against birth control in May of 1919. Reminding the married that “the principal end of marriage is the procreation of children,” the bishops of France declared: “It is to sin seriously against nature and against the will of God to frustrate marriage of its end by an egotistic or sensual calculation.”¹³ All practices that led to the restriction of births were seen “as disastrous as they are criminal.”¹⁴

AMERICAN BISHOPS SPEAK OUT

In September 1919, the American bishops met in Washington, D.C., and produced their first joint pastoral letter since 1884. Referring to the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, the bishops stated that procreation was the first and most serious obligation of marriage.¹⁵ Using the traditional misinterpretation of the biblical account of Onan’s sin, the bishops condemned all forms of

birth regulation because “the selfishness which leads to race suicide . . . is, in God’s sight, a ‘detestable thing.’”¹⁶

According to the American bishops, the increase of children brought about such good effects as a “fresh stimulus given to thrift” brought about by the virtuous necessity of stretching the family income as well as the “industrious effort” of mother and father who had to work harder.¹⁷ True, more children necessitated making more “sacrifices,” but sacrifices were “sources of blessing.”¹⁸

MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL UNION IN THE 1917 CODE OF CANON LAW

For centuries canon lawyers had been refining the concept of marriage to its most basic form by asking the question, “What makes the marriage relationship different from every other kind of human relationship?” In 1917 Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, the principal designer of the first universal Code of Canon Law, had reduced the idea of marriage to what was considered its barest essence: “Marital consent is an act of the will whereby each party grants and accepts a permanent and exclusive right over the body regarding its acts which are of themselves apt for the generation of offspring.”¹⁹

Thus marriage was understood as a lawful contract in which the two parties handed over to each other the right to use one another’s genital organs for acts suitable for the generation of children. If two persons were to use the vocabulary of the church’s canonical definition in their wedding vows, the bride and groom might say to each other, “I understand our marrying as an act in which I hand over to you the right to use my body for acts that are apt for generating children. I want to do this in a contractual context before these gathered witnesses.”

Canon 1013 had combined the views of Augustine and Aquinas: “The primary end of marriage is the procreation and nurture of children; its secondary end is mutual help and the remedying of concupiscence.”²⁰ Here the term “concupiscence” might refer to all the ways that spousal love, desire, and affection were physically expressed and received. A St. Valentine’s Day card framed in the language of canon law might bear the caption, “Won’t You Be My Remedy for Concupiscence?”

A NEW QUESTION IS RAISED

Then, in the decade following the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, “personalism” began to emerge. Instead of viewing the marital act in

terms of what it meant for the human species, or what it meant for the state of the church or both, this new philosophical perspective raised a question that had never really been asked before: What did sexual intimacy *mean* to the husband and wife engaging in the act of sexual intercourse? Given the history of Catholicism's teaching on marital relations, it was a question that had revolutionary implications. In the 1920s and 1930s two theologians in particular, one a married layman (Dietrich von Hildebrand) and the other a Polish priest (Rev. Herbert Doms), pointedly raised the question of the meaning of the marital act.

NOTES

1. Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, in *Papal Teachings: Matrimony*, trans. Michael J. Byrnes (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), 136.
2. Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, in *Papal Teachings: Matrimony*, 136–37.
3. Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, in *Papal Teachings: Matrimony*, 140.
4. Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, in *Papal Teachings: Matrimony*, 152.
5. Pope Leo XIII, *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae*, in *Papal Teachings: Matrimony*, 152.
6. “Instruction des Evêques de Belgique sur l’onanisme,” the Bishops of Belin in *Nouvelle-Revue Theologique* 41 (1909), 617.
7. “Instruction des Evêques de Belgique sur l’onanisme,” the Bishops of Belin in *Nouvelle-Revue Theologique*, 618.
8. “Instruction des Evêques de Belgique sur l’onanisme,” the Bishops of Belin in *Nouvelle-Revue Theologique*, 618.
9. “Instruction des Evêques de Belgique sur l’onanisme,” the Bishops of Belin in *Nouvelle-Revue Theologique*, 619.
10. “Instruction des Evêques de Belgique sur l’onanisme,” the Bishops of Belin in *Nouvelle-Revue Theologique*, 619.
11. “Instruction des Evêques de Belgique sur l’onanisme,” the Bishops of Belin in *Nouvelle-Revue Theologique*, 619.
12. See Joseph Laurentius, S.J., “Das Bischofswort zum Schutze der Familie,” in *Theologisch Praktische Quartalschrift* 67 (1914), 517–28, cited in John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 501.
13. *Documentation Catholique* 1 (1919), 578–79, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 501.
14. *Documentation Catholique*, 578–79, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 501.
15. National Council of Catholic Bishops, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792–1919* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Council, 1923), 312.

16. National Council of Catholic Bishops, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792–1919*, 313.
17. National Council of Catholic Bishops, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792–1919*, 313.
18. National Council of Catholic Bishops, *The National Pastorals of the American Hierarchy, 1792–1919*, 313.
19. *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1917), 1081.2
20. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, 1013.

A New Vision: Love Related to Marital Intercourse

MARITAL INTERCOURSE: AN EXPRESSION OF LOVE?

For the first thirteen centuries of the church's history the families of the bride and groom arranged the majority of marriages. With the development of commerce and the emergence of a middle class in Europe, certain social aspects of marriage began to change. As a result, more people began to marry on the basis of friendship and mutual attraction. *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566) had spoken approvingly of the way people married in order to give each other "mutual aid."¹

In 1850 Rev. Ferdinand Probst, a German moral theologian, made a connection between spirituality and marital sexuality. He proposed that the marital union of husband and wife was a reality that ought to "be re-clothed in spiritual raiment."² That spiritual re-clothing could be achieved "through the moral elevation of sexual love and its resultant transformation into marital love."³

Probst's thought was an amazing reversal. Since the second century churchmen had been driving a wedge between physical sex and spiritual love. Probst was proposing that the church move in the opposite direction by joining sexual love with spiritual love. If that was done, then the union of partners in marriage might find "its highest expression in the marriage act."⁴ But Probst's unusual perspective on marital intercourse was ignored.

Forty years later, in the 1890s, Rev. Alois De Smet also perceived a relationship between marital intercourse and spousal love. De Smet proposed that "the marriage act itself, by which the partners are made one flesh, cultivates and nourishes this love."⁵ At the beginning of the twentieth century Rev. Anton Koch, a German moral theologian, suggested that marital intercourse might both symbolize and physically express the undivided community of life

that constitutes marriage. According to Koch, there was a significant correlation between marital intercourse and marriage as shared community of life.⁶

DIETRICH VON HILDEBRAND

Teaching philosophy at the University of Munich, Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977) became “the first married lay person to make a substantial contribution to Catholic doctrine on marriage.”⁷ Having studied the phenomenology of Max Scheler and Edmund Husserl, von Hildebrand developed what has been called “a personalist approach” to Christian marriage. For almost the whole of the church’s history theologians and churchmen thought of marital intercourse in terms of what it meant for the human species, or what it meant for the state, or what it meant for the church. In the early 1920s von Hildebrand began to explore what meaning marital intercourse might have for husband and wife.

In 1925 Dietrich von Hildebrand gave a series of lectures on love and marriage for the Federation of Catholic Students’ Unions at Innsbruck, Germany. He proposed that husband and wife could express their love for each other through marital intercourse. Two years later he put his ideas in a small book dealing with the virtue of chastity (English title: *In Defense of Purity*). Then, in another book-length essay, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, Dietrich took note of the fact that “moral theologians are emphasizing the role of love in marriage, a role which was previously underestimated by some.”⁸ Incorporating some of the ideas expressed earlier by Ferdinand Probst, Alois De Smet, and Anton Koch, von Hildebrand developed the thought that marital intercourse could be understood as an expression of spousal love.

Besides Procreation

While the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions had focused on the goods or purposes of marriage, Dietrich concluded that “it is quite impossible to regard the union of love and sex in marriage as due exclusively to its aim of propagation.”⁹ Rather, “the sexual gift of one person to another signifies an incomparably close union with that other and a self-surrender to him or her. The sexual union is thus the organic expression of wedded love, which intends precisely this mutual gift of self.”¹⁰ In marriage the two partners find themselves in the “presence of an entirely novel and most profound relationship” in which “the act of wedded communion” possesses “the *significance* of a unique union of love.”¹¹

Dietrich's approach to the meaning of marriage was based on the Pauline image of the love of Christ for his church: "The greatness and sublimity of marriage . . . are revealed to us at one stroke in this exhortation of St. Paul wherein he compares married love to the love of Christ, the Word made Flesh, for His Holy Church."¹²

Augustine, having overlooked the unitive power of sexuality, had suggested that in Paradise a male partner might have been a more suitable helpmate for Adam. But von Hildebrand perceived the core truth in the Genesis story. "Man and woman are spiritually oriented toward each other," he wrote, because "they are created for each other."¹³ Thus the sexual differentiation of male and female amounted to a God-given mission to man and woman: "Because of their complementary difference, a much closer communion and more ultimate love is possible between them than between persons of the same sex."¹⁴ The physical complementarity of the bodies of husband and wife provided them with an ability to express deep love in a sexual way.

Since the second century most of the ecclesiastical interpreters of the New Testament had spiritualized the way husband and wife manifested the love of Christ for his church. Ignoring the act of marital intercourse, churchmen stressed that the marriage union could not be dissolved because the love of Jesus for his church was indissoluble. When von Hildebrand pointed out that the letter to the Ephesians asserted that the physical act of marital intercourse symbolized the love of Christ for his church, something happened. All the Christian Stoics, Christian Platonists, Christian Manicheans, Christian Cathars, Christian Jansenists, and Christian legalists, with their anti-body, "puritanical horror of all things sexual,"¹⁵ stood exposed as bogus interpreters of Ephesians.

Von Hildebrand asserted that sexual experience was not something that belonged to a person's "lower" or "animal" nature: "[W]e cannot but see that it differs completely from all other instincts or appetites."¹⁶ Sexual experience "has a kind of depth which neither thirst nor hunger nor the need to sleep nor any desire for other bodily pleasure possesses."¹⁷ Because marital experience has this quality of depth, the effect of this kind of experience "transcends the physical sphere and . . . involves the soul deeply in its passion."¹⁸

The Relationship between Marital Intercourse and Love

The desire for marital intercourse was not merely a matter of lust and selfishness. Von Hildebrand saw a profound connection between marital sex and the act of other-oriented, self-giving. He perceived that sex is "a voice from the depths, the utterance of something central and of the utmost significance.

In and with sex, man, in a special sense, gives himself.”¹⁹ (Of course, von Hildebrand was referring to spouses of both sexes.)

Von Hildebrand also perceived the long overlooked relation between sex and the spiritual life. Marital intercourse, because of its intimacy and deep centrality, “is capable of a particular relationship with love, the most spiritual and the deepest of all experiences.”²⁰ He pointed out that the marital act “has not only a function, the generation of children; it also possesses a significance for [the person] as a human being—namely, to be the expression and fulfillment of wedded love and community of life.”²¹

When von Hildebrand observed that “we should rather speak of the meaning of sex than its function,”²² he was not denying the basic connection between marital relations and procreation. But he wanted his readers to perceive that marital intercourse is an act that also had a profound personal meaning for husband and wife. The reduction of sexual union to its function of procreation amounted to taking a strictly biological approach, or, as von Hildebrand expressed it, “a thoroughly materialistic view.”²³

Further commenting on the spiritual meaning of marital intercourse, von Hildebrand stated: “And just because sex is so uniquely intimate and represents the secret of the person concerned, the sexual gift of one person to another signifies an incomparably close union with that other and a self-surrender to him or her.”²⁴ Stating that “the sexual union is thus the organic expression of wedded love, which intends precisely this mutual gift of self,”²⁵ von Hildebrand moved well beyond the Catholic Church’s long-term tendency to associate selfishness and lust with marital intercourse.

Transcending the idea of sexual utility, von Hildebrand stated that the end or purpose of procreating children “is not the only *meaning* of the physical act; subjectively speaking it is not even its primary meaning.”²⁶ The meaning of marital intercourse “is primarily the realization of the sublime communion of love which, according to the words of our Savior, ‘Two shall be one in one flesh.’”²⁷ Thus, in distinguishing between the primary end of marriage (procreation) and the primary meaning of marital intercourse (the expression of conjugal love), von Hildebrand truly opened the way to recognizing the value of marital intercourse for the married couple. When he wrote, “[i]n virtue of its *quality*, physical sex is the expression of wedded love,”²⁸ he included the full acceptance of all the feelings, passions, pleasures, and desires that are involved in sexual loving.

At the same time, von Hildebrand never disconnected the natural link between marital intercourse and procreation: “That a new human being should issue from it is certainly part of the solemn grandeur of this supremely intimate union.”²⁹ In order to preserve the attitude of reverence toward the mystery of marital union, von Hildebrand stated that the “general connection

between procreation and love must always be maintained even subjectively, at least as a general possibility of this act.”³⁰

According to von Hildebrand, conjugal love is meant to be a total love that embraces every dimension of married life—the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. Thus, “conjugal love, like every authentic love, implies a genuine intention to make the beloved happy.”³¹ To love one’s spouse is to will not only the spouse’s earthly good, but also the spouse’s eternal good. In considering this spiritual aspect of conjugal love, von Hildebrand believed that the spouse’s intention to seek the happiness of the beloved “is elevated to a fervent desire for the eternal welfare of the beloved.”³² In sum, spousal love “embraces the beloved not only within the limits of this life and for this life, but also for eternity.”³³

SUMMARY

Dietrich von Hildebrand had moved away from the relentless promotion of the utility of marital intercourse for procreation and for alleviating concupiscence. He did so by declaring that sexual love belonged to “the specifically significant sphere” of the fulfillment of married love.³⁴ He pointed out that there is a God-intended relationship between marital sex, wedded love, and the scriptural teaching about the union of two persons in one flesh. Thus “the act of wedded union is a unique expression of wedded love and its specific fulfillment, because in it both partners, according to the word of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, become one flesh.”³⁵

NOTES

1. *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. Very Rev. J. Donovan, D.D. (Dublin: James Duffy & Co., Ltd., 1829), Question 13, 296.

2. Ferdinand Probst, *Katholische Moral Theologie*, 1850, Tome II, 180, cited in Dr. Herbert Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), xix.

3. Probst, *Katholische Moral Theologie*, cited in Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, xix.

4. Probst, *Katholische Moral Theologie*, cited in Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, xix.

5. Alois De Smet, *Les Fiancailles et le Marriage*, 2.1.3.1.4, cited in John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 586.

6. Anton Koch, *Lehrbuch de Moral Theologie*, 1905, 602, cited in Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, xx.

7. Noonan, *Contraception*, 587.
8. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1984), xxiv.
9. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, translated from the 1927 *Reinheit und Jungfräulichkeit* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1945), 16.
10. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 16.
11. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 22.
12. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 1.
13. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman: Love & the Meaning of Intimacy* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1966, 1992), 37.
14. von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman*, 37.
15. von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman*, 3.
16. von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman*, 49.
17. von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman*, 49.
18. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 13.
19. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 14.
20. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 16.
21. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 20.
22. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 20–21.
23. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 21.
24. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 16.
25. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 16.
26. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 20.
27. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 20.
28. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 24.
29. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 21–22.
30. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 22.
31. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 37.
32. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 37.
33. von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*, 38.
34. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 24.
35. von Hildebrand, *In Defense of Purity*, 24.

The Teaching of Pope Pius XI: Procreation or Abstinence

ANGLICAN BISHOPS DECLARE THAT MARITAL SEX EXPRESSES SPOUSAL LOVE

On August 14, 1930, with 193 favoring and 67 opposing, the leaders of the Anglican Church passed seven resolutions dealing with “marriage and sex.” The bishops stated: “The Conference emphasizes the truth that the sexual instinct is a holy thing implanted by God in human nature. It acknowledges that intercourse between husband and wife as the consummation of marriage has a value of its own within that sacrament, and that thereby married love is enhanced and its character strengthened.”¹ Thus the bishops of the Church of England did something that no group of bishops had done in the long history of the western church. They asserted that there was a God-given, positive relationship between marital intercourse and spousal love.

The Anglican teaching on marital sexuality chose to ignore Augustine’s theory that the sexual instinct was a matter of concupiscence resulting from the sin of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, since the Anglican pastors acknowledged that marital intercourse has a “value of its own,” it followed that married people did not need a justifying “excuse” to engage in the marital act. On the one hand, the Anglican bishops had set aside nearly seventeen centuries worth of theological speculation about the motives that justified initiating marital intercourse. On the other hand, the bishops reasserted the traditional teaching they had in common with the Roman Catholic Church: “The primary purpose for which marriage exists is the procreation of children.”²

The fifteenth resolution was in agreement with the traditional teaching in this respect: “Where there is a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or to avoid parenthood, the primary and obvious method is complete abstinence from

intercourse (as far as may be necessary) in a life of discipline and self-control lived in the power of the Holy Spirit.”³ But that same fifteenth resolution also stated that, if a couple faced “a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood” and the couple had “a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence, the conference agrees that other methods may be used.”⁴ Thus the Anglican Church, the Christian community closest to the Catholic Church in doctrine and organization, had taken a position different from any previous ecclesial teaching: Married couples might engage in marital intercourse while taking specific measures to prevent conception. The decision to do so was a matter of conscience for which married couples themselves were responsible.

On October 4, 1930, Cardinal Francis Bourne, the Catholic archbishop of Westminster, denounced the decision made by the conference of the Anglican bishops. He declared that they “had forfeited any claim to be ‘authorized organs of Christian morality.’”⁵

Arthur Vermeersch, the moral theologian who played a large role in writing the stringent statement on marriage made by the Belgian bishops in 1909, was greatly disturbed by the way the Anglican bishops had appropriated the teaching of Alphonsus Liguori on conscience. Vermeersch and other theologians thought that only a “strong papal action” could put an end to the assault on Catholic doctrine regarding the purposes of sexual relations in marriage.⁶

THE STRONG PAPAL ACTION: *CASTI CONNUBII*

On December 31, 1930, Pope Pius XI (1922–1939) promulgated *Casti Conubii* (On Chaste Marriage). The pope, with the ghost writing of Arthur Vermeersch, provided the Catholic Church with “one of the great papal documents of all time.”⁷ This encyclical “defined not only the nature of Matrimony but also the moral duties flowing therefrom.”⁸

As he gazed out upon the world from “the watchtower” of the Vatican, Pope Pius XI observed that certain “pernicious errors and degraded morals” had spread “even among the faithful.”⁹ The pope wanted to remind everyone that both the Bible and the Council of Trent had declared that matrimony was created not by human beings but by God. Thus there was little scope for human decision-making when it came to contractual marriage: “the only function of . . . human freedom is to decide that each of the consenting parties in fact wishes to enter the state of matrimony.”¹⁰ Therefore, having consented to marry, the spouses were subject to the way God instituted marriage with its particular “ends, laws and blessings.”¹¹

Procreation or Abstinence: The Married Couple's Only Choice

Referring to St. Augustine as the great Christian authority on marriage, Pope Pius XI reminded his readers of the three goods of marriage: "These . . . are the blessings which make matrimony itself a blessing: OFFSPRING, FIDELITY, SACRAMENT."¹² These traditional goods provide "the law of marriage, which gives luster to the fruitfulness of nature and sets a curb upon shameful incontinence."¹³ The pope next referred to the summary found in the 1917 Code of Canon Law: "The primary end of matrimony is the procreation and education of offspring."¹⁴

In sum, *Casti Connubii* simply repeated what church leaders and theologians had asserted since the third century—namely, that the purpose of marital intercourse was to produce a child. If, at any particular time, husband and wife did not want to conceive a child, they could avoid conception in only one way—namely, "by means of a virtuous continence."¹⁵

The pope noted that some couples were pleading "that they can neither observe continence, nor, for personal reasons or for reasons affecting the mother, or on account of economic difficulties, can they consent to have children."¹⁶ Since Pope Pius XI saw the use of birth control devices as a "criminal abuse,"¹⁷ he rejected all the reasons offered for engaging in marital acts while trying to avoid conception.

Repeating the traditional argument taken from Stoic philosophy, the pope wrote: "The conjugal act is of its very nature designed for the procreation of offspring; and therefore those who in performing it deliberately deprive it of its natural power and efficacy, act against nature and do something which is shameful and intrinsically immoral."¹⁸ Thus Pope Pius XI unknowingly painted the church's teaching authority into a corner. From this point on, Catholic leadership could not escape from that corner without the backtracking embarrassment that future popes would find unacceptable.

Chastising the Anglican Bishops

Referring to the Onan incident in the book of Genesis, the pope repeated his condemnation of contraception: "The Divine Majesty detests this unspeakable crime with the deepest hatred and has sometimes punished it with death."¹⁹ Again citing Augustine, the bishop of Rome wrote: "Sexual intercourse even with a lawful wife is unlawful and shameful if the conception of offspring is prevented. This is what Onan, the son of Judah, did, and on that account God put him to death."²⁰

In commenting on this encyclical's use of scripture, John Noonan stated that "as a distillation of past doctrinal statements" on the Catholic Church's

teaching on marital sexuality, *Casti Connubii* “was a masterpiece” and that it “had immense doctrinal authority as a solemn declaration by the Pope.” However, this masterpiece had a significant flaw: The encyclical’s writers “were indifferent to the historical contexts from which their citations came.”²¹

With his reference to the traditional interpretation of the story of Onan in place, the pope scolded the Anglican Church as “openly departing from the Christian teaching which has been handed down uninterruptedly from the beginning.”²² Against the permissive Anglican bishops “the Catholic Church” had to raise “her voice in sign of her divine mission to keep the chastity of the marriage contract unsullied by this ugly stain.”²³

An Ambiguous Development Regarding Married Love

Pope Pius XI’s encyclical also made a new contribution to the church’s theology of marriage. The pope declared that “marital love” held “a sort of primacy of honor” in Christian marriage.²⁴ Then, speaking of the love that is specific to marriage, the pope stated that “[c]onjugal fidelity requires husband and wife to be united by a special kind of love.”²⁵ Ironically, at the very moment the pope was saying something positive about the sexual dimension of marital love, he resuscitated the old bromide that warned against committing adultery by loving one’s spouse too ardently. Husband and wife “must love each other not as adulterers love, but as Christ loved the Church.”²⁶

The warning against passionate sexual loving had indeed made a long journey. It was developed by the Greek Stoics, promoted by early fathers of the church, and included in the teaching of *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566). Now the admonition had made its way into a papal encyclical on marriage. The warning against loving “as adulterers love” implied that ardor, passion, and sexual pleasure were alien to authentic marital love. And so the pope conformed to the traditional pattern of depreciating marital love by spiritualizing it: “This is the rule prescribed by the Apostle when he says, ‘Husbands, Love your wives as Christ also loved the Church.’ Now Christ certainly loved the Church with a boundless charity, and not for His own personal advantage but solely for the good of His Bride.”²⁷ Did this imply that spouses who wanted to enjoy their marital acts were not loving each other in a Christ-like way because they were selfishly seeking their “own personal advantage”?

According to various commentators, the high point of this encyclical is the papal declaration that spouses should perfect each other’s “interior life.” Spousal love “is not confined to mutual help; it must have as its higher and indeed its chief objective that of shaping and perfecting the interior life of husband and wife.”²⁸ There is an ambiguity in these words. When taking

into account the whole papal letter, the spiritual dimension of marital love seems to be placed in a relationship of opposition to the bodily expression of that same love. When the pope speaks of charity, it is not charity “founded on a mere carnal and transitory desire . . . it is a deep-seated devotion of the heart.”²⁹ One is left with the thought that perfecting the interior life of one’s partner is good but the enjoyment of “carnal and transitory desire” is not.

Part Three: “Return to the Divine Idea of Matrimony”

In part three the pope warned that God might well “punish men for their pride and their audacity” if they dared to tamper with the divine idea of marriage.³⁰ Relying on Augustine’s skewed understanding of the dynamics of human sexuality, Pius XI singled out “the violence of rebellious concupiscence” as the chief obstacle to carrying out God’s plan for marriage.³¹ Such rebellion of the flesh can only be subdued by obeying the church’s leaders who know “the divine laws in marriage and in married life.”³² For this reason married persons must pay special attention to such laws lest they, by reason of their human nature, fall “prey to carnal passion” that so readily deceives and corrupts.³³ Married persons must be ready to sacrifice their sexual desires in order to refrain from marital intercourse: “God’s law sometimes requires of married persons difficult and enduring sacrifices, sacrifices which, as experience shows, the weak man is apt to invoke as so many excuses for not keeping with the divine law.”³⁴

The pope also warned married couples to keep “as far as possible aloof from all idolatry of the flesh and from the degraded slavery of the passions.”³⁵ Dismissing the “exaggerated physiological education” advocated by “the so-called reformers of our day,”³⁶ the pope apparently rejected the legitimacy of limiting marital intercourse to the sterile period (the rhythm method) in order to avoid pregnancy. Pope Pius XI accused the “so-called reformers” of teaching the “art of skillful sinning” instead of “the virtue of chastely living.”³⁷

After husband and wife had given birth to the maximum number of children they could rear, the pope hinted that they should cease having marital relations: “Whatever the theories sustained and propagated by certain persons, husband and wife must . . . use their matrimonial rights always in a Christian and sacred way, especially in the early days of wedlock, so that should circumstances subsequently require them to observe continence, their habit of self-restraint will help them more easily to do so.”³⁸ The gist of this papal teaching relegated sexual feelings to the basement of the house of married living. Since the desire for sexual intimacy was traditionally regarded as lust, such desire had to be repressed in order to develop restraint and attention to

the interior life of one's partner and oneself. In his encyclical Pope Pius XI made no attempt "to develop the relation between coitus and the perfection of the other spouse and the communion of their lives."³⁹

***CASTI CONNUBII'S* REVOLUTIONARY ASSERTION**

In spite of its less than positive attitude toward marital intimacy, it was said that this pope's "humane interpretation of marriage" reached "its farthest advance in all the long centuries of papal declaration."⁴⁰ One reason for such praise is the pope's advancement of a new thesis: "The same *charity* must rule and regulate all the other rights and duties of husband and wife; and so in the prescription of the Apostle: 'Let the husband render the debt to the wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband,' we must see *a rule of charity* as well as a law of justice" [emphasis added].⁴¹

At long last a pope had spoken of marital intercourse as an activity relating to "charity," i.e., love. This was something new because, since the early centuries, popes, bishops, and theologians had viewed St. Paul's words about "rendering the debt" (1 Cor. 7:3) as a concession to concupiscence. Marital intercourse was seen as a duty that a husband owed to his wife and a wife owed to her husband. In 1930, for the first time, an authoritative church document stated that "charity" (love) ought to regulate the various ways husband and wife related to each other, sexual intercourse included.

In the first third of the twentieth century the Catholic Church was at a crossroads. On the one hand, the traditional view perceived the sexual dynamic as one of the lamentable effects brought about by the sin of Adam and Eve. On the other hand, the acknowledgment of the sexual dimension of marriage in connection with the love of Christ for his church raised the significance of marital intercourse to a new level of meaning. Up to this point in the Catholic Church's history, theologians and hierarchy had never really explored the implications contained in the image of the loving union that exists between Christ and his church.⁴²

NOTES

1. *The Lambeth Conferences (1867–1948)* (London: The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1948), The Lambeth Conference, Resolution 9, 164.
2. *The Lambeth Conferences*, 164.
3. *The Lambeth Conferences*, Resolution 15, 166.
4. *The Lambeth Conferences*, 166.

5. Arthur Vermeersch, "La Conférence de Lambeth et la morale du mariage," in *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 57 (1930), 850, cited in John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 504.
6. Noonan, *Contraception*, 506.
7. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, selected and arranged by the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes, in Michael J. Byrnes, trans., *Matrimony* (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), 10.
8. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 10.
9. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 220.
10. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 222.
11. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 223.
12. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 224, citing St. Augustine's *The Good of Marriage*, 24, note 32, and Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1, 9, c. 7, n. 12.
13. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 224.
14. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 228, citing *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, 1.9, c.7, n. 12, and *The Code of Canon Law*, Canon 1013, #1.
15. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 247.
16. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 247.
17. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 247.
18. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 247.
19. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 247–48.
20. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 248. See St. Augustine, *On Adulterous Marriage*, Book I, 2, note 12.
21. Noonan, *Contraception*, 508.
22. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 248.
23. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 248.
24. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 230.
25. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 230.
26. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 230.
27. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 230–31; see also *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Book 2, chapter 8, question 24.
28. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 231.
29. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 231.
30. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 271–72.
31. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 272.
32. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 274.
33. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 275.
34. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 275.
35. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 278.
36. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 278.
37. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 278.
38. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 279.

39. Noonan, *Contraception*, 588
40. Theodore Mackin, S.J., *The Marital Sacrament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 526.
41. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 233.
42. Mackin, *The Marital Sacrament*, 527.

A Rejected Perspective: Bodily Union as the “Direct Purpose” of Marital Intercourse

“TWO-IN-ONESHIP”

Herbert Doms (1890–1966) was a Catholic priest teaching theology at the University of Breslau in Poland. Using Pope Pius XI’s encyclical, *Casti Conubii*, as a starting point, Doms set out to explore “the special character of married love.”¹ His book, *The Meaning and End of Marriage*, was published in Germany in 1935.

Interpreting the pope’s encyclical on marriage as an encouragement to develop a theology that enhanced the dignity of marital relations, Herbert Doms proposed that spouses might achieve holiness through their acts of sexual intercourse. With the creation story of Adam and Eve as his foundation, Doms asserted that God created man and woman with a desire to love each other sexually. Thus, the Polish priest rejected St. Augustine’s pessimistic views on the source of sexual desire (concupiscence) being found in Adam and Eve’s sin.

Doms noted that there is no rutting period in human beings and that sexual intercourse can take place even during a woman’s pregnancy. So he concluded that “sexual intercourse must have some other purpose besides what is called its primary purpose—the child.”² It seemed that the desire of a man and a woman for sexual union with one another was even stronger than parental love.³ That gave Doms his concept of “two-in-oneship,” a phrase he took from the biblical assertion that “the two of them become one body” (Gen. 2:24).

The sexual act that makes the two-in-oneship union possible is both a physical and a spiritual action. This is so because sexual intimacy depends “directly . . . on the spiritual life, on mind and will.”⁴ Thus “the sexual act originates in the depths of the spirit because it is freely willed and involves

the giving of the whole personality to someone else.”⁵ This notion of mutual self-giving in marital intercourse was a foundational idea in Dietrich von Hildebrand’s “personalist” perspective on marriage. In the years to come another Polish priest would draw upon the notion of mutual self-giving in the marital act. That priest, Karol Wojtyła, became Pope John Paul II. He would call his approach to marital sexuality a “theology of the body.”

Augustine parodied that “in intercourse man becomes all flesh.” But Doms perceived a profound spiritual dimension in that same act: “Husband and wife possess each other in intimate love, that is to say spiritually. Each makes a present of himself or herself in an act which literally *is* the free giving of the whole personality.”⁶ The sexual act itself effects or brings about self-giving. For that reason the act of intercourse is sacramental.

In the sixteenth century the Spanish Jesuit Thomas Sanchez was among the first moralists to recognize a connection between physical acts of affection and the expression of married love. In 1935, Herbert Doms proposed that marital intercourse itself was the primary way spouses expressed their self-giving love for each other. He stated that the power to express self-giving “is inseparable from the sexual act and is even more closely bound up with it than the expressing of love and tenderness is bound up with kissing or embracing.”⁷ While a kiss can express the self-giving of one spouse to another, the kiss does so “far less forcibly than sexual union.”⁸ A man and woman about to marry seek sexual union first and foremost: “When a man and woman unite to form the sexual community of marriage, they are usually concerned chiefly with one another, not with a third person—the child.”⁹ Simply said, “the union of husband and wife in the marital two-in-oneness is a natural result of the special properties of human sexual intercourse.”¹⁰

In the fifth century St. Augustine declared that the procreation of children was most useful and therefore procreation was the first good of marriage. In the thirteenth century St. Thomas Aquinas adapted Augustine’s perspective by saying that the primary purpose of marital intercourse was the procreation and education of children. In 1935, while not denying the procreative purpose, Doms introduced a new term with a new emphasis—namely, the “direct purpose” of marital intercourse. “The direct purpose of physical intercourse,” he wrote, “is to bring about the real union of two persons in a single vital relationship.”¹¹ Thus, the most immediate purpose of marital intimacy is union with one’s beloved in the sexual act of two-in-onenesship.

Mutual Self-Giving

Elaborating on the meaning and nature of the marital act, Doms pointed out that in such two-in-onenesship activity “the persons give themselves to each other,

act upon each other and mutually accept each other in one common act.”¹² He reasoned that the meaning of the marital act derives from the act itself, not from some meaning extrinsically imposed upon it. Sexual union, by its very nature, possesses “a unique power for expressing the mutual self-giving of partners.”¹³ Thus the marital act expresses the mutual self-giving of spouses “as immediately and directly as the reception of the Eucharist expresses the self-giving of the individual to the Savior by the very fact of its reality.”¹⁴

Drawing on a comparison made by St. Bonaventure in the thirteenth century, Doms noted that in the act of receiving the Eucharist a person is directly united to Christ and therefore that person becomes more closely united with the other members of the Body of Christ. Doms thought that the closer one member of the Body of Christ is united to another through sexual union, the more both persons are united to Christ. Doms noted that St. Thomas Aquinas placed marriage in the last place among the sacraments because it had the “least spirituality.”¹⁵ The reason why Aquinas thought as he did was that he looked at the sexual relationship of husband and wife “very much from the outside.”¹⁶

By the beginning of the third century, and perhaps earlier, churchmen had adopted a Platonic or dualistic perspective. Thus, those church leaders had assumed there was an opposition between the bodily dimension and the spiritual dimension of human beings. Doms, seeing no such opposition, understood the physical body of each spouse to be an integral aspect of the symbolism of the marital sacrament. He pointed out that the human body possesses a “special power to fulfill two persons through making them one.”¹⁷ Since the “body . . . is the means of direct contact between the persons and the means by which they participate in the life of each other,”¹⁸ it followed that bodily passion and sexual pleasure should be welcomed, not rejected or disdained.

Though a “purely inner act of love” may be able to lead lovers to some form of moral or spiritual union, “only in sexual union is the *very act* of the one received into the *very self* of the other.”¹⁹ Because the person is inseparable from his or her body, “the act of the body becomes the physical and, consequently, perceptible expression of the love of the person who gives himself in order to fulfill the other.”²⁰ This mutual self-giving is exemplified in the Pauline comparison of the love of Christ for his church with the love of husband and wife. Accordingly, “the love and mutual loyalty of Christ and the Church is really a result of their utter possession of each other.”²¹

Marriage: A Reflection of the Love of Christ for His Church

Doms then commented on the long-neglected theme of the sacramental union of Christ with his church: “The *whole* Christ gives Himself to each of the

sanctified members of the Church, as to the whole Church, and He expects [each Christian] to give Him his [her] whole life in return.”²² In such sacramental self-giving, spouses possess each other’s persons and “participate in each other’s bodies” for the whole of their lives.²³ According to Catholic sacramental theology, a sacrament “effects” or brings about that which the sacrament signifies. Therefore, the marital act is sacramental because it brings about the personal union of spouses. Thus, “the marriage act is the most complete expression of marital unity and the deepest experience of marital life; it is also a very expressive likeness of the mystical unity of Christ with the Church.”²⁴

Building upon von Hildebrand’s positive appreciation of the marital act in terms of its unitive meaning, Doms articulated what churchmen had overlooked for most of the Catholic Church’s history—namely, that marital intercourse enhances spousal love: “The marriage act, when ruled by chastity and the moral virtues, will necessarily tend to bring into birth this intimate love, if it was not in existence at the conclusion of the marriage ceremony. If this kind of love already existed, the [sexual] act will strengthen and deepen it.”²⁵

St. Augustine could not see any other way in which Eve could be a “help-mate” for Adam except by bearing children. But Doms perceived that God intended the helping relationship to be a sexual partnering, a two-in-oneness form of mutual help. Having created them as male and female, God “made it possible for them to receive, each from the other, and to exert, each upon the other, this deep formative impression . . . through the performance of the [sexual] act.”²⁶ God created people as sexual beings so that a man and a woman could become “the very body of the other, and each be with the other ‘one flesh.’”²⁷ Thus our human sexual differentiation “is the most powerful of the means ordained by God to teach us to love the person as an individual, and to realize this love in an utterly individual way.”²⁸

Marital Relations and Procreation

The traditional teaching held that procreation justified acts of marital intercourse. But Doms, noting that the marital act needed to be repeated often before it became in fact an act of generation, held that “the very nature of the sexual act emphasizes its personal importance as distinct from its biological purpose.”²⁹ He concluded that the “primary content” of the sexual activity of husband and wife is sexual union with one another: “It seems then that we shall be nearer the truth if we look upon the procreation of children as the natural result of the act of marital union. . . . We shall certainly be making a mistake if we subordinate the act in its primary content to procreation, because in a great number of circumstances (for instance,

during pregnancy or . . . after the change of life) this purpose cannot in fact be fulfilled.”³⁰

Doms explained why he thought that sexual union, not procreation, was the “primary context” of marital intercourse. First, the marital union of persons will generate a child only in a relatively few instances. Second, “in normal copulation the human act . . . in the strict sense is nothing more or less than the union of persons.”³¹ It may well be true that in willing a particular act of sexual union both husband and wife will also the procreation of offspring. When taking into account the hundreds or even thousands of acts of sexual union in the course of a marriage, it is clear that the vast majority of these acts are performed because husband and wife are seeking marital union with one another. Doms noted that “the biological object of the act,” the conception of a human person, is “something far less frequently achieved.”³²

Resolving Some Problems

In the long history of the development of the Catholic Church’s teaching on marital relations, the issue regarding the purposes of marital intercourse had revolved around the idea of procreation as the “primary purpose.” However, when taking into account pregnancy, sterility, and change of life, one sees an inherent problem in the teaching that the procreation of children is the primary purpose of marital intercourse. In an attempt to deal with that problem, Doms raised this question: What was the purpose of a “perfectly natural sexual act” when procreation could no longer be the objective purpose of that marital act? Doms answered: “In my view, the only possible purpose is the representation and realization by husband and wife of their state of two-in-oneness.”³³ Since God gave marriage the essential content of sexual union (two-in-oneness), there existed no necessity to choose “between the two purposes of sexual activity—either procreation of children or the subjective fulfillment of husband and wife.”³⁴

Doms attempted to resolve a perennial problem by asserting that the marital act had one immediate purpose and “two ulterior purposes, one personal and the other biological.”³⁵ The ulterior personal purpose of marital sex, he said, is the fulfillment of husband and wife at every level of their human existence. The ulterior biological purpose of intercourse is procreation, a purpose that is impossible to achieve in each and every act of intercourse.³⁶ With these distinctions in place, Doms offered his solution to the issue of a couple’s participating in marital intercourse while pregnant or sterile or while hoping that conception would not result. Simply stated, the direct purpose of the couple’s act of marital intercourse is sexual union, that is, the realization of the “two-in-oneness.”

DOMS' IDEAS REJECTED

Dietrich von Hildebrand's books, *In Defense of Purity and Marriage*, had generated a modest but favorable reception in 1927 and 1929. Doms' *The Meaning and End of Marriage* was published in German in 1935, translated into French in 1937, and translated into English in 1939. With Doms' book on their desks or nightstands, married couples were able to better articulate the goodness of their sexual loving. Doms' personalist view of the ends of marriage proclaimed that their acts of conjugal union were primarily orientated toward the proper perfection of each other. Spouses could view their acts of sexual union in terms of both natural and spiritual values. Those values were said to be present even when the good of offspring was not achieved.³⁷

But some things Doms had written would get him in trouble. He had stated that "the sexual act does not derive its dignity and its grandeur from the fact that it is performed with a view to procreation."³⁸ He had also written that "perhaps it would be best if, in the future, we give up using such terms as 'primary' and 'secondary' in speaking of the purposes of intercourse."³⁹ And so Doms' opponents, wielding the sword of Aquinas' scholastic philosophy, slashed and hacked at Doms' personalist approach. Seeing "a rejection of the traditional theory of the ends," the defenders of traditional Catholic teaching rallied to the defense of the long-accepted theology on the purposes of marital intercourse.⁴⁰

R. Boigelot, a French Jesuit, drew up one list of charges. Doms had substituted "the subjective experience of married couples for the objective reality of marriage."⁴¹ Doms was then accused of making pleasure the primary end of sexuality.⁴² Furthermore, Doms was accused of encouraging "an inevitable overestimation of sexuality on the part of readers."⁴³ Because Doms had placed the good of the individual couple before the good of the human species, other critics labeled his approach to marital intimacy as "individualistic and sexolatric."⁴⁴

Thus, in 1939, even as the English edition of *The Meaning of Marriage* appeared with an *imprimatur* (ecclesiastical permission to print), Doms' book was being withdrawn from sale in other parts of Europe. Five years later, on April 1, 1944, the Holy Office, one of the key congregations of the Vatican, delivered the final blow. Noting that certain theologians "attached" unacceptable meanings to certain words such as "end," "primary," and "secondary," the Holy Office asked: "Can the opinion of certain modern writers be admitted, who either deny that the primary end of marriage is the generation and education of children or teach that the secondary ends are not essentially subordinate to the primary end, but are equally principal and independent?"⁴⁵ The Holy Office answered: "Negative."

Although Doms was not specifically named as one of the offending “modern writers,” the rebuke was understood as aimed at him. In one fell swoop the Holy Office undermined Doms’ reputation and destroyed any authority his work may have had.⁴⁶

NOTES

1. Dr. Herbert Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, trans. George Sayer (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), xxi.
2. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 7–8.
3. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 5, 6, 25, and 26.
4. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 14.
5. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 14.
6. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 14.
7. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 15.
8. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 15.
9. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 15–16.
10. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 16.
11. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 18.
12. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 43–44.
13. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 44.
14. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 45.
15. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 65, a. 2, cited in Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 135.
16. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 46.
17. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 117.
18. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 111.
19. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 49.
20. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 49–50.
21. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 116.
22. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 116; see also 130–36.
23. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 116.
24. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 123.
25. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 50.
26. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 51.
27. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 53.
28. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 62.
29. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 68.
30. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 68.
31. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 71.
32. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 73.
33. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 84.
34. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 85.

35. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 85.
36. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 85. See also 67–81.
37. Rolando B. Arjonillo Jr., *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Marriage* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 211. Arjonillo draws his information from T. De Urdanoz, “*Otro Grave Problema Moral en Torno al Matrimonio*,” in “*Ciencia Tomista*,” 68 (1945), 234–35.
38. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 57.
39. Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 88.
40. Arjonillo, *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Marriage*, 210.
41. R. Boigelot, “*Du sens et de la fin du mariage*,” in *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, 30, in Arjonillo, *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Mariage*, 217–19.
42. R. Boigelot, “*Du sens et de la fin du mariage*,” cited in Arjonillo, *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Mariage*, 218.
43. R. Boigelot, “*Du sens et de la fin du mariage*,” cited in Arjonillo, *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Mariage*, 218.
44. R. Boigelot, “*Du sens et de la fin du mariage*,” cited in Arjonillo, *Conjugal Love and the Ends of Mariage*, 219.
45. AAS 36:103, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 591.
46. AAS 36:103, cited in Noonan, *Contraception*, 591–92.

The Break with St. Augustine: Pope Pius XII Accepts the Rhythm Method

PAPAL ALLOCUTIONS FOR NEWLYWEDS

In 1939, Pope Pius XII began his nineteen-year papal reign. Perhaps the new ideas about marital intercourse¹ put forward by Dietrich von Hildebrand and Herbert Doms prompted the newly elected pope to give frequent “allocutions” to the newly married. On May 24, 1939, Pius XII told the newly married that their mission in life was to “nourish civil society with good citizens . . . increase the Church of Jesus Christ” and “prepare new citizens for the heavenly country.”² In November the pope warned newlyweds to avoid the “evil utilitarian motive” and “the demands of sterile licentiousness” that “hinder the gift of life and cause the tender names of brother and sister to be forgotten.”³ On December 6 the pope, noting that not all Christians were called to “the sublime ideal” of virginity, said that those who married could “have the legitimate desire to see yourselves surrounded by a glorious crown of children, the fruit of your union.”⁴

On January 15, 1941, Pope Pius XII reminded newlyweds that married people were called to the ministry of conceiving “children and bringing them up for divine worship.”⁵ Two weeks after that, referring to the teaching of St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622), the pope stated that “mutual affection” was something merely natural, something immersed “solely in the inclination that attracts man towards woman.”⁶ Downplaying human affection, the pope told the newlyweds that “only divine grace can make” them “superior to all the daily miseries” that sprang “like weeds, from the root of weak human nature.”⁷

POPE PIUS XII AND THE ITALIAN CATHOLIC SOCIETY OF MIDWIVES

On October 29, 1951, Pius XII began his historic allocution to the Italian midwives by asserting that any man who approaches his wife's womb to "exercise" his marital right "must know the order which the Creator wishes maintained and the laws which govern it."⁸ If a couple did not want to have another child, the pope directed the midwife to say: "There is only one way open, namely, to abstain from every complete performance of the natural faculty."⁹

Some spouses might object that "long periods of abstinence are impossible."¹⁰ Not so, said the pope. "Abstinence is possible," since God "obliges husband and wife to abstinence if their union cannot be completed according to the laws of nature."¹¹

Is It So?

The pope's view of "the laws of nature" seems to have been based not only on Stoic principles, but also on a mistaken premise made by Aristotle, accepted by Thomas Aquinas and then incorporated into the church's teaching. Aristotle held that each human sexual act was procreative because the male seed was the "efficient cause that changed the nutritive material supplied by the female."¹² For that reason every act of insemination (intercourse) was of itself procreative.¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas accepted Aristotle's mistaken biological perspective and so did the leaders of the Catholic Church up to and including Pope Pius XII himself. However, contrary to what was thought, there is no strict cause and effect relationship between insemination and procreation. "The relation of intercourse to procreation is statistical," and therefore most acts of sexual intercourse do not lead to conception.¹⁴

Advising the Italian Midwives

Since the early centuries of Christianity's existence, marital intercourse had been justified by the procreative purpose. Therefore, if husband and wife did not want to conceive a child at a particular time, they should abstain from sexual relations. In the mid-twentieth century the pope told the midwives that such a call for sexual abstinence could not be wrong. Rather, it would be wrong to conclude that "men and women of our age" were "incapable of continuous heroism."¹⁵

The pope noted that in the past two decades more and more writers had discussed something called "personal values." Such writers were wrong if they held that "the specifically sexual act" serves the married couple.¹⁶ Per-

haps with Herbert Doms in mind, the pope said that it was erroneous to hold that “the proper and most profound sense of the exercise of conjugal rights” consisted in the “personal and affective union” of bodies.¹⁷ The idea that the spousal expression of love might be the primary concern of a couple’s marital activity was threatening the Catholic Church’s ancient juridical and metaphysical approach to marital intercourse. So the pope declared that the theory of personal values in marital intercourse was “a grave inversion of the order of values and of the ends imposed by the Creator Himself.”¹⁸ Since the one and only primary purpose of marriage was “the procreation and upbringing of a new life,” every other aspect of marriage and marital sex was “essentially subordinated” to that primary purpose.¹⁹ Both the will of God and of nature had placed the “most spiritual and profound” aspects of married love “at the service of posterity.”²⁰

A STRANGE, NEW TWIST: THE RHYTHM METHOD

Since the 1850s there had been several attempts to use a woman’s periodic infertility to avoid conception. This method had been ineffective until 1929. Kyusaku Ogino and Hermann Knaus then discovered that ovulation took place twelve to sixteen days before the beginning of a woman’s next menstrual period. If a woman’s cycle were regular, she would be able to regulate her pregnancies by avoiding intercourse during that time of the month when she was biologically fertile.

The pope’s predecessor, Pope Pius XI, had described the attempt to use the sterile period as “the art of skillful sinning.”²¹ During the 1930s and 1940s, some Catholic theologians speculated that the use of periodic abstinence was indeed sinful, but it was a lesser evil than the outright use of other contraceptive methods. Other theologians held that the use of the “rhythm method” was liable to lead to the denial of marriage rights, lessen marital love, promote egoistic self-centeredness, and perhaps, if the method failed, even lead to abortion. One might observe that, in spite of these alleged evil consequences of practicing the rhythm method, the pope nevertheless approved this method in 1951. However, in Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, paragraph 17, similar evil consequences are ascribed to the use of birth control.

Pope Pius XII viewed the rhythm method as “another grave problem.”²² If husband and wife employed the new method of regulating conceptions, they seemed to be engaging in “a clear expression of a will contrary” to the precept of serving maternity.²³ But the pope offered a most unexpected conclusion: In very particular circumstances a couple might use the sterile period and not commit sin! “The rhythm method,” said the pope, “may be *lawful*” under certain

conditions.²⁴ The couple needed to have “grave” reasons or “serious motives” for using this method. Such grave reasons were related to “medical, eugenic, economic and social indicators.” These indicators “may exempt husband and wife from the obligatory, positive debt for a long period or even for the entire period of matrimonial life.”²⁵ This papal teaching constituted a breakthrough in the Catholic Church’s approach to marital relations. Here was the first official Catholic teaching acknowledging that a married couple might lawfully engage in marital intercourse while intending to avoid conceiving a child!

So it was that in 1951, while Pope Pius XII continued to uphold Augustine’s assertion that procreation was the first good of marriage, he disregarded Augustine’s rule that marital intercourse was only justified by the couple’s *intention* to conceive a child. Augustine would have vehemently objected to this new papal teaching for he had condemned the Manichees for attempting to prevent conception by avoiding sexual intercourse during certain times of a woman’s monthly cycle.²⁶

Sexual Pleasure: An Old Problem and a New Recognition

But then came the papal “Catch 22.” Pius XII declared that if the spouses used the rhythm method “while continuing to satisfy the full of their sensuality,” they committed sin.²⁷ A spouse’s desire for sexual communion with his or her mate was still associated with the vice of sensuality. A married couple had no exemption from the duty to procreate if they simply wanted to enjoy their acts of marital intercourse. Spouses needed more “serious motives” if they were to “rightly” use the infertile time to regulate the number of their children. The pope’s address to the Italian midwives also served to refute those who, like Herbert Doms, proposed that the immediate or direct purpose of the marital act was union with one’s beloved.

However, a significant development in the church’s teaching occurred when the pope stated: “Husband and wife, therefore, by seeking and enjoying this pleasure do no wrong whatever. They accept what the Creator has destined for them.”²⁸ Finally, after nineteen centuries, a pope had explicitly accepted the idea that the pleasurable dynamics of marital intercourse was a reality rooted in God’s creative design for male and female! However, even with a papal recognition that pleasure in marital relations is good, the tendency to take away with the left hand what had been given with the right was again at work. Perhaps the pope feared that some Catholic couples, having been temporarily relieved of their obligation to procreate children, would become unrestrained hedonists. So he warned: “As with the pleasure of food and drink so with the sexual they must not abandon themselves without restraint to the impulses of the senses.”²⁹

THE SUPERIORITY OF VOWED VIRGINITY OVER SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

On March 25, 1954, Pope Pius XII promulgated *Sacra Virginitas*. Its purpose was to defend “the excellence of virginity” against those who were “exalting the married state to the point of placing it above virginity, thereby disparaging consecrated chastity and ecclesiastical celibacy.”³⁰ There is some irony in the pope’s declaration because for most of the church’s history her leaders had exalted consecrated celibacy while disparaging the married state.

The pope’s encyclical was a warning given to those theologians who were proposing that marital intercourse might be a means to holiness: “It is asserted in some quarters that the grace of God given by the sacramental agency of Matrimony hallows the use of matrimony [sexual intercourse] in such a way as to make it a more powerful instrument of a personal union with God than virginity itself, since, we are told, Christian wedlock is a sacrament whereas virginity is not.”³¹ So the pope declared: “We must denounce this doctrine as a dangerous error.”³²

To strengthen his denouncement of the idea that marital intercourse was the more meritorious path to God, the pope reminded his audience of the teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. These saints had taught that the origins of sexual passion were found in Adam and Eve’s sin. The pope declared: “It is unfortunately true, that, as a result of the first sin, committed by Adam, our bodily powers and passions have been upset and tend to domineer, not only our senses, but also over our souls. They darken the mind and weaken the will.”³³

While recognizing that the sacrament of marriage “strengthens the bond of mutual love,”³⁴ Pius XII asserted that marital intercourse did not strengthen the bond of one’s love for God. Referring to the 1944 Decree of the Holy Office that had censured the personalist ideas of Herbert Doms and others, the pope said that the sacrament of marriage was not established for the purpose of directly strengthening “the bond of union in charity with God Himself.”³⁵

Stressing that assertion, the pope referred to the traditional but flawed interpretation of St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Since Paul had told married couples “to observe continence for a time in order to give themselves to prayer” (1 Cor. 7:5), the pope pointed out that abstaining from intercourse was a condition for praying.³⁶ Therefore, it followed that marital intercourse *could not* bring spouses closer to God. The pope went on to say that married Catholics were “capable of doing a great deal of good,” but it would be “sheer topsy-turvydom and confusion” to make that fact “a ground for saying that marriage is preferable to complete self-dedication” (consecrated virginity).³⁷ The pope then conceded that although “virginity is . . .

more perfect than wedlock,” it could be said that “holiness of life can also, in fact, be achieved without consecrated chastity.”³⁸ This same idea was also stated by St. Francis de Sales in his seventeenth-century book *An Introduction to the Devout Life*.

SUMMARY

On the one hand, Pope Pius XII reasserted the traditional teaching that the primary purpose of marriage and marital intercourse was the procreation and education of children. He also upheld the teaching that mutual help and the alleviation of concupiscence were the secondary ends of marriage. He portrayed spouses who wanted to engage in marital intercourse while seeking to avoid conception as unheroic, selfish, and carnal.

On the other hand, Pius XII proposed that under certain conditions couples would not sin if they engaged in sexual intercourse while using the sterile time of a woman’s monthly cycle to avoid conception. In doing so he turned away from Augustine’s rigid linking of marital intercourse with procreation. The pope also provided a breakthrough by recognizing that husband and wife “should experience pleasure and happiness of body and spirit” in marital intercourse.³⁹

After Pius XII’s address to the Italian midwives, the Catholic Church found itself in a much broader debate about the purposes of marital intercourse. That debate would soon be fueled by the complaints of those married Catholics who used “the rhythm method” only to discover that it brought them troubles and frustrations.

NOTES

1. For a bibliography on that debate see John C. Ford, S.J., “Marriage: Its Meaning and Purposes,” *Theological Studies* 3 (1942), 333 ff.

2. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to Newlyweds, May 24, 1939, selected and arranged by the Benedictine Monks of Solesmes, in Michael J. Byrnes, trans., *Matrimony* (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), 303.

3. Pope Pius XII, *Sertum Laetitiae*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 307.

4. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Newlyweds, December 6, 1939, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 310.

5. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to Newlyweds, January 15, 1941, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 318.

6. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to Newlyweds, January 29, 1941, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 319.

7. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to Newlyweds, January 29, 1941, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 319.
8. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, October 29, 1951, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 405.
9. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 420.
10. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 421.
11. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 421.
12. Richard McCormick, "'*Humanae Vitae*' 25 Years Later," *America*, Vol. 169, no. 2, July 17, 1993, 11.
13. McCormick, "'*Humanae Vitae*' 25 Years Later," 11.
14. McCormick, "'*Humanae Vitae*' 25 Years Later," 11.
15. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 422.
16. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 422.
17. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 422–23.
18. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 423.
19. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 424.
20. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 426–27.
21. Pope Pius XI, "The Holiness of Matrimony" (*Casti Connubii*), in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 278.
22. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 416.
23. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 416.
24. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 419.
25. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 419.
26. See Philip Schaff, "On the Morals of the Manichaeans," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, trans. Rev. R. Stothert (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), chapter 18, 65, 86.
27. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 419.
28. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 430.
29. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 430.
30. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, March 25, 1954, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 464.
31. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 470.
32. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 470.
33. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 469.
34. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 470.
35. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 470.
36. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 470.
37. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 472.
38. Pope Pius XII, *Sacra Virginitas*, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 473.
39. Pope Pius XII, Allocution to the Midwives, in Byrnes, *Matrimony*, 430.

The Effects of Papal Teaching: Frustration and Tears

A PERTINENT STORY

In December 1958 I found myself in a Chicago hospital with “Doc” as my roommate. Doc, a man in his forties, confided in me that he could not receive the Eucharist from the hospital chaplain because he and his wife were using artificial birth control. At the time I was a nineteen-year-old novice with the Congregation of the Clerics of St. Viator. After returning to the novitiate, I decided to convince Doc to stop using sinful birth control methods. To that end I sent him an article from *The Liguorian*, a Catholic monthly. Written by a priest whose byline was “The Bystander,” the article began with a letter that was “typical of the many that we receive.”¹

Dear Editor: Would you like to know what it is like being a Catholic who practices birth control? . . . After 8 years and 6 children we learned a lot. Our doctor can only explain why rhythm doesn’t work for some women—including me. He can explain why I must stay off my feet the last 5 months of pregnancy. . . .

The picture isn’t pretty. Three years ago our baby was born and not expected to live. The extra medical bills . . . had us living in an old drafty house with no plumbing. We knew something had to be done and rhythm wasn’t the answer. The only two “sure” methods were to abstain from the marriage act for several weeks at a time or to use contraception.

My husband was 30 years old and wouldn’t consider the first method. So we chose mortal sin.

In 3 years I have seen my husband turn from a practical Catholic into a lukewarm one. . . . He didn’t go to Communion after going to confession at Christmas time. I’m afraid the priest refused him absolution. I don’t ask. My confessor has refused me absolution until I give up this sin. I want to—believe me. . . .

My husband is wonderful with the children. He is a steady worker and over the years he has given up fishing, hunting, his occasional beer, barber shop haircuts, and now cigarettes, to save money for the children's expenses. We can't continue that way for 12 to 15 years until time solves our problems. We must do something soon—but what? . . . Thanks for hearing me out.²

The Bystander responded that “only a heartless representative of Christ would not be moved to sympathy” by such a letter. But it was “impossible for me as a priest (or for any priest in the whole wide world) to tell you that yours is a case in which it is lawful to practice birth-prevention.”³

The Bystander offered the following four-step program that would lead both wife and husband “back into a state of mind that will make a sin like that of birth prevention unthinkable.”⁴ First she had to confide her story to a priest who would give her “practical suggestions” that would serve “as a backdrop for giving up mortal sin.”⁵ Second she had to spend fifteen to thirty minutes a day in recommended spiritual reading. “If you are ever to escape from your sins,” the Bystander warned, “don't say you are too busy or too tired to do any reading.”⁶ The third step involved seeking out “other mothers and fathers of large families who face the same temptations you do, but have overcome them.”⁷ Such a group should read and discuss portions of Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii*. Prayer was the fourth step. She was instructed to say prayers in the morning and the evening, recite the rosary daily, attend “some public novena devotion every week if that is possible,” and “make a special visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day.”⁸

It was a tough, monastic regimen to be sure, but the Bystander's plan may well have worked. After taking care of her six children and keeping the prescribed spiritual routine, it would be unlikely that this woman would have time or energy left for any sinful sex with her husband.

Thus I had done my part to help Doc and his wife turn from their sins of using birth control. Doc never replied.

MARRIED CATHOLICS AND THEIR EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE

In the nineteen hundred years since First Corinthians was written, the fathers of the church, the Irish monks, theologians, canon lawyers, authors of moral manuals, members of the Roman Penitentiary, and numerous bishops and popes had formed the church's theology regarding marital intercourse. But married people never had their say. In 1964 that long silence ended when thirteen couples wrote about their personal experience of Catholic marriage in a

book entitled *The Experience of Marriage*. While the stories of these couples cannot be said to sum up all of the marital experience of Catholic Christians, their accounts indicate that, in the decade following Pope Pius XII's approval of rhythm, the use of the sterile time produced sexual tension, anxiety, and frustration for at least some couples.

Entitling their essay "Permanent Continence," Mr. and Mrs. A wrote that they had four children in five years of marriage, the last two children conceived while they were "practicing rhythm." Mr. A described their six years of married life in terms of "three contexts." The first involved "learning to love as man and wife" in a way that was "not complicated by a need to avoid pregnancy."⁹ The second context, "the rhythm context," began after the birth of their second child. He and his wife consulted calendar and temperature charts in the hope of arriving "at some approximate knowledge" of when they could "allow their mutual love to overflow into its fullest and most complete expression" and "when they could not."¹⁰ When the calendar did not permit them to become two in one flesh, they found themselves acting out their "common role of sexual indifference and personal distance."¹¹

After rhythm "proved unreliable," the third context of "sustained continence" began. Mr. A summed up the dilemma of Catholic couples: "[E]ither they risk the good of the family and the health of the wife by making another pregnancy possible . . . or they risk the psychological damage and frustration of a wedded life without sexual union."¹²

"A Harsh and Terrible Thing" was the title of Mr. and Mrs. B's testimony after ten children in eighteen years. Finding "Vatican roulette" unreliable, Mrs. B stated that "conception became sometimes a matter of desire outweighing fear."¹³ Mrs. B's "dominant moral anxiety in the use of sex" was the likelihood of conceiving more children. Mr. B agreed with his wife.

Mrs. C described the effects of her many pregnancies on their sexual relationship: "As my fear of pregnancy grew, and as I found myself bone-weary with caring for my young children, I was less and less able to respond to gestures of love and affection from my husband."¹⁴ She lost sexual desire for her husband: "I soon reached a point where I experienced none myself, and I even resented and shrugged off ordinary everyday signs of affection."¹⁵ Mrs. C concluded her testimony with these mournful words: "And so I was passive and dutiful and frigid, enduring his love with no response."¹⁶

Mr. C recalled that he and his wife married "primarily because we loved each other."¹⁷ A dutiful Catholic and father of seven children, Mr. C found himself living in the context of "sustained continence." He then searched for novel ways that would enable him to cease being "a beast with physical needs." He confided, "You train yourself no longer to see her as 'desirable,' so that she is no longer a threat to your continent virtue, no longer a real

physical value in your life.”¹⁸ Given enough time and enough “heroic purpose,” Mr. C managed to render his desire for his wife “completely sterile.”¹⁹ Augustine, along with numerous other saints, theologians, and popes, would have applauded Mr. C’s success in overcoming his concupiscence.

Mrs. D, having married Mr. D at the beginning of his graduate studies, had three “rhythm pregnancies” in five and a half years of marriage. Mrs. D described herself and her husband as “a normal, healthy married couple not yet thirty years old.” She wistfully confided that, because of their circumstances, they never really had the chance to explore freely their sexual yearning for each other as husband and wife.²⁰ After six years of marriage they found themselves having, “with considerable trepidation,” sexual intercourse about once every three months.²¹

The traditional approach presumed that spouses who did not practice sexual restraint were “indulging in endless orgies of sex.”²² Mrs. D disagreed: “[F]requent and regular intimacy encourages control, consideration for the other, the building of subtleties into the relationship [and] the primacy of the relationship over the gratification.”²³ She concluded that those who advocate the rhythm method do not realize that this method can be “unnatural, unhealthy and spiritually destructive.”²⁴

However, Mr. E, the father of six children in nine years of marriage, did not experience the rhythm method as something harmful. Admitting that rhythm “does have its tensions,” he discovered that “if I am working very hard, smoking too much, drinking too much coffee, wrapped up in some article or book I am writing, rhythm is no problem at all.”²⁵ He added: “At such times I couldn’t care less about intercourse.”²⁶

Mrs. E acknowledged that on certain occasions she had “been tempted to old-fashioned lust,”²⁷ but she had also conquered the “tensions” of rhythm through work. While admitting “sex is . . . one of the world’s most exquisite pleasures,” Mrs. E queried: “[W]ho has time for exquisite pleasures?”²⁸ Her life was so crowded with children, deadlines, and “never-ending work schedules” that “time passes so quickly that a month’s abstinence now equals a day’s denial in times past.”²⁹

Mrs. F had married at age twenty. Six years and three children later, she stated that she “had been living in a state of suppressed rage for five years, a rage at trying to conform to standards that were an insult to my intelligence and my feelings.”³⁰ Mr. and Mrs. F concluded that when Catholic couples attempt to regulate fertility according to papal teaching, they “will have to sacrifice much in sexual relationship, so much in fact that in many cases we must conclude that requirements for a full and satisfying sexual life have been destroyed.”³¹

Summing up the last five years of their six-year marriage, Mrs. F bitterly reflected: “We realized that the rhythm method is in such direct contradic-

tion to the natural emotional rhythms of man and wife, and was forcing us to live under such a regime of anxiety, tension, and dissatisfaction that our whole marital life was on the verge of turning into something very cold and angry.”³²

When Mrs. F was carrying her third child, she and her husband came to the realization “that we had reached the end of our rope and we could no longer live under such a biological tyranny.”³³ They decided to use contraceptives to provide a form of birth regulation that was both more effective and that did not create so many spiritual, psychological, physical, and biological conflicts.³⁴ Mrs. F concluded: “For the first time, we can feel free to embrace when our feelings and psychological rhythms really draw us together, instead of trying to turn ourselves off and on in some mechanized fashion.”³⁵

Between the ages of twenty-nine and thirty-four Mrs. G gave birth to four children. Experiencing health problems, she and her husband began a strict observance of periodic abstinence. Nevertheless, two more children were born in the next six years. For the rest of their marriage they “abstained for all but five or six days at the end of every month, and practiced total abstinence as long as five months” after each birth.³⁶

Mrs. G enumerated some of the effects of church teaching: “I must admit to a burning rage when I see women suffering, and need not look far: my friend in her early forties with ten living children, suffering a miscarriage with serious aftereffects; an acquaintance, a young mother in our parish with four children, recently returned from her second stay in a mental hospital, where her doctors warned her against bearing any more children; yet she is psychologically unable to bear the conflict between this advice, that of her confessor, and the demands of her husband. Again, there are several young women I know, still in their mid-twenties and pregnant with their fifth child in five years; and the women whose veins deteriorate more and more with each successive pregnancy.”³⁷

Mr. H would come home only to find his wife constantly worn out by the “attention which three young children demand.”³⁸ Even if he and his wife could “afford more children financially,” they could not “afford them emotionally and spiritually.”³⁹

Using periodic abstinence, Mr. H said he found it difficult “to have a meaningful sexual relationship with my wife.”⁴⁰ For twenty years they abstained from marital intimacy “for about half of the menstrual cycle,” a practice that prevented them from making “any significant progress in achieving a more satisfactory sexual relationship.”⁴¹ Mr. H hoped that such sacrifice would become “a means to our sanctification.”⁴²

Mr. and Mrs. I conceived a child almost immediately after their wedding. While she was nursing their baby, she asked her confessor for permission to

use the rhythm method for a few months after she stopped nursing her baby. The priest made it known that “the idea of a mother with one child wanting to use rhythm was selfish.”⁴³ A second pregnancy soon followed. Mrs. I concluded that the kind of continence demanded by rhythm seemed “morally objectionable” because “love cannot be turned on like a faucet at certain times of the month and shut off during fertile periods.”⁴⁴

Mr. I was of the opinion that if the churchmen who so solemnly “officiate” on the conduct of marital love today were present at the wedding feast of Cana (John 2:1–11), they “would have spoken of indulgence and self-control, of the necessity to curb our appetites, and with the academic detachment belying any pertinent experience they would have praised God for protecting the guests from excesses.”⁴⁵

Once married, Mr. and Mrs. J discovered for themselves that spouses are “better people, better parents, better citizens [and] better candidates for sainthood because they are better bedmates.”⁴⁶ Mr. and Mrs. J hoped that the Catholic Church would develop “a sharper perspective . . . on the sacredness of the body and sex in marriage.”⁴⁷

Mr. and Mrs. L were parents of five children in seven and a half years. “Biological calculation” had replaced “joy and affection” in their marriage.⁴⁸ Mr. L recounted how his wife’s health broke down while carrying their fifth child. After that, they began to practice rhythm. Once it happened that Mrs. L’s period was two weeks late. Mr. L came home “to find the house in disorder, my wife sitting distraught on the floor of the living room with the children gathered around her. She was immobile, unable to care for them. When I tried to encourage her to get up, and said that things would somehow work out all right, she broke down. For nearly thirty minutes, she could only repeat, over and over, ‘You don’t understand, you don’t understand.’”⁴⁹ Together they prayed that they would be spared another child.

Reflecting on his experience of marriage, Mr. K found a certain kind of consolation in two concepts developed by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross—namely, “the dark night of the soul” and “the dark night of the senses.” Mr. K accepted rhythm as “the ‘dark night’ of this half of the twentieth century.”⁵⁰ Giving up all attempts “to understand the ethics of rhythm,” Mr. K yielded his assent: “The Church has spoken. It is enough.”⁵¹

THE SLEEPLESS MORAL THEOLOGIAN

In 1964, the same year in which *The Experience of Marriage* appeared, Father Charles E. Curran wrote: “I am a moral theologian. I teach in a seminary. Some nights I have trouble getting to sleep.” He explained what was

troubling: "Questions and doubts race through my mind about the church's teaching on birth control. Every time I talk with other priests they invariably bring up the same subject. Why is birth control wrong? What shall we tell our penitents? I think of a young couple I know who have nine children and live on a school teacher's salary. After their fourth baby, a priest . . . advised them to stay away from each other. But they *are* husband and wife. One day they came to tell me that the night before they had exchanged sexual intimacies; both were tense and he had lost the seed. Together they cried."⁵²

"Why is birth control wrong?" The answer is found in the history of the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage. Birth control is wrong because of the way the fathers of the church reacted to the teachings and practices of Gnostics and Manichees. Birth control is wrong because those early church leaders formulated the doctrine that marital intercourse was justified only by the usefulness of procreation. Birth control is wrong because the Stoics taught that the natural law directed human beings to use sexual intercourse only for the reproduction of the human species.

Birth control is also wrong because, after the historical context that had brought about the church's attitude of pelvic anxiety had changed, leaders of the church did not reexamine the foundations of that negative attitude. Birth control is wrong because, through nearly eighteen centuries of the church's existence, her leaders saw marital relations only in terms of the couple's double obligation to procreate and to avoid seeking lustful pleasure.

NOTES

1. The Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," *The Liguorian* (October 1957), 29.
2. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 29–30.
3. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 30.
4. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 31.
5. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 31.
6. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 32.
7. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 32.
8. Bystander, "Is Heaven Worth It?," 32.
9. Michael Novak, ed., *The Experience of Marriage* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964), 2.
10. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 9.
11. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 9.
12. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 12.
13. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 19.
14. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 33.
15. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 33.

16. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 33.
17. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 37.
18. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 39.
19. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 39.
20. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 46.
21. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 46.
22. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 53.
23. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 53.
24. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 56.
25. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 62.
26. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 62.
27. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 64.
28. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 65.
29. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 65.
30. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 81.
31. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 77.
32. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 79.
33. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 80.
34. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 80.
35. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 81.
36. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 90.
37. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 93–94.
38. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 109.
39. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 110.
40. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 110.
41. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 111.
42. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 112.
43. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 120.
44. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 121–22.
45. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 129.
46. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 136.
47. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 140.
48. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 154.
49. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 155.
50. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 157.
51. Novak, *The Experience of Marriage*, 157.
52. Charles E. Curran, *Christian Morality Today* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1966), 47.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) Recognizes the Value of Marital Love

OVERVIEW

In the course of nineteen centuries it can be said that the Catholic Church developed three types or doctrinal patterns regarding marital intercourse. The first pattern centered on the reproductive function of marital intercourse. The second pattern viewed sexual intimacy as a source of shame and defilement. The third pattern saw marital intercourse as a source of spousal intimacy and as a symbolic expression of the union of Christ and his church.¹ The first and second patterns formed the core of the Catholic Church's teaching on marital intercourse. The third was largely ignored. The Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965) adopted the third pattern as the basis for its doctrinal treatment of marriage.

PREPARATION FOR THE VATICAN COUNCIL'S TEACHING ON MARRIAGE

In 1959 Pope John XXIII announced that he would call the world's Catholic bishops to an ecumenical council in Rome. Preparing for that council, the Holy Office wanted a preliminary document on the properties, ends, and the use of marriage (marital intercourse). The document's purpose would be to strengthen the church's traditional teaching. Therefore, the document would focus on continence and chastity by stating the superiority of virginity over the married state, reaffirming procreation as the primary end of marriage, reasserting the papal teachings of Popes Pius XI and Pius XII, and condemning a variety of errors relating to marital sexuality.²

When that document, *On the Moral Order*, was presented in May 1961, both Rev. Bernard Häring and Rev. Rene Laurentin objected to its negative tone, its heavy emphasis on procreation, and its omission of the importance of spousal love.³ Father Bernard Häring and a few members of the theological commission wanted to broaden the church's theology of marriage by including the personalist perspectives that had been developed by Dietrich von Hildebrand and Herbert Doms. So, using statements found in *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* and in Pope Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*, Häring and his party argued that the total communion of husband and wife is "the chief reason and purpose of marriage."⁴

Rev. Francis Hurth rejected Häring's argument on the ground that it "contradicted Church teaching."⁵ The "traditionalists" opposed any new development in the theology of marriage. So they attached this warning footnote to the text on the ends of marriage: "Some people, on the basis of a statement in the Roman Catechism (*The Catechism of the Council of Trent*) that is cited there, are unduly exalting conjugal love as the primary purpose of marriage."⁶ The traditionalists subsequently posted warning notes in those texts where any attempt was made to speak "of conscience, of charity, of freedom, of sexuality [and] of married love."⁷

THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

When the world's Catholic bishops met in October 1962, they rejected sixty-nine out of the seventy prepackaged, Curia-dominated documents that had been submitted to them. The gathered bishops then realized they had a real opportunity to influence the future of the Catholic Church.

Cardinal Leon Suenens, archbishop of Malines-Brussels, feared that *On the Moral Order*, the draft on Christian marriage, might slip through the council's screening committees and end up as part of an official document. So, in December of 1962, Suenens privately spoke with Pope John XXIII. The cardinal suggested that Pope John appoint a special commission to look into ways in which certain new empirical findings on birth control might relate to the church's teaching on marriage. Suenens later acknowledged that he thought it was time to propose an intelligent statement on responsible parenthood, and thus try to reform the old idea "the more children the better."⁸

The Pontifical "Birth Control Commission"

In March 1963, Pope John XXIII secretly appointed three priests and three laymen to "the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, the Fam-

ily and Birth.” The six men met at a Belgian hotel that October and all six agreed with Pope Pius XI’s 1930 condemnation of artificial birth control.⁹ However, when this six-man commission began to seek ways to enunciate persuasive arguments for Pius XI’s teaching on the intrinsic evil of artificial birth control methods, they were unable to do so. The pill had been developed and certain theologians were beginning to question the church’s condemnation of all methods of birth control. So the six-man commission asked the new pope, Paul VI, for more help. The pope added seven more members in 1964, four of whom were moral theologians. Now the group included the “notoriously liberal” Bernard Häring, who had vigorously disagreed with the description of marital love as a secondary end of marriage.¹⁰

When the Pontifical Commission met in April 1964, its members began to “reevaluate the church’s whole approach” to marital sexuality.¹¹ Commission member John Marshall later reported an exchange between Dr. Willem Marinus van Rossum and one of the priests on the commission. The doctor began by noting that married couples had a duty to love each other “carnally.”¹² When a priest objected to some of van Rossum’s thinking, the doctor responded: “You think of sex as something you must avoid in order to be faithful to your vocation. That is all right for you. But our vocation is to love one another.”¹³ In a nineteen-page summary given to Pope Paul VI, Dr. Henri de Riedmattan reported that “the group unanimously affirms that love is at the heart of marriage, and a majority of the members agree that the love of husband and wife would not, in any way, be ranked among the secondary ends of marriage.”¹⁴

The commission was also becoming aware that Stoicism’s natural law argument had its weaknesses. To begin with, “natural” was a difficult term to define. Disease and famine were also “natural” but overcoming both through human ingenuity was morally good. Part of Dr. de Riedmattan’s message to Pope Paul VI stated: “The members concur that ‘the natural law alone cannot provide a good answer’ to the perplexities presented by the birth control dilemma.”¹⁵

In late April 1964 news of the behind-the-scenes discussions of birth control became public. On June 23, 1964, Pope Paul VI met with the College of Cardinals and told the cardinals that the issue of birth control “is being subjected to study, as wide and profound as possible.”¹⁶ Declaring that the rules of Pope Pius XII “must be considered valid,” the pope removed the issue of birth control from further discussion by the bishops of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁷ But the pope’s announcement stirred further debate. For example, a survey of German, French, and Dutch literature on the subject of birth control revealed that “roughly ninety to ninety-five per cent of fertile Catholic couples offend against the norms” of Pope Pius XII.¹⁸ Concerning the practice

of birth control, the survey noted that even “with the best will in the world, the majority of our faithful find it impossible to live up to the demands of moral teaching about marriage as it stands today.”¹⁹

The Third Session of the Second Vatican Council

In the fall of 1964, the council president announced to the bishops that the birth control issue was not to be discussed because the special commission was handling it. However, while more or less avoiding direct discussion of the birth control issue, the bishops did begin to process the way in which traditional church teaching on the purposes of marriage impacted the lives of the faithful.

Cardinal Paul Léger was the first of four speakers to find some fault with the Catholic Church’s traditional approach to marriage. On October 28, 1964, he spoke of “a certain pessimistic and negative attitude regarding human love” that had developed out of the “philosophies of past centuries,” an attitude that “has veiled the importance and legitimacy of conjugal love in marriage.”²⁰ Léger argued that the draft under discussion “should clearly present human conjugal love . . . as a true end of marriage, as something good in itself.”²¹

Léger also declared: “Conjugal love is good and holy in itself and should be accepted by Christians without fear.”²² Echoing ideas like those articulated by Dietrich von Hildebrand and Herbert Doms, the cardinal said: “It must also be stated that the intimate union of the spouses also finds a purpose in love.”²³ He concluded by stating: “And this end [the expression of love] is truly the end of the act itself, lawful in itself, even when it is not ordained to procreation.”²⁴

Cardinal Suenens spoke next. Also using terminology similar to that found in Doms’ *The Meaning of Marriage*, the cardinal archbishop of Malines-Brussels recognized that in the past churchmen might “have accentuated . . . ‘increase and multiply’ to such a point that we have obscured another text, ‘and they will be two in one flesh.’”²⁵ Suenens added that St. Paul had given “the very love of Christ for his Church as a prototype for Christian marriage.”²⁶

Suenens then suggested that the assembled bishops distance themselves from centuries of negative thinking: “The problem confronts us not because the faithful try to satisfy their passions and their egotism, but because thousands of them try with anguish to live in double fidelity, to the doctrine of the Church and to the demands of conjugal and parental love.”²⁷ He then urged the council’s bishops to be “done with Manichean pessimism.”²⁸

Maximos IV Saigh, the eighty-seven-year-old patriarch of Antioch, also addressed the “agonizing and burdensome” problem of birth control.²⁹ He

portrayed the faithful as people finding “themselves forced to live in conflict with the law of the church, far from the sacraments, in constant anguish, unable to find a viable solution between two contradictory imperatives: conscience and normal married life.”³⁰ Noting some of the sources of the church’s sexual pessimism, Maximos IV asked: “Are we not, perhaps unwillingly, setting up a Manichaean conception of man and the world, in which the work of the flesh, vitiated in itself, is tolerated only in view of children?”³¹

The next speaker, Bishop Beitia of Santander, Spain, voiced his opposition to those bishops who questioned traditional Catholic doctrine on the purposes of marital intercourse. He faulted the draft on marriage and the family because it seemed to state that the marital sacrament depended upon “love.”³² He refocused attention on the old definition of marriage as a contract. Regarding those situations in which parents found it impossible to reconcile their sexual responsibility to each other with the desire not to have children, those spouses should know that “divine law might require heroic sacrifices.”³³

Siding with Bishop Beitia, Cardinal E. Ruffini, Bishop of Palermo, criticized the draft for stating that couples could make decisions regarding the number of children they would procreate. Ruffini then suggested that the writings of St. Augustine should be used “in reproof of selfish sexuality which was rampant today.” He declared that the council could resolve the whole controversy by citing Pope Pius XI’s encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, and Pius XII’s allocution to the Italian midwives.³⁴

Cardinal B. Alfrink, bishop of Utrecht in the Netherlands, disagreed with bishops Ruffini and Beitia. Referring to those who had pointed out that sacrifice and the Cross were vital to Christianity, the cardinal declared that the joy of Easter also pertained to the essence of Christianity. Noting the anguish of loyal Catholics, Alfrink asserted that God did not take pleasure in the difficulties of human beings.³⁵ Besides, there existed “an honest doubt” regarding the teaching that “complete or periodic continence” is the only solution to “conflicts in married life.”³⁶

Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, whose personal motto was *Semper idem* (“always the same”), spoke next. Claiming certainty in the truth of Catholic teaching, Ottaviani staunchly opposed any revision of the teaching on marriage. He scolded those bishops who spoke up for change: “I am not pleased with the statement . . . that married couples can determine the number of children they are to have. This has never been heard before in the history of the Church.”³⁷ In a very real sense the cardinal was correct. The faithful never had the chance to be heard regarding their experience of marriage. Cardinal Ottaviani continued: “Are we to think that the precept, ‘Increase and multiply,’ is contradicted by the precept, ‘They shall be two in one flesh’? The priest who speaks to you is the eleventh of twelve children, whose father was

a laborer in a bakery. . . . My parents never doubted Providence. Their motto was: 'Look to the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.'"³⁸

More Members for the Pontifical Birth Control Commission

In December 1964, Pope Paul VI added more than forty new members to the commission. For the first time women and married couples were included. The committee, now fifty-eight strong, met for the fourth time from March 25 to 28, 1965. On March 25, historian John Noonan, author of *Contraception*, spent two hours reviewing how the Catholic Church's views of marriage, love, and marital intimacy had gone through significant changes over the centuries.

Upon learning how the church's teaching on marriage had developed over the centuries, some members of the commission realized that there could still be further development. But the traditionalists, including one of the commission's new members, John Ford, an American Jesuit, vigorously opposed any idea of development. The Spanish Jesuit, Marcelino Zalba, declared, "We stand before a practically uninterrupted tradition" and then vehemently argued in favor of the teaching that procreation was the primary end of marriage.³⁹ Father Ford agreed with Zalba: "This prescription [against contraception] is in full force now as it was before, and so it will be tomorrow and forever, because it is not a mere human enactment but the expression of a natural and divine law."⁴⁰

Father Bernard Häring and others countered by arguing that infallibility does not pertain to interpretations of natural law, but only to matters of divine revelation. Häring declared that while marriage as a whole has to be open to the procreation of children, this did not mean that every act of marital intercourse between husband and wife had to be open to the possibility of conception.⁴¹ Patrick and Patricia Crowley, an American couple, spoke on behalf of thousands of Catholics in the Christian Family Movement. They wanted an expanded theology of marriage that stressed the positive values of married love.⁴²

The Fourth Session of the Council

The fourth and final session of the Second Vatican Council began in the fall of 1965. Even though Pope Paul VI had excluded the bishops from the process of reforming the church's teaching on birth regulation, their *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* made an enormous contribution to a positive development of church teaching concerning marital relations.

Promulgated on December 7, 1965, *Gaudium et Spes* (the *Constitution's* Latin title) consisted of two main parts. The preface to the second part, "Some

Problems of Special Urgency,” stated that “there were a number of particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age.”⁴³ The bishops considered those urgent needs “in the light of the gospel and of human experience.”⁴⁴ This examination of needs in the light “of human experience” was unexpected. Churchmen had long viewed human experience as an unreliable guide in the search for truth because such experience was “subjective.” Now, however, the bishops made it known that they would take into consideration the data supplied by such human sciences as history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, medicine, etc. Marriage was the very first “urgent need” the bishops examined.

THE PASTORAL CONSTITUTION: FOUR SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS

Having considered what married couples felt, feared, experienced, endured, and hoped for, the council members made four significant contributions to the church’s theology of marriage. First, the bishops did not repeat the ancient distinction that Ambrose, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Pope Pius XI, and Pope Pius XII and other churchmen had made between the primary end (the procreation and education of children) and the secondary ends of marriage (mutual assistance and the alleviation of concupiscence). The bishops simply stated: “By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown.”⁴⁵ In stating that marriage was a matter of both the expression of love and the procreation of children, the bishops did not designate either purpose as primary or secondary.⁴⁶

The second significant contribution occurred when the bishops referred to marriage as a “covenant” rather than a contract. Marriage was described as an “intimate partnership of married life and love . . . rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent.”⁴⁷ Since the relationship between Christ and his church is not a contract but a covenant, the language of covenant was considered a far better way to refer to the relationship between husband and wife.

Some bishops wanted to include canon law’s definition of marriage as a contract in which spouses exchanged the right to use each other’s bodies for acts apt for generating offspring.⁴⁸ Their request was denied. The reasons given for that denial were: 1) juridical language was not conducive to a pastoral approach; 2) such language was humiliating; and, 3) the idea of “a right to the body” came from a time when wives were regarded as possessions.⁴⁹ Most importantly, the majority of bishops recognized that “covenant” corresponded “to an understanding of marital intercourse as mutual self-giving.”⁵⁰

The Council's Endorsement of "Responsible Parenthood"

The third significant contribution made by the bishops was their recognition that parents sometimes needed to limit the number of their children in order to raise them properly. Parents not only cooperated with the love of God in bringing children into the world, but they were also "the interpreters of that love."⁵¹ So, when it came to the question of how many offspring parents would bring into the world, the parents should "thoroughly take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which may be foreseen."⁵² While recognizing that "children are the supreme gift of marriage,"⁵³ the bishops also perceived that married couples sometimes found "themselves in circumstances where at least temporarily the size of their families should not be increased."⁵⁴

Affirming that "the task of transmitting human life" was the "proper mission" of parents,⁵⁵ the bishops also stated that the number of children could make "the faithful exercise of love and the full intimacy of their lives . . . hard to maintain."⁵⁶ The traditional language promoting the sacrifice of sexual desire did not appear. Instead, the conciliar bishops acknowledged that the hardship of breaking off "the intimacy of married life" sometimes "imperiled" marital fidelity and not infrequently "ruined" the "fruitfulness" of married life.⁵⁷

At Last! Church Teaching Recognizes the Value of Sexual Loving

The fourth significant contribution to the Catholic Church's teaching on marriage is found in the bishops' adoption of an attitude of unconditional acceptance concerning marital intercourse. Taking an idea found in Pope Pius XI's encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, the conciliar bishops developed the view that marriage was a "community of love."⁵⁸ They described sexual intercourse as "that human act whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other."⁵⁹ In that "community of love" marital intercourse has a most significant role: "Thus a man and a woman, who by the marriage covenant of conjugal love 'are no longer two, but one flesh' (Matt. 19:6), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions."⁶⁰

By stressing the centrality of conjugal love, the conciliar bishops promoted the long-neglected view of marriage as a source of intimacy and loving communion. For nearly eighteen centuries churchmen had often used the Scriptures to exalt celibacy and depreciate marital intercourse. At the Second Vatican Council the leaders of the Catholic Church turned in a new direction: "The biblical Word of God several times urges the betrothed and the married to nourish and develop their wedlock by pure conjugal love and undivided mutual affection."⁶¹

Affirming the personalist perspectives expressed so well by Dr. Dietrich von Hildebrand and Rev. Herbert Doms, the bishops declared that the love of husband and wife “leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves, a gift proving itself by gentle affection and by deed.”⁶² The bishops praised the power and purpose of sexual intimacy by teaching that spousal love “is uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act.”⁶³ There were no references to marital intercourse as a way to alleviate concupiscence or as a way to render the marriage debt. Instead, marital acts were acknowledged to be “noble and worthy” actions that signified and promoted “that mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other with a joyful and a thankful will.”⁶⁴ The church’s leaders were encouraging husbands and wives to express and develop their love for each other by engaging in acts of marital intercourse!

This encouragement can be said to represent a 180-degree turn from nearly eighteen centuries of putting down the sexual union of spouses. Thus, the bishops reclaimed the biblical attitude of total acceptance. God created us as sexual beings and this is a reality to be accepted “with a joyful and thankful will.” In their affirmation of the goodness of marital sexuality the bishops of the Second Vatican Council also provided an authentic “spirituality” of marital intercourse. They wrote: “Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many-faceted love, welling up as it does from the fountain of divine love and structured as it is on the model of His union with the Church.”⁶⁵

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World was an amazing doctrinal advancement. For some eighteen centuries the men who led the church had overlooked the message that the sexual acts of married partners symbolized the union of Christ and his church (Eph. 5: 22–33). In 1965, the leaders of the Catholic Church belatedly realized that in the sacrament of marriage the risen Christ lives in both husband and wife in order to enrich the holiness of their lives.

Nevertheless, the Papal Commission on Family, Population, and Birth was still at work. The pope awaited his commission’s recommendations and the faithful of the Catholic Church waited for the pope’s final words.

NOTES

1. See James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5.

2. Giuseppe Alberigo, ed., *History of Vatican II*, Vol. I (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 251.

3. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 254.

4. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 256.

5. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 256.
6. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 257.
7. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 257.
8. Robert Blair Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion* (Kansas City, Mo.: Leaven Press, 1985), 39.
9. Edward Stourton, *Absolute Truth: The Struggle for Meaning in Today's Catholic Church* (New York: TV Books, 2000), 72.
10. Alberigo, *History of Vatican II*, 256.
11. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 44–45.
12. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 45.
13. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 45.
14. Robert McClory, *The Turning Point* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 50.
15. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 54.
16. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 55.
17. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 55.
18. Franz Böckle, "Bibliographical Survey on the Question of Birth Control," in *Concilium*, Vol. 5, no. 1, ed. Franz Böckle (London: Burns and Oates, May, 1965), 53.
19. Böckle, "Bibliographical Survey on the Question of Birth Control," 53.
20. Xavier Rynne, *Vatican Council II* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 365.
21. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 365.
22. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 365.
23. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 365.
24. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 365.
25. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 366.
26. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 366.
27. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 367.
28. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 367.
29. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 368.
30. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 368.
31. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 368.
32. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 369.
33. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 369.
34. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 369–70.
35. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 370.
36. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 60–61.
37. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 370.
38. Rynne, *Vatican Council II*, 370.
39. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 70.
40. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 70.
41. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 71.
42. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 73–74.

43. Walter Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), #46, 248.
44. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #46, 248.
45. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #48, 250.
46. Bernard Häring, "Part II, Chapter 1, "Fostering the Nobility of Marriage and the Family," in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 5 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 234.
47. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #48, 250.
48. Häring, in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. V, 233.
49. Häring, in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. V, 233.
50. Häring, in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. V, 233.
51. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #50, 254.
52. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #50, 254.
53. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #50, 253–54.
54. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #51, 255.
55. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #50, 254.
56. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #51, 255.
57. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #51, 255.
58. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #47, 249.
59. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #48, 250.
60. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #48, 250.
61. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #49, 252.
62. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #49, 253.
63. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #49, 253.
64. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #49, 253.
65. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, #48, 251.

The Postconciliar Work of the “Birth Control Commission” and Its Culmination in *Humanae Vitae*

BEHIND THE SCENES

While the council’s bishops were completing the final draft of the text dealing with marriage in November 1965, Father John Ford, S.J., met with Pope Paul VI. Ford reported that the draft of the bishops’ document, *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, implied that contraception was not intrinsically evil. If the bishops’ text were approved, said Ford, it would promote immorality among the weak and shake the faith of the strong.¹

About the same time, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani was at work discounting the doctrinal authority of *The Pastoral Constitution*. He declared that the 1930 papal encyclical, *Casti Connubii*, with its categorical rejection of all methods of contraception, was superior to the Council’s *Pastoral Constitution* because *Casti Connubii* was “the milk of pure doctrine” while the council’s document was “only a pastoral text.”²

THE SIXTH AND FINAL MEETING OF THE PAPAL COMMISSION ON BIRTH CONTROL

The papal commission met for their sixth and final time from April to June 1966. The members of the Commission were then meeting in specialized groups. In May a group of nineteen theologians were asked to vote on two questions: 1) Is the teaching of *Casti Connubii* irreformable? 2) Is artificial contraception an intrinsically evil violation of natural law?³ To both questions fifteen theologians voted “no” and four voted “yes.”

Another specialized group, the physicians, saw a need for a change in the church's teaching. Dr. Albert Görres of the University of Mainz objected to the traditional processes used to decide "questions of the greatest importance for life."⁴ With regard to the relevant encyclicals, he pointed out that significant theological issues had "been decided apparently without theological discussion and according to the opinions of one or two of the Holy Father's private theologians or of a curial authority."⁵

Görres also objected to the claim that moral theologians had "unanimously" opposed contraception through the centuries. While Catholic theologians were on record as opposing contraception, Görres pointed out that they had never truly *discussed* the morality of contraception. From the thirteenth century through the twentieth the priests belonging to religious orders and congregations did almost all the writing dealing with marital sexuality.⁶ After the conclusion of the Council of Trent in 1563, writers and teachers of marital ethics in religious orders found themselves under a double censorship. One form of censorship came from the local bishop and the other from the superior of their religious order.⁷ A bishop or a superior of a religious order could remove any theologian from his teaching position if that theologian expressed an opinion that did not echo the traditional point of view. Under such conditions the power to articulate the Catholic Church's doctrinal position went to "an assortment of timid, often scrupulous ultraconservatives" who embraced any argument that supported the old, foregone conclusions.⁸ Görres also pointed out that historical distortions of marital morality had first come from Stoicism, Platonism, and Manichaeism and that these distortions were still more or less active in the church.⁹

Fathers Ford and Zalba argued in favor of reasserting the teaching in Pope Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*. Father Ford reasoned that the encyclical had to be correct in its condemnation of artificial birth control, or else it would mean that the Holy Spirit would have been with the Anglican bishops when they permitted the use of contraception in 1930.¹⁰ Father Zalba, taking into account the church's rule forbidding the use of contraceptives, asked: "What then about the millions of souls which according to the norms of *Casti Connubii* we have damned to hell, if those norms were not valid?"¹¹ Hearing this, Patricia Crowley then asked Zalba: "Do you really believe that God has carried out all your orders?"¹²

Married Experts Join the Debate

Dr. Donald Barrett noted that many Catholics dutifully accepted their church's rules for trying to space the births of children. While some spouses accepted rhythm as a means of fostering discipline, far fewer said that rhythm

fostered married love. 63 percent of the three thousand Christian Family Movement couples were of the opinion that "practicing rhythm harmed their marriages in varying degrees because of tension, frustration, sexual strain, loss of spontaneity, arguments, irritability, discouragement, insecurity, [and] fear of pregnancy."¹³ One anguished wife and mother reported: "I bend over backwards to avoid raising false hopes on my husband's part. . . . I stiffen at a kiss on the cheek, instantly reminded that I must be discreet. I withdraw in other ways too, afraid to be an interesting companion, gay or witty or charming, hesitant about being sympathetic or understanding, almost wishing I could be invisible. . . . And I wonder why I can't shake off the fear and uncertainty during the rest of the month."¹⁴

Colette Potvin, one of the commission's five women, stated that "[c]hildren are a normal consequence of our love and not the goal. The physiological integrity of the conjugal act is less important than the repercussions of that love on the couple and on their family."¹⁵ She then stated that the "conjugal act is the principal way we have of showing our love for each other."¹⁶

Patty Crowley concluded that it was not birth control but the rhythm method itself that was "unnatural." Respondents to the Christian Family Movement's questionnaire repeatedly "pointed out that nature prepares a woman at the time of ovulation to have the greatest urge to mate with her husband."¹⁷ That is the time when a woman's husband wants to sexually respond to his wife because she desires his love. "Yet month after month she must say no to her husband because it is the wrong date on the calendar or the thermometer reading isn't right."¹⁸

Some Clerical Reaction

The lack of objectivity in remarks such as those made by Mrs. Potvin and Mrs. Crowley disturbed some of the clerical members of the commission. They thought that information supplied by the laity should be dismissed because it could not be proved.¹⁹ On the day following Mrs. Potvin's remarks, Father Stanislas de Lestapis, S.J., complained that some members of the commission were "idolizing" married people. He declared that "the couple has become a state of grace and contraception their sacrament and the result is . . . a devaluation of procreation."²⁰

And so it was that the witness of the church's "lower-archy"²¹ (the married laity) would be dismissed. Monsignor George A. Kelly stated that he saw little value in having "social scientists" and "lay witnesses" on the papal commission. He rejected the testimony of married laity on the grounds that "they could speak only about questions irrelevant to the moral determination the original Commission was called upon to make."²² Rev. Kelly also opined

that the “mixed assortment of theological amateurs” had turned Pope Paul’s commission “into a debating society arrogating to itself the function of reformulating Catholic doctrine in political caucus.”²³

More Behind-the-Scene Maneuvers

In May 1966, the pope demoted most of the fifty-eight members on the papal commission to the rank of “expert.” When the newly demoted took a week’s vacation, some of the remaining members met secretly. Opposing any change in the church’s doctrine, Father John Ford, S.J., and Dr. Germain Grisez, an American philosopher, produced a document stating that the church could not change her teaching. This document carried forward the gist of the traditional theological perception of marriage by declaring that there was no necessary relationship between marital sex and marital love: “Conjugal love is above all spiritual (if the love is genuine) and it requires no specific carnal gesture, much less its repetition in some determined frequency.”²⁴ To strengthen that conclusion, the document noted that “a father and a daughter can love each other without the necessity of carnal gestures.”²⁵ While this was an irrelevant comparison because father and daughter are not husband and wife, it nevertheless serves to indicate the desperation in Ford and Grisez’s attempt to shore up the traditional opposition between the carnal and the spiritual dimensions of marriage.

Rev. Ford argued that the role of the Holy Spirit was to prevent church authorities from making errors in their teaching. He pointed out that if Pope Paul VI did not declare that all contraception was intrinsically evil, “it would have to be acknowledged that the Holy Spirit in 1930, in 1951 and in 1958 assisted Protestant churches and that for half a century Pius XI, Pius XII and a great part of the Catholic hierarchy did not protest against a very serious error”—namely, the condemnation “most imprudently, under the pain of eternal punishment, thousands upon thousands of human acts [of contraception] which are now approved.”²⁶

The Birth Control Commission’s Official Report and the So-Called “Minority Report”

The fact is that “Responsible Parenthood” was the only official report given to Pope Paul VI. However, commission members De Lestapis, Visser, and Zalba had signed the document that had been secretly written by Ford and Grisez. When Cardinal Ottaviani gave the report to the pope, the cardinal represented the document as “the minority report.” This maneuver turned the

single official report of the papal commission into a less impressive "majority report." This ploy of "minority" and "majority" reports would eventually enable Pope Paul to reject the recommendations of his own Pontifical Commission.

The sole original report, "Responsible Parenthood," stated that the church's traditional teaching on marriage "developed in the argument with heretics such as the Gnostics, Manicheans and later the Cathari, all of whom condemned procreation . . . as something evil."²⁷ The resulting doctrinal tradition "intended to protect two fundamental values: the good of procreation and the rectitude of marital intercourse."²⁸ This statement can well serve as a succinct summary of the origins of the church's doctrine on marriage and marital intercourse.

Outlining a wide perspective that might help Pope Paul VI find a way out of that current impasse, the commission's theologians adopted an approach similar to the one taken by the bishops at the Second Vatican Council. Examining contemporary issues "in the light of the gospel and of human experience," the authors of "Responsible Parenthood" declared: "The facts which throw light on today's world suggest that it is not to contradict the genuine sense of this [the church's] tradition and the purpose of the previous doctrinal condemnations if we speak of the regulation of conception using means, human and decent, ordered to favoring fecundity in the totality of married life."²⁹

The reference to "human experience" would include the discoveries of the sciences, thus providing the Catholic Church with information unknown to church leaders in previous ages. Some of the new information included "social changes in marriage and the family, especially in the role of the woman; lowering of the infant mortality rates; new bodies of knowledge in biology, psychology, sexuality and demography."³⁰ It was no longer necessary for parents to produce six children in order to have two of them survive to provide for their parents in old age. For the 40 percent of women who had an irregular menstrual cycle, the rhythm method produced great hardship. There seemed to be only one function of the clitoris: to provide the woman with sexual pleasure.³¹

Perhaps the most significant "new fact" was that for the first time in the history of the Catholic Church some of her leaders and theologians had listened to the testimony of the married laity. The writers of "Responsible Parenthood" declared: "There must be considered the sense of the faithful: according to it, condemnation of a couple to a long and often heroic abstinence as a means to regulate conception, cannot be founded on the truth."³² The crux of the commission's report held that the morality of the marital act did not "depend upon the direct fecundity of each and every particular act."³³

1966 TO 1968: “A TIME OF STUDY AND REFLECTION”

After the council ended in 1965, Catholic married couples began to draw their own conclusions about the moral use of certain forms of artificial contraception. If both the unitive and the procreative purposes of marital intercourse were equally good, and if spouses needed to space the births of their children more effectively, couples reasoned that the procreative purpose might be temporarily put aside when they engaged in acts of marital union. By the mid-1960s there was some doubt about the church’s rule banning all forms of artificial contraception. If moral theology’s maxim “a doubtful law does not bind” is correct, then spouses could love each other without calendars or thermometers or the fear of hell.

With the increasing uncertainty about what was the church’s position on birth control, Pope Paul VI needed to do something. On October 29, 1966, exactly fifteen years after Pope Pius XII had addressed the Italian midwives about the use of the rhythm method, Pope Paul addressed the Italian Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology. He told the society that he could not make a definite ruling on the report of the birth control commission. Then he declared that “the magisterium of the church” was “in a moment of study and reflection,” and not in “a state of doubt.”³⁴ The pope concluded: “The norm now taught by the Church . . . demands generous and faithful observance.”³⁵

ANOTHER PERTINENT STORY

In the fall of 1966 I was the only layperson taking Rev. Dr. Carl Peter’s course on the ecclesiological aspects of the act of faith in Catholic University’s School of Theology. Discussing the papal statement of October 29, Rev. Peter pointed out that there are important differences within “the magisterium” (the official teaching) of the church. While teaching belonging to “the deposit of faith”³⁶ cannot change, some official teaching can be changed.

The Second Vatican Council dealt with such distinctions when it taught that the church is always in need of “continual reformation.” The conciliar bishops pointed out that, “if the influence of events or of the times has led to deficiencies in conduct, in church discipline, or even in the formulation of doctrine (which must be carefully distinguished from the deposit itself of faith), these should be appropriately rectified at the proper moment.”³⁷ For example, Pope Gregory XVI declared, in his 1832 encyclical *Mirari Vos*, that “freedom of conscience” was “an absurd and erroneous doctrine.”³⁸ That papal teaching was “rectified” in 1965 when the Second Vatican Council’s

Declaration on Religious Liberty held that freedom of conscience was a basic human right.³⁹

Rev. Peter said that Catholic leaders may have made a wrong assumption about Pope Pius XI's teaching on the intrinsic evil of contraception. While some may have assumed that the papal teaching belonged in the category of the "deposit of faith," it may well have been that *Casti Connubii*'s condemnation of all forms of artificial contraception belonged in the realm of reformable doctrine. Upon hearing this, one of the priests was visibly shaken. His voice quivered as he objected to the notion that the Catholic Church could change its teaching on the birth control issue: "I've been hearing confessions for twenty-five years, and I always told my penitents that using contraception was a mortal sin. I told them that they would go to hell if they died without absolution from their sins." He then asked: "What would happen to all those people who had come to me in confession?"

Father Peter asked him: "Why should God judge them by your standards?" The priest replied that his standards were those of the Catholic Church and then asked: "How could the church make such a mistake for so many years?" Father Peter answered: "If the teaching church has made such a mistake, it would not be the first time." He then pointed out for nearly three centuries, roughly between 300 and 600, the leaders of the church taught that grave sin committed after baptism could be forgiven only once. Attempting to defer reconciliation until they were dying, many Christians died before they could be reconciled.

NEWS FLASH!

On April 19, 1967, *The National Catholic Reporter* published both the commission's official report as well as the document described as "the minority report." The publication of "the minority report" interfered with Cardinal Ottaviani's plans to use Ford's arguments as the basis for a future papal text demonstrating that all forms of birth control were intrinsically evil.

Cardinal Ottaviani then called for a meeting with the four signers of the "minority report." These were the commission members who opposed all change in the church's teaching. The other fifteen members of the commission were not invited. Together with the pope's theologian, Carlo Columbo, the four men drafted a fifteen-page document and gave it to Pope Paul VI. This document argued that the teaching of *Casti Connubii* had to stand because a change in its teaching would have the effect of undermining the authority of church (papal) teaching.⁴⁰ Their draft also stated that a change in the traditional Catholic teaching on procreation would encourage selfishness and hedonism

in married couples.⁴¹ But this draft was so rigid that even Ottaviani's Holy Office rejected it as unsuitable.⁴²

In the next attempt to produce the document that would become the 1968 papal encyclical, two groups of ghostwriters were put to work, neither group knowing of the existence of the other. One group worked out of the Vatican secretary of state's office and the other labored under the direction of Cardinal Ottaviani's Holy Office. Each group worked on different portions of what eventually would become Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

Word of these writing efforts leaked out to the other cardinals and bishops who had been official members of the papal commission. Cardinal Suenens tried to inform the pope that a "traditionalist" document on the birth control issue would hurt the church by creating a "credibility chasm." On August 29, 1967, Suenens was rebuffed by a letter stating that "the sovereign pontiff believes that the observations favoring a new thesis . . . do not seem sufficiently convincing."⁴³ Fifteen of the nineteen members of the Papal Commission on the Study of Population, Family, and Births found themselves completely shut out. Apparently, more than three years of the pope's own commission's work had been dismissed.

THE PAPAL ENCYCLICAL: *HUMANAЕ VITAE*

It appears that the arguments coming from Ford, Grisez, Visser, and Zalba were "sufficiently convincing." The long-awaited papal encyclical appeared on July 29, 1968. Pope Paul VI addressed his letter to church leaders, the laity, and "all men of good will."⁴⁴

In 1965, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council had *recognized* the significance of marital intercourse as an expression of spousal love. In 1968 the pope asked if that "new" *recognition* warranted a change in the church's teaching regarding the purposes of marital intercourse. Pope Paul answered: "No."⁴⁵ The pope declared: "The Church . . . teaches that each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life."⁴⁶ Monsignor Ferdinando Lambruschini, the theologian who introduced the encyclical to the public, referred to this statement as "the center, the nucleus, the apex, the heart and the key of the encyclical."⁴⁷ That meant the end of any talk about the purpose of procreation pertaining to the whole of conjugal life. Procreation had to be related to each single act of marital intercourse.

The Encyclical's New Teaching

Having asserted that every act of marital intercourse had to be "open" to the transmission of new life, the pope then gave a new theological rationale

for this assertion. That rationale was "the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning."⁴⁸

Never in the history of the church had any of her leaders taught that there was an "inseparable connection" between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning of marital intercourse. The pope's assertion was truly a "novum," a new theological concept. With the assertion that all marital acts had to "remain open to the transmission of life," the church's chief teacher was able to offer a new explanation for the malice of artificial birth control. Contraception broke the relationship between the expression of marital love and procreation. This idea of an inseparable connection between the expression of spousal love and procreation had come from Bishop Karol Wojtyla, the man who, in ten more years, would become pope.

"Paul himself labored over the final version, removing specific references to mortal sin and adding a paragraph about tolerance and charity towards sinners."⁴⁹ Pope Paul did not use Pope Pius XI's depiction of the use of a contraceptive device as a "criminal abuse."⁵⁰

The Old and the New

Thus the justification for engaging in the marital act continued to be the possibility of procreation. The encyclical argued that if the church permitted couples to engage in marital intercourse while using methods that prevented conception, terrible things would happen. A "wide and easy road" to marital infidelity would be opened, and the husband would tend to "lose respect for the woman."⁵¹ The husband, "no longer caring for her physical and psychological equilibrium, may come to the point of considering her as a mere instrument of selfish enjoyment."⁵² Thus it would seem that the two "p" words, procreation and pleasure, the latter often called "selfish enjoyment," were still the entangled factors underpinning the church's teaching on marital intercourse.

Nevertheless, in the twentieth century of the church's existence, a papal encyclical formally recognized that one of the purposes of the marital act was to express love sexually. This was new.

REACTION TO *HUMANAE VITAE*

Pope Paul's encyclical caused rejoicing in conservative circles, stunned the leaders of various national conferences of bishops, exasperated the members of the disbanded papal commission, disheartened those who had followed

the progress of the Second Vatican Council, and greatly disappointed untold members of the married laity. After the encyclical's promulgation, national gatherings of bishops met to decide how to interpret the papal teaching for Catholics living in the locales they shepherded. In an analysis of the reaction of the leaders of the world's Catholic dioceses, Philip Kaufman, a Benedictine monk, pointed out that the bishops of 262 dioceses (17 percent) accepted *Humanae Vitae* totally, the bishops of 428 dioceses (28 percent) were uncertain in their support of the encyclical, and the bishops of 866 dioceses (56 percent) mitigated their reception of the encyclical.⁵³

The American bishops produced a pastoral letter entitled *Human Life in Our Day*. On the one hand, they openly supported the pope's encyclical. On the other hand, they recognized the possibility of "theological dissent" from church teaching "if the reasons are serious and well-founded, if the manner of the dissent does not question or impugn the teaching authority of the church and is such as not to give scandal."⁵⁴

Reception of *Humanae Vitae*

Several years earlier, when the papal commission was active, Dr. Albert Görres pointed out that significant theological issues had "been decided apparently without theological discussion and according to the opinions of one or two of the Holy Father's private theologians or of a curial authority."⁵⁵ History had repeated itself when this papal encyclical had been written in secret by a small number of like-minded theologians. While it had the signature of the pope, the letter was promulgated without the benefit of careful discussion and discerning argument. John Noonan observed that "it is . . . surprising that what is alleged to be the design of God could only be discovered in the utmost secrecy."⁵⁶

At the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Father Charles Curran met with nine other theologians in order to draft a response to the papal letter. While noting that the pope expressed "many positive values concerning marriage," the theologians regretted that the encyclical gave "no real importance" to "the witness of the life of the church in its totality."⁵⁷

Their statement noted the following "defects" in the encyclical: "over-emphasis on the biological aspects of conjugal relations as ethically normative; undue stress on sexual acts and on the faculty of sex viewed in itself apart from the person and the couple; a static world-view which downplays the historical and evolutionary character of humanity . . . unfounded assumptions about 'the evil consequences of methods of artificial birth control'; indifference to Vatican II's assertion that prolonged sexual abstinence may cause 'faithfulness to be imperiled and its quality of fruitfulness to be ru-

ined.”⁵⁸ The statement was immediately circulated and by the next morning, eighty-seven theologians had signed it. In the next few weeks another six hundred theologians from around the world added their signatures.

Patrick and Patricia Crowley regretted that the pope had agreed with such a small minority.⁵⁹ Colette Potvin asked: “Could there not be some trust in a Christian couple’s judgment to decide what is good and what they must do?”⁶⁰ Thomas Burch, another lay member of the commission, remarked: “[T]he encyclical for me was the last straw. All that work wasted! I could see no continuity, no connection whatsoever between what the Commission did and *Humanae Vitae*.”⁶¹

Cardinal Suenens, outspoken leader of conciliar reform, regretted that Pope Paul had not acting in concert with his brother bishops on the birth control issue. In 1972, desiring to retire from his role as spokesman for controversial change, the Belgian prelate took on a new role as a leader in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement.⁶²

OUTCOMES

In the summer of 1968 the “traditionalists” had their triumph. But as Cardinal Suenens had foreseen, the price to be paid for that triumph was the loss of the papacy’s credibility. In 1993, twenty-five years after the encyclical was issued, a *New York Times* survey found that nine out of ten Catholics held that “someone who practices artificial birth control can still be a good Catholic.”⁶³

As for Pope Paul VI, he never wrote another encyclical during the ten remaining years of his papacy. He prayed the rosary daily as he walked the Vatican gardens, seemingly identifying with the first sorrowful mystery, Jesus’ agony in the garden. At the shrine of St. Peter, now and then, Pope Paul could be seen weeping, presumably “over the state of the church.”⁶⁴

NOTES

1. Robert McClory, *The Turning Point* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1995), 82.

2. Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 470.

3. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 99.

4. Robert Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion* (Kansas City, Mo.: Leaven Press, 1985), 138.

5. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 138.

6. John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), 576.
7. Noonan, *Contraception*, 576.
8. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 138.
9. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 138.
10. Bernard Häring, *My Witness for the Church*, trans. Leonard Swindler (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 74.
11. Häring, *My Witness for the Church*, 74.
12. Häring, *My Witness for the Church*, 74.
13. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 136.
14. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 104.
15. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 141.
16. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 141.
17. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 103–4.
18. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 104.
19. Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 473.
20. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 142.
21. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 101.
22. George A. Kelly, *Keeping the Church Catholic with John Paul II* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 36.
23. Kelly, *Keeping the Church Catholic with John Paul II*, 36.
24. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 144.
25. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 144.
26. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 138.
27. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 113.
28. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 113.
29. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 113.
30. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 113.
31. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 150.
32. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 113.
33. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 114.
34. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 181.
35. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 180–81.
36. See Walter Abbott, “The Decree on Ecumenism,” in *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), #6, 350.
37. Abbott, “The Decree on Ecumenism,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, #6, 350.
38. William J. Bausch, *Pilgrim Church* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989, 1991), 320.
39. Abbott, “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” in *The Documents of Vatican II*, #6, 684–85.
40. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 193.
41. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 193.
42. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 193.
43. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 193.

44. Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae)* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Catholic Conference, 1968), #1, 1.
45. Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae)*, #3, 2–3.
46. Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae)*, #11, 7.
47. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 139.
48. Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae)*, #12, 7.
49. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 138.
50. Pope Pius XI, *On Chaste Marriage*, in Michael J. Byrnes, trans., *Matrimony* (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), 247.
51. Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae)*, #17, 11.
52. Pope Paul VI, *On the Regulation of Birth (Humanae Vitae)*, #17, 11.
53. Philip S. Kaufman, O.S.B., *Why You Can Disagree and Still Remain a Faithful Catholic* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1993), 77.
54. National Council of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day* (Washington, D.C.: The United States Catholic Conference, 1968), Pastoral letter issued on November 15, 1968, 18.
55. Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion*, 138.
56. "Theologians' Statement," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 7, 1968, cited in Daniel Callahan, *The Catholic Case for Contraception* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 68.
57. "Theologians' Statement," cited in Callahan, *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, 68.
58. "Theologians' Statement," cited in Callahan, *The Catholic Case for Contraception*, 69.
59. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 141.
60. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 141.
61. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 142.
62. McClory, *The Turning Point*, 151.
63. Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 258.
64. Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 594.

Pope John Paul II: Old Assertions and New Perceptions

INTRODUCTION

Born in Poland in 1920, Karol Wojtyla lost his mother when he was nine. His older brother died of scarlet fever three years later. After that, “the boy was left only with his father, a taciturn military man, who kept his son to a rigidly structured schedule that permitted but three pleasures: study . . . soccer, and prayer.”¹ In subsequent years Karol Wojtyla developed a deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, studied philosophy, resisted the Nazi occupation, acted on the stage, and practiced a Tridentine Catholicism that was “dependent on the training of the human will to create a hero who always does what is most difficult.”²

Bishop Wojtyla participated in the Second Vatican Council, served on the papal birth control commission, and was elected pope in October 1978. During his twenty-six-year papacy John Paul II traveled the world as an ambassador of the Roman Catholic Church, wooed the youth of many nations, wrote numerous encyclicals, and raised nearly a thousand persons to sainthood.

BISHOP WOJTYLA’S VIEWS ON MARITAL INTERCOURSE

Karol Wojtyla was ordained a priest in 1946. In his pastoral care for young people Father Wojtyla stressed the interrelationship between sex, love, and marriage. His book, *Love and Responsibility* (1960), manifests how this future pope worked out a theology of marriage based on the virtues related to married love. He extolled commitment, tenderness, responsibility, humility, chastity, and charity. Echoing St. Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Karol declared

that if love is to bring about an authentic union of a man and a woman, then love “must be firmly based on the affirmation of the value of the person.”³ On the one hand, the “personalism” advocated by German, French, and Polish theologians was foundational to Karol Wojtyla’s approach to marital love. On the other hand, the pope put forward an “absolute position” condemning birth control, which he “proposed as coming from the hand of God.”⁴

An Important Distinction

Wojtyla’s distinction between “carnal concupiscence” and “love of the body” flows from his understanding of “the value of the person.” Carnal concupiscence is the drive that “seeks an outlet in ‘carnal love.’” But “love of the body” is authentically human because the body of another is a basic “component of the person” and as such can be “an object of love” for each spouse.⁵ In this affirmation one can almost hear Adam’s shout of joy, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23).

Concupiscence, however, “is a consistent tendency to see persons of the other sex through the prism of sexuality alone, as ‘objects of potential enjoyment.’”⁶ This kind of sexual desire merely seeks to enjoy the sexual values and sensuous beauty of the other, thereby leading to the exploitation of those sexual values without serious regard for the person. Though concupiscence can draw people into physical intimacy, such desire is deficient because “it does not unite a man and a woman as persons.”⁷ If there is no regard for the true good of the person in the act of sexual union, there can be no true expression of love that “is oriented towards objective values.”⁸ Such objective values are “the value of the person, which both partners in love affirm, and the union of persons to which love leads.”⁹

Persons who recognize the goodness of sexual values may truly enjoy each other sexually because each one perceives that the body of the other is “a component of the person.” Thus the physical body of the spouse is “an object of love only because of the value of the person.”¹⁰ Sensuality and emotional feelings are perfectly acceptable when they are “absorbed in true love.”¹¹

The Virtue of Chastity

The value of chastity can only be realized when each partner mutually and lovingly wills the good of the beloved. Only when such love is present can the objective demands of the “personalistic norm” be satisfied. That norm requires “loving kindness” toward a person and rejects any form of “utilization” of the person.¹² It is precisely here that the virtue of chastity is applicable, for it is the function of chastity “to free love from the utilitarian attitude” that

would use the other simply as an object for one's own enjoyment.¹³ Thus the virtue of chastity plays a positive role in helping each spouse develop sexual playfulness. This happens because chastity enables a lover to raise his or her sexual responses to the attractions of the lover's body to a level that also affirms "the value of the person in every situation."¹⁴

Regarding Sexual Delight

Throughout the church's long history most bishops discouraged spouses from seeking sexual pleasure with each other. In a remarkable shift in attitude, Bishop Karol Wojtyla advocated seeking sexual gratification in the marital act. *Love and Responsibility* promoted equality between husband and wife, offered accurate information about the way in which a woman can be brought to experience orgasm, and spoke frankly about the importance of a husband's pleasing his wife sexually. With the "value of the person" as his basic principle, Wojtyla asked the husband to "carefully observe the reactions of the woman" so that she will "obtain natural gratification from the sexual act."¹⁵

Bishop Wojtyla pointed out that sensual enjoyment in marriage is praiseworthy. Even if one's sensuality reacts to the spouse's body as a possible object of use, the partner's will "is fixed by love not on the exploitation but on the true good of the other person."¹⁶ In marriage the good of the other includes "shared sexual enjoyment."¹⁷ Thus Karol Wojtyla, more than any of his papal successors, accepted the way God created us as male and female, welcoming all the emotional and sensual responses related to sexual experiences in marriage.

WOJTYLA'S MODIFIED STOICISM

Stoicism declared that the only justification for engaging in marital intercourse was procreation. After calling the Stoic perspective "an exaggeratedly strict ethical position,"¹⁸ Wojtyla proposed his own "strict ethical position" by asserting that a couple may never morally engage in marital intercourse without "the inner willingness to accept conception, should it occur."¹⁹ Only the willingness to accept the conception of a child "justifies ('makes just') sexual intercourse between a married couple in their own eyes and before God the Creator."²⁰ This stress on the readiness or willingness to accept conception would eventually become the cornerstone of Pope Paul's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

Wojtyla promoted his modified Stoicism by asserting that "the true greatness of the human person is manifested in the fact that sexual activity" requires the "profound justification" of willingness to become parents.²¹ If,

as Thomas Cahill wrote, Karol Wojtyla's upbringing created "a hero who always does what is most difficult,"²² it might be suggested that Karol Wojtyla hoped that married couples would follow in his footsteps.

According to Bishop Wojtyla, spouses engaging in marital intercourse while using artificial means to exclude the possibility of conception would be negating all love and reducing "the whole context of the marital act to sexual enjoyment."²³ Here again the two "p" words were in play. Without the openness to procreation, the spouses would merely be seeking the pleasure of "sexual enjoyment." In Bishop Wojtyla's perspective, there can be no "true union of persons" when spouses try to exclude the possibility of procreation.²⁴ He declares that if spouses are not willing to accept "the possibility of paternity," they "should refrain from intercourse."²⁵ It seems that control, strength of will, and self-mastery should be the key characteristics governing the sexual intimacies of married persons.

After Karol Wojtyla became pope, an old friend visited him. That friend asked the pope to modify the church's strict prohibition against birth control. In a response that was a sign of things to come, the newly elected pope told his friend, "I can't change what I've been teaching all my life."²⁶

The First Married Saints?

Perhaps Pope John Paul's stoical perspective on marital intercourse is manifested in his choice of the first married couple to be beatified in the history of the Catholic Church. Luigi Quattrocchi married twenty-year-old Maria in 1905. They had four children, three entering religious life and the fourth never marrying.²⁷

Did Pope John Paul II choose Luigi and Maria Quattrocchi to be the first married couple to attain beatification because they harbored Jewish people from the Nazis during World War II? Or was it because they renounced marital relations after twenty-one years of marriage and lived the next twenty-five years as brother and sister? At the time of their decision to abstain completely from marital intercourse, Luigi was forty-six and Maria was forty-one.²⁸ When Pope John Paul beatified the Quattrocchis in October 2001, he presented them as exemplars of married Catholics who "lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary way."²⁹

CATHOLIC MARITAL DOCTRINE FOR FERTILE COUPLES

The starting point of Karol Wojtyla's marital ethics is "the fact that a man and a woman are persons, and that their love is a mutual relationship between

persons.”³⁰ However, spouses may legitimately express their love sexually only when “the possibility of paternity and maternity” is not “excluded when intercourse takes place.”³¹

On the one hand, the author of *Love and Responsibility* (published in 1960) was less strict than those church fathers who insisted that the only acceptable motive for engaging in marital relations was that of producing offspring. On the other hand, Wojtyla insisted that a spouse’s “acceptance that ‘I may become a father’/ ‘I may become a mother’” is the justification of the marital act.³² That acceptance puts the marital act on “the level of a true union of persons.”³³ But to engage in marital intercourse while taking steps to exclude possible conception is to “deprive marital intercourse of the value of love and leave it only the value of ‘enjoyment.’”³⁴

In taking measures to prevent conception, the couple would be left only with “the sexual act itself, or rather reciprocal sexual exploitation.”³⁵ Thus their marital act would be deprived “of the value of love.”³⁶ By declaring that “willingness for parenthood” is the “indispensable condition of love,”³⁷ Bishop Wojtyla presented his theology of the basic purpose of marital relations for all married couples. In 1968 this view would end up as the central assertion in Pope Paul VI’s encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

Trying to Resolve the Issue of Birth Regulation

The one “morally correct single solution to the problems of reproduction and parenthood” permits spouses to become two in one flesh only as long as they are willing to accept the parental consequences of their act.³⁸ “In the absence” of the willingness to conceive a child, “the man and the woman should refrain from intercourse.”³⁹

Karol Wojtyla recognized that refraining from intercourse might be difficult because “spouses grow accustomed to intercourse,” begin to enjoy “sexual intercourse as a habit,” and experience “a constant inclination . . . [and] a mutual need for intercourse.”⁴⁰ Bishop Wojtyla conceded: “This being so, the idea of refraining from intercourse inevitably runs into certain difficulties and objections.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, Bishop Wojtyla stood by his variation on the ancient Stoic and Augustinian formula—namely, marital intercourse has to somehow be open to the generation of children.

THE POPE’S “THEOLOGY OF THE BODY”

Pope John Paul presented his theological perspective on “the nuptial meaning of the body” in a series of 129 short talks given from September 5, 1979, to

November 28, 1984. George Weigel, one of this pope's biographers, referred to the pope's teaching on the body as "one of the boldest reconfigurations of Catholic theology in centuries."⁴² Others see it as a positive development in the traditional context.

The pope began his presentation of his theology with the text, "It is not good for the man to be alone. So God said, 'I will make him a helper'" (Gen. 2:18). Augustine used this text when he declared that the only way a woman could be a helper was bearing children.⁴³ However, when John Paul reflected on what he called the situation of "original solitude," he recognized that the woman "helped" Adam by offering him "the basic conditions that make it possible to exist in a relationship of mutual giving."⁴⁴

According to Pope John Paul, the crux of Genesis 2:18 is the man-woman relationship. The man realizes his essence "only by existing 'with someone'—and even more deeply and completely—by existing 'for someone.'"⁴⁵ The two words, "alone" and "helper," tell us that "both the relationship and the communion of persons" are crucial for human beings.⁴⁶ Man and woman can experience the communion of persons only if there is "a relationship of mutual gift."⁴⁷ In the act of intercourse sex and love combine in the mutual gift of man and woman to each other.

It is the person's masculinity or femininity that allows the man or woman to give themselves as gift to the other. Thus, "masculinity and femininity—namely, sex—is the original sign of a creative donation and an awareness on the part of man, male-female, of a gift lived in an original way. Such is the meaning with which sex enters the theology of the body."⁴⁸

The body has a "nuptial" meaning because the beginning of human existence is connected with the revelation and discovery of sexual reciprocity of man and woman.⁴⁹ The conjugal unity of man and woman was established in the assertion that the man leaves father and mother, joins his body to his wife's body and the two become one flesh (Gen. 2:24). Following this assertion is "the verse which testifies to the nakedness of both, without mutual shame (Gen. 2:25)."⁵⁰ The "nuptial" meaning of the body, a meaning that springs from the God who is love, "becomes an experience of mutual giving."⁵¹ It can be said that in this assertion the pope was expressing an attitude of total acceptance of the way God created us as male and female.

In his next general audience John Paul II spoke of the significance of the nakedness of Adam and Eve: "Created by Love, endowed in their being with masculinity and femininity, they are both 'naked' because they are free with the freedom of the gift."⁵² That gift is the ability to give themselves sexually to each other in a love that "fulfills the meaning of being and existence."⁵³ With the insight that the body has a "nuptial meaning" John Paul recognized

that “love” is a worthy motive for spouses who wanted to give themselves to each other in marital intercourse.

The pope’s acknowledgment that love is a worthy motive for engaging in marital intercourse had taken a long time to develop. In the second century St. Justin (d. 165) declared: “We Christians either marry only to produce children.” Sts. Clement of Alexandria and Augustine proclaimed that same Stoic justification for marital intercourse. That justification was repeated down through the centuries. But in 1850 Rev. Probst perceived a connection between sexual love and marital love. In the 1920s von Hildebrand proposed that the marital act is a unique expression of wedded love. In the 1930s Rev. Doms developed the ideas of Probst and von Hildebrand in *The Meaning of Marriage*. The bishops of the Second Vatican Council recognized the relationship between marital intercourse and spousal love and included that understanding in *The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Now Pope John Paul was incorporating these themes in his teaching about the “nuptial meaning” of the body.

It should be noted that celibacy could also convey the nuptial meaning of the body. A person can forego marriage and give his or her body for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, an act demonstrating the “nuptial meaning” contained in “the freedom of the gift in the human body.”⁵⁴

SEXUAL ATTRACTION

In his audiences from April 16, 1980, to December 10, 1984, Pope John Paul II offered further reflections on love, concupiscence, and sexual attraction. Many of his ideas were the same as those enunciated in his *Love and Responsibility*. Only if a man and a woman are able to exercise a certain sexual restraint, can they “exist in the relationship of mutual self-giving.”⁵⁵ If a spouse only desires the body of his or her mate, then that spouse treats the other’s body-self as an object of his or her lust. He or she thereby degrades “the relationship of the gift” to the level of a “relationship of appropriation.”⁵⁶ Appropriation flows from the concupiscence that drives a person toward possession of the other as an object of mere enjoyment. Such possession “brings with it the negation of the nuptial meaning of the body.”⁵⁷

John Paul was not against married people enjoying each other’s bodies in their acts of marital intercourse. In an audience given on September 10, 1980, he elaborated on this point. “Passion aims at satisfaction” and thus “wears out” the one who seeks it.⁵⁸ However, sexual attraction is not lustful passion. “The value of sex is part of all the rich storehouse of values” though which masculinity appeals to the woman and femininity appeals to the man.⁵⁹

Pope John Paul II did want to distance himself from the Manichees who “saw the source of evil in . . . the body” and then extended their condemnation of the body to “marriage and to conjugal life.”⁶⁰ In contrast, said the pope, the Christian view of the body asserts that from the beginning man and woman were mutually called to sexual communion.⁶¹ Because God created us male and female (Gen. 1:27), the bodily communion of husband and wife has always been an “intentional dimension of the man’s and the woman’s mutual existence.”⁶² According to God’s plan, our bodies and our sexuality are to be placed “in the service of the communion of persons.”⁶³ For these reasons mutual sexual attraction and the nuptial meaning of the body are integral aspects of the human condition.

The Erotic as “Good, True, and Beautiful”

The attitude of total acceptance of God’s creative Lordship recognizes that God wills the erotic dimension of human sexuality. The pope pointed out that the source of the word “erotic” is found in Plato’s understanding of *eros*, a kind of “interior force” that draws human beings “towards everything good, true and beautiful.”⁶⁴ *Eros* is an attraction that “seems to be first and foremost of a sensual nature.”⁶⁵ Thus it can be said that sensual attraction “arouses the mutual tendency of both the man and the woman to draw closer to each other, to the union of bodies, to that union of which Genesis 2:24 spoke.”⁶⁶ Thus “the call to what is true, good and beautiful” includes “the possibility and the necessity of transforming what has been weighed down by the lust of the flesh.”⁶⁷ The prohibition of lust not only protects the essential values of human sexuality; it “also makes them accessible and liberates them, if we learn to open our heart to them.”⁶⁸

In his audience of November 12, 1980, the pope continued to remind his listeners that they had the responsibility to constantly rediscover “the nuptial meaning of the body and the true dignity of the gift” that is contained in the erotic.⁶⁹ If a man and a woman merely stopped at the prohibition of lust when considering the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 5:28), they would not be able to experience the “fullness of *eros*.”⁷⁰ That “fullness” embraces “the aspiration of the human spirit towards what is true, good and beautiful, so that what is erotic also becomes true, good and beautiful.”⁷¹

POPE JOHN PAUL II AND *HUMANAE VITAE*

After he became pope, Karol Wojtyla wanted to produce a rational argument that would demonstrate that every act of intercourse ought to be open to

the transmission of human life (see *Humanae Vitae*, #11). So he invited the church's scholars "to commit themselves to the task of illustrating ever more clearly the biblical foundations, the ethical grounds and the personalist reasons behind this doctrine" so that it would become "accessible to all people of good will."⁷² Karol Wojtyla, as pope, "inexorably rejected every deviation from traditional doctrine."⁷³ He would not lift the church's ban on contraceptives even as whole nations suffered from the AIDS epidemic.⁷⁴ For the first ten years of his papacy John Paul II reaffirmed the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* "so often and in so many different ways that the reaffirmation became his main teaching effort."⁷⁵

It is possible that Pope John Paul constantly reaffirmed *Humanae Vitae* because much of that encyclical was his own thought. In 1965, supported by the findings of his own Krakow-based study commission (composed of Polish clergy and lay people), Karol Wojtyla opposed any change in the Catholic Church's prohibition of artificial birth control. He then sent his argument straight to Pope Paul VI.⁷⁶ In 1966, as a member of the papal birth control commission, he strongly disagreed with the majority of the nine bishops on the commission who had concluded that "the Church's condemnation of birth control could not be sustained by reasoned argument."⁷⁷ They had also concluded that the use of artificial birth control was *not* "intrinsically evil."⁷⁸ In his *Love and Responsibility*, written six years earlier, Bishop Wojtyla had declared his position: "Neither in the man nor in the woman can affirmation of the value of the person be divorced from awareness and willing acceptance that he may become a father and she may become a mother."⁷⁹

After *Humanae Vitae* was issued in July 1968, Cardinal Wojtyla took credit for himself and his Krakow commission, declaring, "We helped the pope [Paul VI]."⁸⁰ One of Wojtyla's colleagues, Father Andrzej Bardecki, stated that 60 percent of Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* could be traced back to Wojtyla's Krakow commission and subsequent paper.⁸¹ Bernstein and Politi commented: "Thus the sexual philosophy of Wojtyla and his flock of Polish Catholics became the rule for the Church universal."⁸²

FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO

In 1982 Pope John Paul II wrote his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Family). This papal exhortation artfully sounded the personalist themes articulated by Dietrich von Hildebrand, Herbert Doms, the conciliar treatment of marriage, *Humanae Vitae*, and, not surprisingly, *Love and Responsibility*. *Familiaris Consortio* is a hymn praising married love. Over and over again the pope spoke of the "vocation of the baptized 'to be married in the Lord.'"⁸³

God created the human person as an “incarnate spirit.”⁸⁴ The pope recognized that “sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another . . . concerns the innermost being of the human person as such.”⁸⁵ Avoiding the age-old Catholic tendency to juxtapose carnal body and spiritual soul, he proclaimed: “Love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love.”⁸⁶

Referring to the letter to the Ephesians, the pope spoke of the sexual union of spouses reaching “its definite fullness in the gift of love . . . and in the sacrifice which Jesus Christ makes of himself on the cross for his bride, the church.”⁸⁷ With the Holy Spirit acting in Christian husbands and wives, they become “capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us.”⁸⁸ In married love the “appeal of the body and instinct” (sexual attraction) involves “all the elements of the person”—namely, the “appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will.”⁸⁹ Thus Pope John Paul II explicitly moved the Catholic Church’s teaching to a new place, a place where all the dynamics of marital intercourse are accepted as coming from the creative Lordship of God. In 1850 Rev. Ferdinand Probst proposed that marital intercourse was a reality that ought to be “re-clothed” by means of “the moral elevation of sexual love and its resultant transformation into marital love.”⁹⁰ In his “theology of the body,” Pope John Paul made his contribution to that “moral elevation of sexual love.”

Nevertheless, as good and holy as marital love is, the pope declared that marital intercourse should not be thought of without its inseparable connection to procreation. Thus, while conjugal love “aims at a deeply personal unity,” each act of sexual union also had to be “open to fertility.”⁹¹ As he had asserted earlier, “the total physical self-giving would be a lie if it were not the sign and fruit of a total personal self-giving, in which the whole person is present.”⁹² The pope drove home his point by repeating the key point in *Humanae Vitae*: “[T]he teaching of the church ‘is founded upon the inseparable connection willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning.’”⁹³

Pope John Paul then presented his list of personalist reasons that explained why the sexual expression of love may not be separated from the possibility of procreation. First, spouses taking measures to avoid conception “‘manipulate’ and degrade human sexuality.”⁹⁴ Second, spouses degrade “themselves and their married partner by altering the value of the marriage act.”⁹⁵ Third, if contraception is involved, spouses cannot express “total self-giving” because “the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other.”⁹⁶

For nearly nineteen centuries the leaders of the Catholic Church said nothing about marital intercourse being an expression of self-giving love. But toward the end of the twentieth century Pope John Paul II could not say enough about the relationship between marital intercourse and the expression of spousal love. Over and over again he asserted that the conjugal act is especially wonderful because it can express perfect, self-giving love. He employed the language used by Dietrich von Hildebrand in his efforts to explore the meaning that marital sex could have for husband and wife. Again and again one might see Herbert Doms' theme of "two-in-oneness" reflected in the pope's words. The reliance of Pope John Paul II's argument against birth control almost parallels that of Herbert Doms, who wrote: "But if he interferes with the biological process itself either before, after or during the act, his giving of himself can no longer be complete and unreserved. . . . It has ceased to express the giving of the whole personality."⁹⁷

Thus Pope John Paul II had offered his argument proving that all forms of artificial birth control were immoral. If spouses were not prepared to include their fertility in their act of self-giving love, then they falsified "the inner truth of conjugal love."⁹⁸ It would be as if each partner said to the other, "I want your body, but I don't want your fertility." To be a truly authentic marital act, every act had to be *both* an act of loving communion as well as an act open to procreation.

Asserting the inseparable connection between marital acts and procreation, Pope John Paul II preserved the ancient Stoic doctrine that had been the basis of church teaching since the early centuries. The justification of marital intercourse still depended on its relationship to procreation. But there was something very new. Thanks to the pope's reasoning, each act of marital intercourse had to express all of its possible values—indissolubility, fidelity, self-giving love, and openness to offspring. If all these values could not be expressed at the same time, then spouses should abstain from marital relations.

Pope John Paul also enumerated the advantages of self-control that can be attained through the use of "periodic continence" or "Natural Family Planning" (NFP). "Far from harming conjugal love," avoiding intercourse during the woman's fertile time confers "a higher human value" on the practice of dominating instinct.⁹⁹ The "continual effort" of practicing periodic continence has the "beneficent influence" of enriching husband and wife by enabling them to "fully develop their personalities."¹⁰⁰

While Pope John Paul has offered a perspective that goes against contemporary culture's trivialization of human sexuality, his perspective may be too lofty to connect with most married people. Luke Timothy Johnson has noted that the pope's "all-encompassing mode of mutual self-donation between

man and woman . . . lacks any of the messy, clumsy, awkward, charming, casual, and, yes, silly aspects of love in the flesh.”¹⁰¹ Pope John Paul might have shown some real “appreciation for the goodness of sexual pleasure” instead of presenting sexual passion “mainly as an obstacle to authentic love.”¹⁰²

IN SUM

It can be said that Pope John Paul II’s reign over the Catholic Church’s official teaching on marital intercourse extended from 1966 through 2004. Wojtyla had expressed his position on marital sexuality in his 1960 work, *Love and Responsibility*. In 1966, when the majority of the birth control commission on population was voting for a change in the Catholic Church’s prohibition of artificial birth control, Wojtyla took his argument directly to Pope Paul VI. Two years later Wojtyla’s key ideas were found embedded in Pope Paul’s *Humanae Vitae*.

After Cardinal Wojtyla became pope, he repeatedly stressed that there could be no separation of the unitive purpose of marital intercourse from the procreative purpose. Difficulties and objections notwithstanding, Karol Wojtyla, as a priest, as a bishop, as a member of the papal birth control commission, and as pope, has stood by what he has called “sexual morality from a personalistic point of view.” His stance can be summed up in his own words: “I can’t change what I’ve been teaching all my life.”¹⁰³ However, in that lifetime of teaching Karol Wojtyla had presented the most positive official teaching about marital intercourse in the history of the Catholic Church.

NOTES

1. Thomas Cahill, *Pope John XXIII* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 224.
2. Cahill, *Pope John XXIII*, 224–25.
3. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1981, 1994), 145.
4. Brennan R. Hill, “Bernard Häring and the Second Vatican Council,” in *Horizons: The Journal of the Catholic Theology Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Spring 2006, 97.
5. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 148–49.
6. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 159.
7. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 150–51.
8. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 155.
9. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 155.
10. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 160.
11. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 160.

12. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 167.
13. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 169.
14. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 171.
15. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 273.
16. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 184.
17. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 184.
18. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 233.
19. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 236.
20. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 236.
21. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 236.
22. Cahill, *Pope John XXIII*, 225.
23. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 236.
24. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 237.
25. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 237.
26. Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, *His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 83.
27. Claire Schaeffer-Duffy, "Models of Holiness and Married Life," Cover story, *National Catholic Reporter*, December 28, 2001.
28. Schaeffer-Duffy, "Models of Holiness and Married Life."
29. Schaeffer-Duffy, "Models of Holiness and Married Life."
30. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 266.
31. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 235.
32. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 242.
33. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 242.
34. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 244.
35. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 249.
36. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 249.
37. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 236.
38. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 248.
39. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 237.
40. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 237.
41. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 238.
42. George Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 336.
43. Johannes Quasten, Walter Burghardt, and Thomas Lawler, eds., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation. St. Augustine: The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, S.J. (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1982), Book IX, 5, 9, 75.
44. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), general audience of January 9, 1980, 60.
45. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 60.
46. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 61.
47. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 61.

48. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 62.
49. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 62.
50. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 62.
51. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 9, 1980, 62.
52. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 16, 1980, 63.
53. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 16, 1980, 63.
54. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of January 16, 1980, 66.
55. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of July 22, 1980, 127.
56. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of July 22, 1980, 127.
57. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of July 30, 1980, 130.
58. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of September 10, 1980, 146.
59. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of September 17, 1980, 149.
60. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of October 15, 1980, 161.
61. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of September 24, 1980, 152.
62. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of September 24, 1980, 152.
63. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of October 22, 1980, 163.
64. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 5, 1980, 169.
65. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 5, 1980, 169.
66. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 5, 1980, 169.
67. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 5, 1980, 170–71.
68. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 5, 1980, 171.
69. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 5, 1980, 171.

70. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 12, 1980, 171.
71. Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, general audience of November 12, 1980, 171.
72. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1982), #31, 28.
73. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 404.
74. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 404.
75. John F. Kippley and Sheila K. Kippley, *The Art of Natural Family Planning* (Cincinnati: The Couple To Couple League International, Inc., 1996), 274.
76. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 112–13.
77. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 112.
78. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 212.
79. Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 228.
80. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 113.
81. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 113.
82. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 113.
83. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #7, 6.
84. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #11, 9.
85. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #11, 9.
86. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #11, 9.
87. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #13, 10–11.
88. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #13, 10–11.
89. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #13, 12.
90. Ferdinand Probst, *Katholische Moral Theologie*, 1850, Tome II, 180, cited in Dr. Herbert Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), xix.
91. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #13, 12.
92. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #11, 9.
93. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, 29 (see also *Humanae Vitae* #12).
94. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, 29.
95. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, 29.
96. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, 29.
97. Herbert Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage*, trans. George Sayer (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), 168.
98. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, 29.
99. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, art. 33.
100. Pope John Paul II, *On the Family*, #32, art. 33.
101. Luke Timothy Johnson, “A Disembodied ‘Theology of the Body’: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure,” in Kieran Scott and Harold D. Horell, eds., *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 114.
102. Johnson, “A Disembodied ‘Theology of the Body,’” 117.
103. Bernstein and Politi, *His Holiness*, 83.

Conscience and Fidelity to Church Teaching

ON ATTITUDES, RELATIONSHIPS, AND CHURCH TEACHING

Ideally, the leadership and the members of a believing community live in a relationship of complementarity. Ecclesiastical leadership supports the community by proclaiming the church's moral and spiritual values. In turn, the members support the ecclesial leadership, accepting its guidance as gift and living in accord with those spiritual and moral values.

However, since the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, increasing numbers of Catholics have been ignoring the church's teaching on marital morality. In 1997 a poll conducted by a grant from the Lilly Foundation revealed that agreement with papal teaching was statistically nonexistent among Catholics in their twenties and thirties.¹ These Catholics seem to have adopted a take-it-or-leave-it attitude. They might think, "The pope isn't married, so what does he know?" But such a remark displays an attitude that both misses the point about genuine authority and destroys the role of conscience.

Simply put, a serious Catholic takes the teaching of the church seriously. It is inappropriate to approach Catholic teaching on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Catholic Christians are asked to give their religious assent to official church teaching (the magisterium).² The requirement of religious assent puts many married couples in a bind when it comes to the Catholic teaching that asserts "every action which, whether in anticipation of the conjugal act, or in its accomplishment, or in the development of its natural consequences, purposes, whether as an end or as a means, to render procreation impossible' is intrinsically evil."³ While this teaching "is not formally (that is, literally) expressed

in Sacred Scripture,”⁴ it *is* the church’s official doctrine. Even though a significant portion of this traditional doctrine rests upon what seems to be the rather shaky foundations of an anti-sexual bias stemming from leaders of the early church, believers are not excused from their responsibility to take church teaching seriously.

A PASTORAL SOLUTION?

So what are faithful Catholic couples to do when they find themselves hard-pressed to live according to the church’s teaching? The answer to this question can be stated this way: Married Catholics are asked to reflect upon, seriously consider, and pray about the ways in which they responsibly express their love for each other. In situations where couples find a conflict involving their sexual expression of love and their fertility, husband and wife should do all they can to follow church teaching. But, if they have tried and have found that they cannot put that teaching into practice, there might yet be another choice before them. It seems to me that the following pastoral approach is a possibility.

In 1968 the American bishops recognized the dilemma of married Catholics when they responded to *Humanae Vitae* in their pastoral letter, *Human Life in Our Day*. Recognizing that “married couples faced with conflicting duties are often caught in agonizing crises of conscience,” the bishops acknowledged that “at times it proves difficult to harmonize the sexual expression of conjugal love with respect for the life-giving power of sexual union and responsible parenthood.”⁵ The American bishops then cited the counsel Pope Paul VI himself gave to couples struggling with the church’s teaching on marital relations—namely, to continue to receive the sacraments. The bishops quoted Pope Paul: “Above all, let them draw from the source of grace and charity in the Eucharist. And if sin should still keep its hold over them, let them not be discouraged, but rather have recourse with humble perseverance to the mercy of God, which is poured forth in the sacrament of Penance.”⁶

Perhaps the American bishops recognized that *Humanae Vitae* possessed what might be called “hard line” and “soft line” approaches. It might be said that, on the one hand, American bishops demonstrated their loyalty to the papal teaching by citing the hard line: “[N]o one following the teaching of the church can deny the objective evil of artificial contraception itself.”⁷ On the other hand, it might be said that the American bishops followed the soft line by introducing a variation in the way married Catholics, even while being hard-pressed to follow church teaching, could still receive the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist. The bishops stated: “With pastoral solicitude we

urge those who have resorted to artificial contraception never to lose heart but to continue to take full advantage of the strength which comes from the Sacrament of Penance and the grace, healing, and peace in the Eucharist.”⁸

Perhaps noting the soft or “pastoral” approach contained in parts of Pope Paul’s *Humanae Vitae*, the American bishops urged Catholics using contraceptives to struggle to overcome this practice while continuing to receive the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist. Ever since the 1886 decision of the Roman Penitentiary not to leave in “good faith” those coming to confession, priests were not permitted to give absolution to those using birth control. Without that absolution a person was forbidden to receive the Eucharist. But in parts of his encyclical Pope Paul VI had perhaps taken a different perspective. It might be said that, working with that perspective, the American bishops told the faithful not to deprive themselves of the healing power of the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist. This could be seen as an act of pastoral statesmanship. By accepting the papal concept that interference with the power of the sexual act to produce children was an “objective evil,” the American bishops had observed the letter of the law of the ordinary, non-infallible magisterium (Catholic teaching). Then, by urging Catholics to continue receiving the sacraments, the bishops may have intended to offer a pastoral solution to an old problem. Perhaps that pastoral solution was the possibility of “dissent.”

Could There Be Dissent from Church Teaching?

Explaining the “Norms of Licit Theological Dissent,” the bishops stated that the starting point for “theological dissent from non-infallible doctrine” is the recognition that there is “always a presumption in favor of the magisterium.”⁹ Given that presumption, when would dissent be appropriate? “Theological dissent” from church teaching is appropriate when it meets three conditions. Such dissent “is in order if the reasons are serious and well-founded, if the manner of dissent does not question or impugn the teaching authority of the church and is such as not to give scandal.”¹⁰ In other words, a theologian has to have good reasons for not following a particular teaching, has to continue to respect the authority of church leaders, and must not cause others to disregard the authority of the church’s leadership.

Some would note that these conditions apply only to theologians. One could ask, however, if these conditions are met, can the Catholic Christian faultlessly follow his or her conscience regarding what he or she should do? While no one can say for sure what the American bishops had in mind back in 1968, it can be said that the bishops did recognize that “married couples faced with conflicting duties are often caught in agonizing crises of conscience.”¹¹

The fact that the bishops outlined the conditions for dissent might mean that they intended that married couples apply the conditions for dissent to their own situations. Perhaps confessors and spiritual advisors might use the listing of the conditions for dissent in order to help the married inform their consciences on this serious matter.

No Pastoral Solution for Married Catholics

In subsequent years, however, the American bishops refrained from speaking further about dissent. In their November 14, 2006, statement, “Married Love and the Gift of Life,” the American bishops pointed out that “when married couples deliberately act to suppress fertility, however, sexual intercourse is no longer fully *marital* intercourse.”¹² Echoing the themes of Pope John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body,” the American bishops observed that “[s]uppressing fertility by using contraception denies part of the inherent meaning of married sexuality and does harm to the couple’s unity.”¹³ The American bishops added: “This may seem a hard saying. . . . But as many couples who have turned away from contraception tell us, living this teaching can contribute to the honesty, openness, and intimacy of marriage and help make couples truly fulfilled.”¹⁴

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

Whether the pope is Boniface VIII, or John Paul II, or Benedict XVI, Catholic Christians are obliged to acknowledge the authority of papal teaching. Even if church leaders have made mistakes in the past, the papal office commands the respect of all. Even if twentieth-century church leaders seem to some to have been unable to offer a convincing natural law argument demonstrating that all forms of artificial birth control are intrinsically evil, there is a constant tradition that procreation should not be separated from acts of marital intercourse. Taking that tradition seriously, it would seem that the most acceptable way to assure that a child is not conceived when husband and wife are unwilling to become parents is to periodically abstain from marital intercourse. At the present time either complete abstinence or Natural Family Planning (NFP) with its periodic abstinence are the only permissible methods that Catholic Christians may use to regulate the number of their children. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “Periodic continence, that is, the methods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods, is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality.”¹⁵

Natural Family Planning, while requiring periodic abstinence, is not the same thing as the unreliable “rhythm method” approved by Pope Pius XII in 1951. “NFP” allows the woman to determine when she is fertile through observation of her own bodily signs. In this method of birth regulation there are no health risks and no conflicts with Catholic teaching. It is also pointed out that, when couples use Natural Family Planning to regulate the size of their families, husband and wife communicate better, appreciate each other more deeply, discover new ways of expressing their affection for each other, and have a much lower divorce rate than the general population.¹⁶

In marriages in which one or both spouses are Catholic Christians, and when it is necessary to limit the number of their children, husband and wife should at least try to make natural methods of family planning work. In making their conscientious decisions, husband and wife need to know as much relevant information as possible. It is hoped that this book’s survey of the origins and development of the church’s attitude and teaching regarding marital relations will contribute to a deeper appreciation of the holiness of their marital acts as well as contribute to the store of information married couples need to inform themselves and to form their consciences.

OBSERVATIONS

I began writing this book in the 1990s in order to make a contribution to the understanding and appreciation of the goodness of Christian marriage. I have discussed the factors that have influenced the formation of the Catholic Church’s doctrine concerning sexual activity in marriage and that there is a developing recognition of the element of spirituality in marital sexuality. I am of the opinion that the theology of the church is in need of further development and I have tried to stay within the doctrinal boundaries of the Catholic Church. I have stressed the values of a loving relationship and sexual pleasure in the theology of marriage.

I have not given much space to the place or value of procreation in the marital context because the Catholic Church’s teaching is clear on the value of the gift of children. But church teaching has not been clear about the spiritual significance of the marital act or the value of the marital act as the primary way in which spouses express their love for one another. These features of marital intercourse were not explicitly recognized until the twentieth century. Pleasure too is a gift of God, and unless we Christians recognize the truth in this, it will be difficult to thank God for this gift. It was not until the eighteenth century that the greatly respected moral theologian, St. Alphonsus Liguori, held that it

was morally permissible to engage in marital intercourse without the intention to conceive a child. This same theologian also taught that spouses could seek sexual pleasure in the marital act provided that they were not principally seeking such pleasure. As this book has pointed out, churchmen have depreciated the element of sexual pleasure in the marital act and have discouraged married persons from finding pleasure in that very act.

I totally agree with the Second Vatican Council's teaching that the purposes of the marital act are union and procreation. As the bishops pointed out at the Second Vatican Council: "By their very nature, the institution of matrimony itself and conjugal love are ordained for the procreation and education of children, and find in them their ultimate crown."¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has only recently recognized that marital sex, mutually pleasurable marital sex, is good, and she still shows reluctance in recognizing the value of sexual pleasure. Perhaps this reluctance comes from the fact that contemporary culture trivializes and exploits sexual pleasure.

In a very real way the Catholic Church is on the verge of doing what Rev. Ferdinand Probst proposed in 1850. He suggested that the marital union of husband and wife was a reality that ought to "be re-clothed in spiritual raiment" by morally elevating "sexual love and its resultant transformation into marital love."¹⁸ However, while the Catholic Church has elevated sexual love into marital love, she has also elevated the biological or reproductive function of marital intercourse. And so the American bishops recently taught that while "a couple need not desire or seek to have a child in each and every act of intercourse," husband and wife "should never act to suppress or curtail the life-giving power given by God that is an integral part of what they pledged to each other in their marriage vows."¹⁹ Repeating the crucial passage in *Humanae Vitae*, the bishops stated: "This is what the Church means by saying that every act of intercourse must remain open to life and that contraception is objectively immoral."²⁰

THE CHURCH'S "GROWTH IN UNDERSTANDING"

When the Second Vatican Council spoke about the church's ever deepening understanding of the Scriptures, the conciliar bishops pointed out that there are three sources of growth in the understanding "of the realities and the words which have been handed down."²¹ That development of perception takes place "through the contemplation and study made by believers . . . through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth."²²

The conciliar bishops also declared: “[A]s the centuries succeed one another, the church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her.”²³ It could well be that the pilgrim church’s doctrine on marital intercourse could belong more to the realm of development than it does to the realm of “the fullness of divine truth.” This author affirms that, when it comes to church teaching, there is “always a presumption in favor of the magisterium.” On the other hand, it is a fact that church doctrine develops. Some theologians rank the prohibition of contraception with the great dogmas that will never change because this teaching belongs to the realm of “the fullness of divine truth.” These theologians conclude that the teaching condemning artificial contraception is infallible. Other theologians argue that this teaching is not infallible.

During most of the church’s history her leaders had limited their perception of marital intercourse as being significant only for its usefulness in procreating children. St. Augustine declared that in the act of intercourse the man becomes “all flesh.” Gratian expressed the medieval counterpart of Augustine’s declaration: “[T]he presence of the Holy Spirit is not given at the time when conjugal acts are undertaken.”²⁴

I wrote this book to make a contribution toward a theology of marital sexuality that would take into account how the Catholic Church developed its teaching on marital sexuality. I wanted to indicate the newer direction in which official Catholic teaching is moving. While our society has certainly trivialized human sexuality, the Catholic Church’s lofty teaching on marriage makes an immense contribution toward an appreciation of the deeply human and spiritual dimensions of human sexuality.

NOTES

1. Garry Wills, “The Council We Are Still Living,” in *National Catholic Reporter*, October 4, 2002.

2. See Walter Abbott, “The Constitution on the Church,” in *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), #25, 48.

3. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, trans. The United States Catholic Conference, Inc. (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori Publications, 1994), #2370, 570. See also *Humanae Vitae*, #14.

4. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), 389.

5. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1968), 15–16.

6. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*, 16, citing *Humanae Vitae*, #25.

7. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*, 16.
8. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*, 16.
9. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*, 18.
10. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*, 18.
11. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*, 15–16.
12. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Married Love and the Gift of Life,” <http://www.usccb.org/laity/marriage/MarriedLove.pdf>. (June 29, 2008).
13. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Married Love and the Gift of Life.”
14. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Married Love and the Gift of Life.”
15. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2370, 570; see also *Humanae Vitae*, #16.
16. See John F. Kippley and Sheila K. Kippley, *The Art of Natural Family Planning* (Cincinnati: The Couple To Couple League International, Inc., 1996), 243–61.
17. Walter Abbott, “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, #48, 250.
18. Ferdinand Probst, *Katholische Moral Theologie*, 1850, Tome II, 180, cited in Dr. Herbert Doms, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1939), xix.
19. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Married Love and the Gift of Life.”
20. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Married Love and the Gift of Life.”
21. Walter Abbott, “The Constitution on Divine Revelation,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, #8, 116.
22. Abbott, “The Constitution on Divine Revelation,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, #8, 116.
23. Abbott, “The Constitution on Divine Revelation,” in *Documents of Vatican II*, #8, 116.
24. Gratian, *Harmony of Discordant Canons* (2.32.2.4), cited in Payer, *The Bridling of Desire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 101.

Epilogue

A LIMPING ANALOGY: "THE TWO TRUTHS OF KATIE NOLAN"

At the start of this book Francie Nolan recognized that she was curious about sex.¹ Years later, Francie meets Lee, a young soldier leaving for the war in Europe. In the course of two days she finds herself falling in love. On the night before his ship departs, Lee asks her if she would spend the night "in a room . . . alone. . . . Just till morning when I leave?"² Thinking Lee might be killed in the war, Francie is torn between compassion, conscience, and desire. She decides not to spend the night with the pleading soldier. Months afterward Francie finds herself feeling betrayed and regretful. She asks, "Mother, he asked me to be with him for the night. Should I have gone?"³

As Katie Nolan's "mind darted around looking for words," her daughter pleads, "Don't make up a lie, Mother. Tell me the truth." But still "Katie couldn't find the right words." Should Francie have loved Lee while she had the chance? Desperate to know the truth, Francie makes a solemn promise that she will never go with a man without being married first. Then she says: "You can tell me the truth without worrying that I'll go wrong if I know it."

"'There are two truths,' said Katie finally. 'As a mother, I say it would have been a terrible thing for a girl to sleep with a stranger—a man she had known less than forty-eight hours. Horrible things might have happened to you. Your whole life might have been ruined. As your mother, I tell you the truth. But as a woman . . .' she hesitated. 'I will tell you the truth as a woman. It would have been a very beautiful thing.'"⁴

In this poignant conversation between mother and daughter one might hear a faint echo of the development of the Catholic Church's attitude and

teaching regarding marital relations. For the longest time Mother Church feared that sexual pleasure could ruin the lives of her children. “Horrible things might have happened.” Eternal life “might have been ruined.” Mother Church knew that when human beings separate erotic desires from the totality of human values, in particular the bodily aspect of genital sexuality, her children could fall into the depths of depravity. Fearing that possibility, Mother Church seems to have overlooked the spiritual aspects of sexual attraction and mutual physical affection. Through the centuries Mother Church’s authoritative voice spoke of marital sexuality in terms of warnings and prohibitions.

There came along a young priest, Karol Wojtyla. He was beginning to think out what would someday become his “theology of the body.” Then Pope John XXIII called for an ecumenical and pastoral council. In a comparison that has obvious flaws, it could be said that just as Katie Nolan’s perception changed when she spoke of sexual intercourse “as a woman,” so also the perspective of the Catholic Church changed when her conciliar bishops recognized that marital intercourse is not only for conceiving children but is also a way of expressing spousal love. Perceiving the goodness in the beauty of the lover’s erotic attraction for his or her beloved, the authors of *The Pastoral Constitution* recognized that marital intimacy is “a very beautiful thing.” The Catholic bishops declared that the “eminently human” love of husband and wife “is uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act.”⁵

Of course, Mother Church would never condone such a one-night stand as discussed by Francie and her mother. The church teaches that, as followers of Jesus Christ, young people should wait until their sexual loving can mirror the permanent and passionate commitment that Christ has for his church. The point of the reference to Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is that, during the last third of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church explicitly recognized that marital intercourse is beautiful and its pleasures come from the way God has created us as male and female.

Some sixteen centuries ago St. Augustine, recognizing his belated love of God, exclaimed: “I have learned to love you late, Beauty at once so ancient and so new! Late have I learned to love you.”⁶ Today spouses might well exclaim, “Late has our Church taught how good it is for us to sexually love each other. Late have we learned to love knowing that our acts of marital intimacy mirror the love of Christ for his Church.”

NOTES

1. Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: Perennial Library Edition, 1968, Harper & Row Publishers, 1943, 1947), 217–18.

2. Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 403.
3. Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 407.
4. Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 407.
5. Walter Abbott, "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," in *Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), #49, 252–53.
6. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961), Book X, 27, 231.

Index

- Abelard, Peter, 78
- abstinence: Anglican Church on, 131–32; Augustine on, 39; in Bible, 9–10, 52–53; as contraception, 199, 208–9; Council of Trent on, 103; in early church, 21–22; Eucharist and, 70, 103; experience with, 156–61; Gnosticism and, 18–19; holy days and, 53, 54, 56, 69–70, 103; Manichaeism and, 32; in medieval church, 52–54, 56–57, 58–59, 69–71, 74, 79; in modern church, 102–3, 120, 133, 135–36, 148–49, 151–52, 192; prayer and, 10, 11, 23, 45, 52, 54, 55, 70; during pregnancy, 24, 53, 69, 71; spirituality and, 73. *See also* celibacy; virginity
- Adam and Eve: Augustine on, 34–35, 41, 42, 43; bodies of, 22, 42, 44, 194–95; creation of, 5, 6, 84, 100; Gnosticism and, 19; lust and, 42; Manichaeism and, 31; marriage of, 81, 100; in medieval church, 81; in modern church, 106, 109, 127, 139, 142, 151, 194–95; pleasure and, 34–35, 85; shame and, 42; sin results from, vii, 34–35, 41, 81, 85–86, 151
- adultery: contraception and, 183; in early church, 11; Gnosticism and, 19; in medieval church, 71, 71–72; moral theology and, 95; sin and, 39; Ten Commandments on, 24
- Adversus Jovinianum* (Jerome), 37
- Aelred of Rievaulx, 57
- The Aeneid* (Virgil), 47n24
- affection, 107, 109, 110–11, 147. *See also* love; union
- agape, 19
- Albert the Great, Saint, 83, 85–86, 88
- Albigensians, 77
- Alcuin, 56
- Alexander III, 73–74
- Alfrink, B., 167
- allocutions, 147, 148
- Alphonsus Liguori, Saint, 113–15, 117, 132, 209–10
- Ambrose, Saint, 37, 62
- American bishops, 184, 206–8, 210–11
- Anglican Church, 131–32, 133–34
- Anysius (bishop), 62
- Aqiba, 6–7
- Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* (Leo XIII), 119
- Aristotle: on conception, 148; moral theology and, 93, 95; Thomas

- Aquinas follows, 83, 84, 86–87, 89, 93
- Athenagoras, 24–25
- Augustine, Saint: on abstinence, 39; attitudes of generally, 29; on children, 32–33, 35–40, 41; Christianity adopted by, 30; contraception and, 150; Council of Trent and, 106; on creation, 33–37, 40; on evil, 36–37; on flesh, 211; God and, 214; on good, 36; on love, 40; on lust, 29–30, 34–37, 38, 39–40, 41, 42–43; Manichaeism and, 29, 31, 32–33, 41, 44; on marriage, 30, 32–40, 41, 45–46, 77, 80–81, 89–90, 102, 133, 195; on pleasure, 32–37, 38, 40–46, 96; sexuality of, 29–30, 33; on sin, 34–37, 39–40, 40–46, 86
- authorship, 15n10
- baptism, 41
- Bardecki, Andrzej, 197
- Barrett, Donald, 176–77
- beauty, 101
- Bede, Venerable, 55–56
- Beitia (bishop of Santander), 167
- Bellarmino, Robert, 106
- Bernard of Clairveaux, Saint, 57, 78
- Bible: abstinence and, 52–53; attitudes in generally, 5–6, 32; on body, 62; on desire, 7, 10, 11–12, 44; Genesis, 6, 7, 18, 19, 33–37, 40, 41, 44, 100, 194; Luke, gospel of, 23; myth in, 5; on pleasure, 6–7, 10–11; sin in, 41; Song of Songs, 6–7, 57; understanding of, 210–11. *See also* Paul, Saint; *individual books*
- Billuart, Charles, 107–8
- birth control. *See* contraception
- bishops, 63, 184, 206–8, 210–11. *See also* clergy; *individual bishops*
- body: Augustine on, 42, 44; Bible on, 62; celibacy and, 195; in early church, 22; in Judaism, 62; Manichaeism and, 31; in modern church, 141, 190, 193–96, 198
- Boigelot, R., 144
- Bonaventure, Saint, 80–81, 141
- Boris (prince of Bulgaria), 56
- Bourne, Francis, 132
- Bouvier, John Baptist, 116
- Brown, Peter, 25
- Buddhism, 90
- Burch, Thomas, 185
- Burchard (bishop of Worms), 69–70
- Caesarius, 54
- Cahill, Thomas, 192
- Cana, 56
- Cannon, Carol Ann, 48n36
- canon law: on celibacy, 61, 62–63, 65–66; Code of Canon Law, 70, 75, 121, 133; development of, 69–75; in modern church, 121
- Canterbury, archbishop of, 55
- Cantor, Peter, 86
- Casti Cannubii* (Pius XI), 3, 43, 132–36, 139, 175–76, 181
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 208
- The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 99–103, 120–21, 125
- Cathars, 77
- Catholic Church: attitude of generally, vii–viii, 4, 20–21, 163, 213–14; conditional acceptance policy of, viii, 7, 8, 21
- celibacy: body and, 195; of clergy generally, 61–66; in early church, 21; Eucharist and, 37; lust and, 64–65; marriage inferior to, 12, 37–38, 151; in modern church, 151, 195; of Paul, Saint, 11–12, 14; pleasure and, 2–3; sin and, 64–65. *See also* abstinence; virginity
- Chambery (vicar of), 115
- charity, 135, 136
- chastity, 93, 95, 97, 190–91
- childbirth, 53, 69

- children: Anglican Church on, 131;
 Augustine on, 30, 32–33, 35–40,
 41; Council of Trent on, 101; in
 early church, 8, 22–26, 30, 32–33,
 35–40, 41; Gnosticism and, 18,
 19; Manichaeism and, 31–32; in
 medieval church, 51, 53, 55, 70–71,
 74–75, 77, 79, 81, 83, 84; in modern
 church, 3, 100, 101, 107–8, 114, 119,
 120, 121, 128–29, 133, 139, 142–43,
 144–45, 147–49, 152, 167–68, 169,
 170, 182–85, 191–93, 196–200,
 210–11; in Second Vatican Council,
 167–68, 169, 170, 182, 210; sin and,
 31–32; Ten Commandments and, 24;
 Thomas Aquinas on, 84. *See also*
 conception; pregnancy
- Christ. *See* Jesus Christ
- Christian Family Movement, 168, 177
- Church. *See* Catholic Church
- church, attendance at, 54, 55, 56–57
- The City of God* (Augustine), 33–34, 86
- cleanliness, 62
- Clement of Alexandria, Saint, 19, 22–
 26, 26n1, 77, 195
- clergy, celibacy for, 61–66
- Code of Canon Law, 70, 75, 121, 133
- coitus interruptus, 114–16, 117
- Columbo, Carlo, 181
- communion. *See* Eucharist
- conception, 148. *See also* contraception
- A Concordance of Discordant Canons*
 (Gratian), 70–71
- concupiscence. *See* lust
- conditional acceptance, viii, 7, 8, 21
- confession. *See* reconciliation
- Confessions* (Augustine), 29, 30
- Congregation of the Holy Office,
 113–14
- conscience, 180–81
- contraception: adultery and, 183;
 Anglican Church on, 131–32,
 133–34; in early church, 161;
 Eucharist and, 120, 155, 206–7;
 experience with, 155–61, 176–77,
 205–8; faithfulness to teachings on,
 205–8; lust and, 3; Manichaeism
 and, 32; in modern church, 114–17,
 119–21, 133–34, 135, 149–50, 152,
 155–61, 164–68, 170, 175–85, 190,
 192–93, 196–200, 205–9; Natural
 Family Planning, 199, 208–9; papal
 commission on, 164–66, 168, 171,
 175–79, 181–82, 185, 197; penance
 for using, 52, 206; rhythm method,
 116–17, 135, 149–50, 152, 155–61,
 176–77, 209; Second Vatican
 Council on, 164–68, 170; as sin, 2,
 114–16, 117, 119–21, 135
- Corinthians: on abstinence, 23, 54,
 55, 99, 102, 111, 120, 151; on
 fidelity, 38–39; marriage debt in, 74;
 marriage in generally, 9–13, 24, 78,
 80; on spirituality, 62; on touching,
 77
- Council of Elvira, 61
- Council of Nicaea, 61
- Council of Trent, 99–103, 106, 113–17
- Courcon (cardinal), 86
- creation: Augustine on, 33–37, 40;
 Biblical accounts of, 5, 6, 7;
 Gnosticism and, 18–20; Jesus Christ
 on, 7, 32, 35–36; in medieval church,
 100; in modern church, 101, 119,
 127, 139, 142, 194–95; of sexual
 intercourse, 32, 40, 84
- Crowley, Patrick and Patricia, 168, 176,
 177, 185
- Cummean, 53
- Cupid, 47n24
- Curran, Charles E., 160–61, 184
- Damasus I, 62
- Dante Alighieri, 7
- dark, 31–32
- debt. *See* marriage debt
- Declaration on Religious Liberty*,
 180–81
- Decretum* (Burchard), 69–70
- de Lestapis, Stanislas, 177

- Dennis (monk), 94
 de Riedmattan, Henri, 165
 de Salinis, Antoine, 117
 desire: Augustine on, 34–35, 40; Bible on, 7, 10, 11–12, 44; Council of Trent on, 101; in early church, 24, 25, 40; in medieval church, 80; in modern church, 190; sin and, vii, 1–2, 3, 12, 34–35. *See also* lust; passion; pleasure
 De Smet, Alois, 125
 Dido, 47n24
Dissertation on Conjugal Onanism (Nardi), 117
Dissertation on the Sixth Commandment (Bouvier), 116
 divorce, 7, 14, 39, 79, 100
 Doms, Herbert, 122, 139–45, 195, 199
 Duns Scotus, 74–75
 duty. *See* marriage debt
- Eastern Orthodox Church, 65
 eating, 19, 96, 97, 110
 education, 1–4
 Egbert (monk), 53–54
 elephants, 110
 emotion, 93
 Encratites, 19
 Ephesians, 13–14, 32, 58–59, 108, 127
 Erasmus, Desiderius, 105
eros, 196
 Eucharist: abstinence and, 53, 56–57, 70, 103; celibacy and, 37, 61, 62–63, 64–65; contraception and, 120, 155, 206–7; Council of Trent on, 103; in Gnosticism, 19; Jesus Christ and, 141; penance and, 52; self-giving in, 141
 Eve. *See* Adam and Eve
 evil: Augustine on, 36–37; Cathars on, 77; Gnosticism and, 18, 23, 24; Manichaeism and, 31; marriage as, 56; pleasure and, 36–37, 39, 42–43, 85–88
Exhortation to Chastity (Tertullian), 21–22
- experience, 156–61, 169, 176–77, 205–8
The Experience of Marriage, 156–60
- Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II), 197–200
 fertility, 26, 116–17, 143. *See also* Natural Family Planning; rhythm method
 fidelity: in early church, 38–39; in medieval church, 79, 81, 85; in modern church, 102, 109, 133
 Finnian, 53, 59
 flesh: in Bible, 13; in early church, 33; in medieval church, 53, 56, 58–59, 77; in modern church, 100
 Ford, John, 168, 175, 176, 178, 181, 182
 fornication, 39. *See also* adultery
 Francis de Sales, Saint, 108–11, 147
 friendship, 88, 89–90
- Galations, 13
 Gasparri, Pietro (cardinal), 121
 Genesis: Augustine on, 33–37, 40, 41; Council of Trent on, 100; creation account in, 6, 7; Gnosticism and, 18, 19; Julian on, 44
 Gilfeather, Brother, 2
 Gnosticism, 17–21, 23–24, 32
 God: abstinence and, 52; contemplation of, 85–86; contraception and, 114; creation by, 5, 6, 7, 100, 127, 142; Gnosticism and, 18–20, 23; love of, 214; pleasure and, 6, 56, 209; in Song of Songs, 7; union with, 103
 good: Augustine on, 36; Gnosticism and, 18; love as, 166; lust and, 36; Manichaeism and, 31; marriage as, 36, 38–40, 56, 81, 84–85, 89–90, 102, 133; passion as, 40; pleasure and, 39, 42, 85–88
The Good of Marriage (Augustine), 30, 36, 37–40, 77
 Görres, Albert, 176, 184
 Gousset, Thomas, 116

- grace, 83, 103, 147
 Gratian, 70–71, 72, 73, 75, 211
 Gregory VII, 65
 Gregory XVI, 180–81
 Gregory of Tours, 63
 Gregory the Great, 54–55, 56, 72
 Grisez, Germain, 178, 182
 Guibert (cardinal archdeacon of Milan), 64

 Halitgar (bishop), 56
 Häring, Bernard, 164, 165, 168
 health, 88, 95, 120
 Hincmar of Reims, 73
 Hinduism, 90
 Hippolytus, 26n1
 holy days, 53, 54, 56, 69–70, 103. *See also* Sabbath
The Holy Sacrament of Matrimony (Sanchez), 106–7
 Holy Spirit, 75, 211
 Hosius (bishop), 61
 Hugh of St. Victor, 74, 79
 Huguccio, 71–72, 74, 96
Humanae Vitae (Paul VI), 149, 182–85, 191, 193, 196–97, 206–7
Human Life in Our Day, 184, 206–7
 human nature, 40–46, 75, 87, 93. *See also* nature
 Humbert (cardinal), 65
 Hurth, Francis, 164

 Ida of Boulogne, 58
 Ignatius (bishop of Antioch), 26n1, 78
In Defense of Purity (von Hildebrand), 126, 144
 Innocent, 44
 Innocent II, 66
 Innocent III, 72
 Innocent XI, 113–14
 interior life, 134–36
Introduction to the Devout Life (Francis de Sales), 108
 Iranian mythology, 17
 Ireland, 51–52, 107

 Irenaeus, 26n1
 Isaac, 11
 Isidore (bishop of Seville), 51

 Jacob, 101
 Jansen, Cornelius, 107
 Jansenism, 107, 113
 Jerome, Saint, 37–38, 71, 101, 104n12
 Jesus Christ: abstinence and, 58; on creation, 7, 32, 35–36; divorce and, 7, 14, 100; Eucharist and, 141; love of, 13–14, 32, 81, 83–84, 102, 108, 127, 134, 136, 141–42, 166, 198; lust and, 3; on marriage, 7, 77; Passion of, 83–84; return of expected, 9, 11, 12–13, 14; in Song of Songs, 7; Thomas Aquinas on, 83–84
 John, Saint, 56
 John XXIII, 163, 164
 John of the Cross, Saint, 160
 John Paul II, 140, 183, 189–200
 Johnson, Luke Timothy, 199–200
 Jonas (bishop of Orleans), 56–57
 Joseph, 79
 Jovinian, 37–38
 Judaism, 10–11, 17, 20, 62, 70
 Julian, Bishop, 44–46
 Justin, Saint, 24, 195

 Kaufman, Philip, 184
 Kelly, George A., 177–78
 Knaus, Hermann, 149
 Koch, Anton, 125–26

 Lambruschini, Ferdinando, 182
 land, 64
 Lateran Council, 66
 Laurentin, Rene, 164
 laws, 51. *See also* canon law
 laxism, 107–8, 113
 Lecomte, Auguste, 117
 Léger, Paul, 166
 Le Maistre, Martin, 95–96, 97
 Leo I, 62
 Leo IX, 65

- Leo XIII, 119
 Leviticus, 62
 life, 5
 light, 31–32
The Literal Meaning of Genesis
 (Augustine), 34, 36
 Lombard, Peter, 73, 80
 love: abstinence and, 58; Anglican Church on, 131–32; Augustine on, 40; Bible on, 13–14; Council of Trent on, 101–2; Doms on, 140, 142; in early church, 40; Francis de Sales on, 108–11; of God, 214; as good, 166; Gousset on, 116; of Jesus Christ, 13–14, 32, 81, 83–84, 102, 108, 127, 134, 136, 141–42, 166, 198; of lust, 89–90; in medieval church, 57–58, 84, 89–90, 94; in modern church, 101–2, 109, 114, 116, 119, 125–29, 134–35, 136, 164, 165, 166, 169, 170–71, 177, 178, 182–83, 189–91, 192–93, 194–95, 197–200, 209–11, 214; papal commission on, 177, 178; passion in, 6; Sanchez on, 107; in Second Vatican Council, 164, 165, 166, 169, 170–71, 182, 195; spirituality and, 57–58, 125; Thomas Aquinas on, 84, 89–90
Love and Responsibility (Wojtyla), 189, 191, 197, 200
 Luke, Saint, 23, 77
 lust: Adam and Eve and, 42; Augustine on, 29–30, 34–37, 38, 39–40, 41, 42–43; baptism and, 41; celibacy and, 64–65; contraception and, 3; Council of Trent on, 101; in early church, 8, 29–30, 34–37, 38, 39–40, 41, 42–43; Francis de Sales on, 109; good and, 36; Jesus Christ and, 3; love of, 89–90; Luther on, 105; marriage and, 53, 54–55, 57, 78, 81, 85; in medieval church, 53, 54–55, 56, 57, 81, 93, 96; in modern church, 3, 101, 119, 121, 135–36, 152, 190, 195, 196; original sin and, 35; rationality and, 38; Satan and, 12; sin and, 34–37, 39–40, 41, 42–43, 44, 45; Thomas Aquinas on, 85, 86. *See also* desire; passion; pleasure
 Luther, Martin, 105–6
 Major, John, 96–97
 Mani, 30–32
 Manichaeism: Augustine and, 29, 30–33, 41, 44; Cathars and, 77; in modern church, 150, 166–67
 Marcion, 19
 Marcus Aurelius, 25
 marriage: of Adam and Eve, 81, 100; Anglican Church on, 131; Augustine on, 30, 32–40, 41, 45–46, 77, 80–81, 89–90, 102, 133, 195; at Cana, 56; Cathars on, 77; Catholic Church on generally, vii–viii, 4, 20–21, 163, 213–14; celibacy superior to, 12, 37–38; of clergy, 61–66; consummation of, 73–74, 79, 100, 121, 131, 132; Council of Trent on, 99–103; as covenant, 169; death and, 21–22; debt in, 10–11, 22, 38–39, 71–72, 74–75, 79, 84–85, 95, 103, 136; in early church, 8, 10, 11–12, 13–14, 21–26, 30, 32–40, 41, 45–46, 62; as evil, 56; experience of, 155–61, 176–77; fidelity and, 38–39, 79; Gnosticism and, 17–18, 18–21, 23–24; as good, 36, 38–40, 56, 81, 84–85, 89–90, 102, 133; Jesus Christ on, 7, 77; laws on, 51; Manichaeism and, 32–33; in medieval church, 51, 53–59, 69–75, 77–82, 83–90; in modern church, 3, 99–103, 105–11, 119, 121–22, 125–29, 144–45, 163–71, 182–85, 189–93; Paul, Saint, on, 10, 11–12, 78, 108; purposes of generally, 37–40, 84–85, 100–101; rationality and, 33–37, 38; remarriage, 21–22; as sacrament, 38, 39, 73–75, 78–82,

- 83–84, 89–90, 101–3, 108–9, 133, 141; in Second Vatican Council, 163–71, 195; for support, 100, 101, 125, 194; Thomas Aquinas on, 83–90, 140, 141; virginity and, 37–38, 55, 57, 100; of Virgin Mary, 79
- On Marriage* (Clement of Alexandria), 24
- On Marriage and Concupiscence* (Augustine), 36, 43
- marriage debt: in early church, 10–11, 22, 38–39; in medieval church, 71–72, 74–75, 79, 84–85, 95, 103; in modern church, 136
- Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* (von Hildebrand), 126, 144
- “Married Love and the Gift of Life,” 208
- Marshall, John, 165
- Martos, Joseph, 46
- masturbation, 118n4
- Matthew, 100
- Maximos IV Saigh, 166–67
- The Meaning and End of Marriage* (Doms), 139, 144, 195
- men, 5
- menopause, 40, 143
- menstruation, 38
- metaphor, 5
- Middleton, Richard, 93–94
- mind, 95
- Mirari Vos* (Gregory XVI), 180–81
- Moral Questions* (Le Maistre), 95, 96
- moral theology, 93–98, 113–17, 160–61
- Moral Theology* (Alphonsus Liguori), 113–15
- Moral Theology for the Use of Priests and Confessors* (Gousset), 116
- Moses, 52, 53
- murder, 52
- myth, 5
- Naj‘ Hammadi texts, 18
- Nardi, Maurus, 117
- Natural Family Planning, 199, 208–9.
See also rhythm method
- nature, 88–90. See also human nature
- Nicholas I, 56
- Nicholas II, 65
- Noonan, John, 72, 133–34, 168, 184
- nursing, 38
- Ogino, Kyusaku, 149
- onah*, 10–11
- Onan, 114, 115–16, 120, 133
- On the Moral Order*, 164
- On the Morals of the Manichees* (Augustine), 30, 32–33
- On the Virginity of Mary* (Hugh of St. Victor), 79
- orgasm, 19, 26, 72
- Origen, 7, 22
- original sin, 35, 40–46, 86, 105
- Ottaviani, Alfredo, 167–68, 175, 178, 181–82
- Pantaenus, 23
- passion, 6, 10, 11–12, 32–33, 40, 105.
See also desire
- Passion (of Christ), 83–84
- Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 163, 169–71, 175, 195
- Patrick, Saint, 52
- Paul, Saint: on abstinence, 52–53, 54, 62, 74, 99, 102, 111, 120, 151; belief about, 8; on children, 23; Gnosticism and, 17–18; on love, 127; on marriage generally, 9–14, 24, 38–39, 45, 55, 58–59, 77, 78, 80, 108; on sin, 41
- Paul VI: *Humanae Vitae*, 149, 182–85, 191, 193, 196–97, 206–7; papal commission on birth control, 165, 168, 178–79, 180; Second Vatican Council and, 175
- Pelagius, 40–41, 44, 46
- penance, 1–2, 52, 53–54, 58–59, 69, 206. See also reconciliation
- penitential handbooks, 52, 53–54, 58–59, 69

Penitential of Cummean, 53

personalism: development of, 121–22, 126–29, 140; opposition to, 148–49, 164; support for, 164, 171, 190, 198

Peter, Carl, 180–81

Peter, Saint, 64–65

Peter Damian, Saint, 64–65, 73

physical reality, 18–21

Pius XI: *Casti Cannubii*, 3, 43, 132–36, 139; contraception and, 133, 149, 165, 175–76, 181

Pius XII, 147–52, 165

Plato, 22, 93, 196

Platonism, 40

pleasure: Adam and Eve and, 34–35, 85; Augustine on, 32–37, 38, 40–46, 96; Bible on, 6–7, 10–11, 13; Cathars on, 77; celibacy and, 2–3; Council of Trent on, 102–3; in early church, 13, 23–26, 32–37, 35–36, 38, 40–46, 213–14; evil and, 36–37, 39, 42–43, 85–88; Gnosticism and, 20; God and, 6, 56, 209; good and, 39, 42, 85–88; Luther on, 105; Manichaeism and, 32–33; in medieval church, 51, 55, 56, 71–72, 85–88, 93–98; menstruation and, 38; in modern church, 106–7, 109–11, 113–14, 120, 144, 150, 152, 191, 192, 209–10, 213–14; nursing and, 38; pregnancy and, 38; Satan and, 24; sin and, vii, 2, 3, 34–37, 38, 40–46, 51, 54, 55, 56, 71–72; Thomas Aquinas on, 85–88. *See also* desire

popes: Alexander III, 73–74; Damasus I, 62; encyclicals of, 119, 132–36, 139, 149, 151–52, 175–76, 180–81, 182–85, 191, 193, 196–200, 206–7; Gregory VII, 65; Gregory XVI, 180–81; Gregory the Great, 54–55, 56, 72; Innocent I, 44; Innocent II, 66; Innocent III, 72; Innocent XI, 113–14; John XXIII, 163, 164; John Paul II, 140, 183, 189–200; Leo I, 62; Leo IX, 65; Leo XIII, 119; Nicholas

I, 56; Nicholas II, 65; Paul VI, 149, 165, 168, 175, 178–79, 180, 182–85, 191, 193, 196–97; Pius XI, 3, 43, 132–36, 139, 149, 165, 175–76, 181; Pius XII, 147–52, 165; Siricius, 37, 56, 62; Urban II, 65–66

Potvin, Colette, 177, 185

Pouchet, Felix, 116

The Praiseworthy Life of the Married (Dennis), 94

prayer: in Bible, 10, 11; in early church, 23, 45; in medieval church, 52, 54, 55, 70

pregnancy: abstinence during, 24, 26, 53, 69, 71; pleasure and, 38, 96; union and, 143. *See also* fertility

privacy, 36–37, 42, 44

private theologians, 72, 76n18

Probst, Ferdinand, 125, 195, 198, 210

procreation. *See* children

promiscuity, 18–20, 23

Protestant Reformation, 99, 105

Pseudo-Bede, 52

Quattrocchi, Luigi and Maria, 192

Rachel, 101

Raphael, 101

rationality: of Augustine, 33–37, 38; in Gnosticism, 20; in Stoicism, 21, 23, 25; of Thomas Aquinas, 85–88, 93

Rebekah, 11

reconciliation, 51–52, 113–17, 119–20, 206–7. *See also* penance

Reynaldo of Piperno, 90n1

rhythm method: development of, 116–17; experience with, 155–61; Natural Family Planning compared, 209; papal commission discusses, 176–77; Pius XI on, 135; Pius XII on, 149–50, 152. *See also* Natural Family Planning

Rolandus, 74

Romans, 41

Ruffini, E., 167

- Sabbath, 53, 54, 56, 69. *See also* holy days
- sacraments: Augustine on, 38, 39;
 Council of Trent on, 101–3; in early church, 38, 39; in medieval church, 73–75, 78–82, 83–84, 89–90; in modern church, 101–3, 108–9, 133, 141–42, 151; Thomas Aquinas on, 83–84, 89–90; virginity compared, 151. *See also individual sacraments*
- Sacra Virginitas* (Pius XII), 151–52
- Sacred Penitentiary, 115–16, 117
- sainthood, 192
- Sanchez, Thomas, 106–7, 140
- Satan, 11, 12, 24, 31
- school, 1–4
- Second Vatican Council, 163–71, 180–81, 182, 195, 210
- self-giving, 140–41, 171, 195, 198–99.
 See also affection; support
- senses, 22
- Sentences* (Lombard), 80
- Sextus, 71
- sexual positions, 54, 88
- shame, 36–37, 42, 44
- sin: abstinence and, 52–54; Adam and Eve as source of, vii, 34–35, 41, 81, 85–86, 151; Augustine on, 34–37, 39–46, 86; Bible on, 1–2, 41; celibacy and, 64–65; children and, 31–32; contraception as, 2, 114–16, 117, 119–21, 135; cooperation in, 114–15; desire and, vii, 1–2, 3, 12, 34–35; in early church, 11, 12, 34–37, 39–46, 86; fornication, 39; Gnosticism and, 19; lust and, 34–37, 39–40, 41, 42–43, 44, 45; Luther on, 105; in medieval church, 51–59, 70–72, 78, 80–81, 85–88; in modern church, 106–7, 113–17, 135, 151; original sin, 35, 40–46, 86, 105; Paul, Saint, on, 41; pleasure and, vii, 2, 3, 34–37, 38, 40–46, 51, 54, 55, 56, 71–72; sexual positions and, 54; shame and, 36–37, 42, 44; Thomas Aquinas on, 85–88.
 See also individual sins; penance; reconciliation
- Siricius, 37, 56, 62
- Sister Joseph Roberta, 1
- Smith, Betty, vii, 213–14
- Soliloquies* (Augustine), 33
- Song of Songs, 6–7, 57
- Sophia, 19, 20
- Soto, Dominic, 97
- spirituality: abstinence and, 73;
 Augustine on, 40; in Catholic Church generally, vii; in early church, 8, 40, 62; in Gnosticism, 18–21; love and, 57–58, 125; in medieval church, 57–58, 73, 84; in modern church, 125, 128–29, 134–35, 139–40, 171, 209–11; in Second Vatican Council, 171; senses and, 22; Thomas Aquinas on, 84; union and, 139–40
- spiritual reality, 18–21
- Stoicism: in early church, 21, 23–26, 32, 36–37; in medieval church, 51, 71, 93; in modern church, 102, 165, 191–92
- Suenens, Leon, 164, 166, 182, 185
- Summa Theologica* (Thomas Aquinas), 83
- support, 100, 101, 125, 194. *See also* affection; self-giving
- Synod of Bourges, 65
- Synod of Clermont, 66
- Synod of Lyon, 63
- Synod of Orleans, Fourth, 63
- Synod of Pavia, 65
- Synod of Toledo, 63
- Ten Commandments, 1–2, 24
- Tertullian, 21–22, 26n1, 41
- Theodore, 53
- Thomas Aquinas, Saint, 74, 83–90, 106, 141, 148
- Timothy, 17–18, 66n1
- Titus, 17, 66n1
- Tobit, 101

- touch, 86, 107, 109
- A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (Smith), vii, 213–14
- two-in-oneness, 139–45, 199. *See also* union
- union: Doms on, 139–45; John Paul II on, 190, 196, 198; Pius XII on, 148–49, 150, 151; in Second Vatican Council, 164, 171, 210–11
- Urban II, 65–66
- Urbicus (bishop of Clermont-Ferrand), 63
- Valentinus, 19
- van Rossum, Willem Marinus, 165
- Vatican Council, 163–71, 180–81, 182, 195, 210–11
- Vermeersch, Arthur, 132
- Virgil, 47n24
- virginity: in early church, 11–12, 14, 21–22, 37–38; Gnosticism and, 20; in medieval church, 55, 57, 79; in modern church, 100, 151–52. *See also* abstinence; celibacy
- Virgin Mary, 55, 58, 64, 79
- Visser, 178, 182
- von Hildebrand, Dietrich, 122, 126–29, 140, 142, 144, 195
- Waletrude, 58
- Weigel, George, 194
- William of Auxerre, 86
- Wojtyla, Karol. *See* John Paul II
- Zalba, Marcelino, 168, 176, 178, 182
- Zeno, 23, 93