

## Reflections on the Virtues and Dangers of Sexuality and Celibacy in the Roman Catholic Tradition

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### Abstract

This paper outlines past and current teaching on celibacy and marital sexuality within the Roman Catholic tradition, and explores the interconnections between these approaches to sexuality. Given the view of fallen human nature, historically most Roman Catholic theologians viewed celibacy very highly and regarded sexual desire and pleasure as distorted and corrupting. In contrast, Roman Catholic theology today tends to regard both marital sexuality and celibacy to be of positive spiritual benefit. This paper examines both the spiritual significance and dangers of sexual activity and celibate practices in Roman Catholicism, and illustrates briefly some possible parallels and relevance for other religious traditions.

### Introduction

This paper outlines and reflects upon contemporary and historical developments in the views of celibacy and marital sexuality within the Roman Catholic tradition, as well as the theological interconnections of these lifestyles. In Roman Catholicism today, sexuality is thought to be potentially of much spiritual benefit to married couples, no less than the practice of celibacy, despite the fact that until fairly recently all sexual desire and pleasure was regarded by most Roman Catholic theologians as spiritually distorted and corrupting. This paper reflects on these various views of sexuality and celibacy, highlighting both the possible dangers and spiritual significance of these lifestyles. It briefly illustrates historical parallels between the Roman Catholic experience of celibacy and that of Theravada Buddhism. The paper also suggests that this spiritual significance of sexuality might apply to other traditions that seek in their religious ideals an integration of sexuality with other facets of the person, rather than a simple transcendence of sexual desire.

#### 1. The Virtue of Chastity

Celibacy and marital sexuality are treated in Roman Catholicism as moral virtues. Official teachings regard both as forms of *chastity*, which in turn falls under the cardinal

virtue of temperance (*Catechism* 1999, 2338). Chastity is a moral virtue of sexual regulation—the “self-moderation and self-regulation in sexual life” (O’Riordan 2003, 442)—which applies differently to people depending upon their status as a married person, a single lay person, or as a member of a Religious or Clerical-Diocesan community. I will illustrate these different applications in a moment. However, I note here that chastity in all its forms involves the integration of sexual passions with the cognitive, emotional, and moral facets of the person. The redemptive ideal in Roman Catholicism is incarnational—it hopes that all aspects of the person will be unified within the healing love and light of Christ. Sexual desire is an essential element of the person which needs to be drawn effectively into this transformative and integrative dynamic. Chastity is a key to this personal, spiritual integration.

According to current official Roman Catholic teachings, there is a “twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life” (*Catechism* 1999, 2363), and these are thought to be intrinsically united and inseparable, given the basic nature of human beings (Paul VI 1968, 12). Sexuality is regarded as an enriching and “intimate giving of spouses to each other” through a physical communion that is “integral” to their love (*Catechism* 2354, 2361). In this view, sexual desire and pleasure are considered to be highly valued aspects of married life. They are key aspects in one’s ecstatic and intimate opening to the personal depth of one’s spouse, though the misuse of sexuality leads to distortions of the human person and relationships. Pope Benedict XVI observes how some contemporary secular approaches to sexuality tend to degrade the body by objectifying sex as a form of “enjoyable and harmless” recreation. Sex is “no longer integrated into our overall existential freedom...[but] it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere”. Moreover, *eros* (sexual desire), “reduced to pure ‘sex’, has become a commodity, a mere ‘thing’ to be bought and sold” (2005, 5). On the contrary, modern Roman Catholic teaching regards marital sexual activity as a key feature in a person’s movement towards spiritual integration and fulfillment in love and happiness. It is a virtue and a grace – an aspect of God’s favor and help.

On the other hand, chastity for single persons is an imperative to celibacy—to abstain from sexual activity—where a person actively refuses to participate in actions that maintain, promote or enhance genital pleasure. Single persons are supposed to channel sexual desire into the pursuit of other life-activities and thereby to sublimate it (O’Riordan 2003, 443-444). They are to “practice chastity in continence” (*Catechism* 1999, 2349). Celibacy is a form of chastity that is supposed to be practiced by *all* unmarried Roman Catholics. It is curious how this fact is often neglected in discussions about sacerdotal (Priestly) and consecrated (Religious) celibacy—that unmarried lay Catholics are supposed to act celibately, just as are Priests and Religious Sisters and Brothers. For Religious persons, the difference is that they take a vow of permanent celibacy within the context of the Evangelical Counsels (obedience, poverty, chastity). Sandra Schneiders describes this as a free response of a calling to a “sexually abstinent, life-long commitment to Christ that is externally symbolized by remaining unmarried”

(2001, 177). The celibacy of unmarried lay Catholics, on the other hand, need only be temporary and need not involve such a deeply affective commitment to Christ, though presumably some lay Catholics do make similar commitments, even if they do not include formal religious vows.

Of course, for many non-Religious and non-Clerical Catholics, this can be a very difficult teaching, given the powerful nature of the sexual instinct and the fact that they might not be called to undertake Religious or Priestly vocations and might be actively seeking a permanent relationship. This has led some modern theologians to advocate a reappraisal of the severity of the ‘sin’ associated with most non-marital sexuality – “as defects in fortitude and self-control” – without denying all negative effects of it (De Vinck 1970, 81, 93). I will return to the status of marital and non-marital sexuality later in the paper, but I turn now to a brief historical overview of celibacy in Christianity, before reflecting on some of the critical issues that are associated with it and their bearing on marital sexuality.

## **2. A Brief Historical Outline of Christian Celibacy**

The earliest Church structures included married deacons, presbyters, and bishops. For the first two hundred and fifty years, sacerdotal celibacy was optional in both the Christian East and West and presented as such by various Church Fathers and other writings and Councils of this period. Although Priestly marriage came to be the regular practice in the Eastern Church, the Roman Church advocated sacerdotal celibacy and, despite ongoing conflicts over it, various papal and council decrees were introduced or reintroduced after the 10<sup>th</sup> century to support this view. In the face of resistance by some bishops, celibacy was nevertheless established as an aspect of Roman Catholic Priestly discipline by the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Delhaye 2003, 323, 326). Celibacy was also a practice of some male and female communities by at least the second century (Cahill 1996, 172), and it develops into the formal consecrated celibacy that is practiced by the various Religious orders and communities.

At the Council of Trent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Catholic authorities countered both ongoing criticisms of the practice and the developing Protestant view, which supported sacerdotal marriage, with the position that is current today: although the celibacy of Clergy is not an imperative derived from divine law and not required by the character of the priesthood, the Roman Catholic Church proclaims sacerdotal celibacy as an important aspect of the vocation of ordination (Delhaye 2003, 327; Kelsey 1986, 167-168). The Church has the power to dispense from the vow when special cases warrant and even the power to dispense from the law itself. However, currently sacerdotal celibacy is upheld as “the condition for greater freedom in the service of God” (Delhaye 2003, 328), and this explanation has also been given in support of consecrated celibacy. The other major reasons that have been put forward historically to support the practices of celibacy are the paradigm of Jesus’ celibacy given in the New Testament and the

traditional negative views of sexuality. I will explore the question of the sexuality of Jesus before turning to the topic of freedom in ministry and then examining traditional Christian views of sexuality in relation to celibacy in Section 4.

Given the Jewish norms around sexuality at the time, which required marriage and procreation, there has been some speculation in contemporary scholarship that Jesus might have been married (Kripal 2007) or that he might have been homosexual in orientation (Kripal 2007; Phipps 1996). These hypotheses are controversial and seem to me to be highly improbable in the way they tend to focus on a few specific New Testament passages with sometimes very strained or narrow interpretations, while ignoring aspects of these passages or other passages that might counter the view. I do not have the space in this paper to explore these questions in detail, but I would note here that it is most likely that New Testament writers do not mention Jesus as married not because his marital status would go without saying, but simply because he was not married.

As unmarried, Jesus would have been a controversial and perhaps even persecuted figure within the dominant Jewish milieu of the period. At that time, a Jewish movement that spoke highly of even a qualified celibacy, appropriate for some followers, would have been suspect by most Rabbis and regarded as offensive. So celibacy would have to be downplayed, at least initially, by Jesus' followers. Moreover, if we presume that Jesus never advocated celibacy as a necessary norm for his followers, nothing needed to be said explicitly in scriptures about his own celibacy. Indeed, it seems to me most likely that it was Jesus' own celibacy that makes celibacy such a controversial subject right from the beginning of the Church. This is compounded by some of his related teachings, which ran counter to certain social norms of that time and culture. As Sandra Schneiders observes: "Neither sex nor family, according to Jesus, was the ultimate determiner of social status or relationships" (2001, 225). Once Jesus is perceived to be of human *and* divine nature, his celibacy becomes easier to accept amongst Jewish converts, given perspectives on purity requirements in relation to the sacred. However, given negative Jewish attitudes toward celibacy, Christianity begins with significant controversy surrounding its sexual teachings.

This perspective on celibacy is supported especially by Jesus' comments in Matt. 19:12: "For there are some who are born eunuchs from their mother's womb and there are some who have been made eunuchs by men and there are some who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. The one who can let this be his reality, let him do so".<sup>1</sup> Some scholars suggest that Jesus is replying here to the personal

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of this passage is from Loader 2005, 131. Also see Loader for reference that supports Jesus' celibacy in the context of this scriptural passage, 133-134, 143-144.

Some opposing views give a radically different interpretation of Matt. 19:12. For example, Gary Taylor and Jeffrey Kripal suggest that, contrary to general perceptions, eunuchs are not impotent and historically were often sexually active as male prostitutes. Jeffrey Kripal writes "*Eunuch* could function as a virtual synonym in Greek and Roman culture for any male who preferred passive homosexual sex"

ridicule that critics are directing at his own celibacy, and that this passage is consistent with some of Jesus' other radical teachings, such as where he advocates the abandonment of family ties and obligations for the sake of his mission and the kingdom of heaven, where he claims that marital relations will not apply in the afterlife, and where he admonishes against divorce.<sup>2</sup>

Also, in imagining Jesus as celibate, we do not need to depict him as narrowly or harshly ascetic, or as espousing a disembodied spirituality as the ideal Christian life. Presumably, in his humanity Jesus would have had sexual desires that might have been expressed in marriage, if his mission had not precluded this. And within a celibate lifestyle, one can imagine that Jesus had very warm connections physically, emotionally, and spiritually with many women and men, without it ever involving what we would understand to be actual sexual relations. It is possible that Jesus was a very tender, sensitive, and passionate man—a deeply personal and intimate teacher and healer for the times—while maintaining a celibate lifestyle. And that is the image that much of the New Testament and Apocryphal writings seem to be giving.

In trying to understand this celibate lifestyle in relation to monogamous relationships, some theologians have interpreted Jesus' stance to represent his equal love for all, which otherwise would have been particularized in a special way to his spouse and children. They suggest there was something about Jesus' love for humanity that prevented him from directing sexual love towards a particular woman and focusing on a family—that such a love would have been too exclusionary and have inhibited the self-giving of his sacrifice. Similarly, they argue, Roman Catholic priests are called to participate in all aspects of Christ's life, including this egalitarian self-giving. Celibacy brings a freedom of vocation that in many cases married persons simply cannot have, given their special loves and responsibilities for spouse and children. Closely related to this freedom, Sandra Schneiders speaks of a particular *relationship* with Jesus that is enabled by the consecrated celibacy of the Religious life: “For Catholic Religious the

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(2007, 40). He argues that this passage suggests that Jesus privileged gay men in a movement that involved a kind of homo-erotic mysticism. Other passages he cites to support this hypothesis are: Mark 14:13 (following the water jar-man); Mark 10: 21 (the loving gaze); John 13: 21-26 (the beloved disciple); Matt. 8:5-13 (the healing of the centurion's slave-boy); Matt. 19:11-12 (afterlife relations); Matt. 22:30 (admonitions to abandon family); John 13:1- 6 (the foot-washing) (Ibid., 39-50).

However, it seems to me most unlikely that Jesus would be advocating a homo-erotic mysticism for his closest disciples in the context of the “eunuch” references. It is extremely difficult to connect such a reading of this passage with the reference to “the kingdom of heaven”. What actually is the “kingdom of heaven” in this homo-erotic reading of this passage? How would such a vision relate to other sayings and teachings of Jesus? It seems more likely that Jesus is referring to celibacy here in his reference to “eunuchs”.

<sup>2</sup> Scriptural references for these teachings are: Mark 10: 28-30, Matt. 19:29, Luke 18: 29-30; Mark 12:25, Matt. 22:30, Luke 20:35; and Mark 10:2-12, Matt. 19:3-12, Luke 16: 18.

only fully adequate motivation for lifelong consecrated celibacy is the relationship of the Religious to Jesus Christ. This relationship is experienced as a total affective involvement that is incompatible with an analogous marital relationship with another human being, and in its psychological-spiritual exclusivity is self-evidently and necessarily permanent, as is the relationship between spouses” (2000, 14).

In regards to sacerdotal celibacy, Pope Paul VI writes that it “signifies a love without reservation, it stimulates a charity which is open to all” (1967, 24). Priests are called to model the celibate life of Jesus and thereby embrace an evangelical freedom which would not obtain in a marital context. Related to this call to egalitarian love, Paul writes that the celibate priest is able to adhere “wholly and directly to the Lord, and is concerned only with Him and His affairs (1 Cor. 7: 33-35), thus, he manifests in a clearer and more complete way the profoundly transforming reality of the New Testament” (1967, 20). This is related to a sense of spiritual “purity” which celibacy is thought to secure: “The consecrated celibacy of the sacred ministers actually manifests the virginal love of Christ for the Church, and the virginal and supernatural fecundity of this marriage by which the children of God are born but not of flesh and blood (John 1:13)” (1967, 26).

### 3. The Status of Sexuality in Relation to Celibacy

This idea of “the virginal love of Christ for the Church” relates to the question of the status of sexuality historically in Church-thinking about celibacy. A major factor in the argument for celibacy amongst many Church writers has to do with pessimistic perceptions of the body and earthly life.<sup>3</sup> Even if the privileging of celibacy that occurred early in the history of the Church challenged the current secular social order and “served as an equalizing factor between men and women and between ordained ministers and laity” (Cahill 1996, 172; Brown 148-50; Schneiders 2000, 19), it also contributed to the disparagement of marital sexuality. Sexuality was thought to be negatively carnal and spiritually polluting. This view dates back to the ancient Israelite people, where, despite a positive view of sexuality in relation to marriage and a wholesome depiction of sexuality in *The Song of Songs*, the temple priests were required

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<sup>3</sup> Wendy Farley helpfully summarizes the various reasons for the choice of celibacy in early Christianity that are developed by Peter Brown in *The Body and Society*: “freedom to spread the gospel;...the soul can transform the body; conversion of heart is helped by celibate integration of affections in relation to God; sexual nonavailability of women to men can overturn gendered expectations; friendship can be greater if it transcends sexual intimacy; rigorous asceticism includes the repudiation of sex, sexual renunciation provides what martyrdom once offered: the total self-gift to God; the death and resurrection of Jesus can be entered into in a way that makes sex irrelevant” (2006, 255). As Farley notes, not all these motivations to celibate life are based on a negative view of sex. However, some of them are based on a negative view of sex, many of them are based on a negative view of the body in contrast to disembodied spirit, and most of them imply a negative view of sexuality.

to practice periods of sexual abstinence in relation to the purity requirements associated with service at the Temple. One needed to cleanse oneself from the polluting effects of sexual contact in order to participate effectively in sacred ritual. The Essenes extended this view to include the larger cultic community in celibate relation to God (Meier 1991, 336-339).<sup>4</sup> Similar ideas develop within the Christian tradition—that in order to relate to Christ most intimately and completely one needed to be free of or purified from the corrupting effects of sexual contact.

A certain strain of Greek thought no doubt also influenced Church thinking on this issue. A general idea derived from the writings of Plato was that spirit is separable from and opposed to matter. The material body needs to be transcended in the spiritual movement to the Divine. Sexuality is associated with bodily passions that are earthy and temporal, while God is wholly rational and eternal. The religious ideal includes virginity or celibacy, for these orientations contribute to a state of spiritual purity that is a condition for intimate contact with a Divine who is solely spirit. Material aspects of life inhibit an awareness of, or intimacy or unity with, purely spiritual Realities of an eternal nature.

Similar Stoic ideas, such as the ideal of *apatheia* (rational freedom from the passions), influenced early Christian theologians, and Manichaean ideas also entered Church thinking about sexuality, especially by way of the writings of St. Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Although he does not limit the distortions of original sin to sexuality, Augustine characterizes the passion (*concupiscence*) associated with the sexual act to be the very vehicle of the transmission of original sin. David Kelly observes that, for Augustine, “sexual excitement and desire for it, even with one’s spouse, are intimately linked to that ‘concupiscentia carnis’ or ‘libido carnis’ [lust of the flesh] which is itself the evil result of original sin” (1983, 93). In this thinking, sexual desire involves a passion that is contrary to and resists a person’s rational and spiritual will. Augustine understands sexual action to be legitimate and necessary for life within the context of marriage, but the desire and pleasure associated with it are defiling and sinful, even when sexual action is open to procreation. Only when sexuality is pursued solely “for the wish to beget children” does it not involve sin (Augustine 1994, 1.17). Augustine taught that the “weakness of incontinence is hindered from falling into the ruin of profligacy by the honourable state of matrimony” (1994, 1.18), but even the good of marriage cannot transform positively sexual desire, which ought to be controlled and “restrained as much as possible” (Augustine 1994, 1.9; Kelly, 1983, 99).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Meier also summarizes his views on celibacy for the Essenes and for Jesus in Vol. 3 of *A Marginal Jew* (2001, 504-509, 621-622).

<sup>5</sup> See also Cahill, 1996, 175-179, for interesting speculation on the personal social factors—Augustine’s relations to his mother, father, concubines, Manicheanism, and male friends—that would have contributed to his pejorative view of sexuality.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Thomas Aquinas expressed a more positive view of marital life than Augustine, but he was heavily influenced by Augustine in his thinking on sexuality. Although he perceived marriage as a form of friendship and an earthly good, he writes that “the shamefulness of concupiscence... always accompanies the marriage act”, and that it is only the “marriage blessing” that excuses the “corruption of concupiscence” (1981, Vol. 5, 41.3; Messenger 1948, 177).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, for Thomas, as for Augustine, “the virginity that is consecrated to God is preferable to carnal fruitfulness” (1981, Vol. 4, 152.4). In such views of marital sexuality, one cannot distinguish between healthy and distorted sexual desire and pleasure, even if sex performed solely for the sake of procreation functions as “a remedy for concupiscence” and does not involve sin (Messenger 1948, 163). This negative view about the status of sexual relations was held by many early Church Fathers, pre-scholastic, and scholastic theologians. Along with Augustine and Thomas, José de Vinck mentions Sts. Jerome, Basil, John Chrysostom, Gregory, Bede, Anselm, Bernard, and Bonaventure as condemning sexual desire and pleasure as a sinful consequence of the Fall, even within a marital context (De Vinck 1970, 28-30).<sup>7</sup> Strict moderation in relation to sex was considered the way of curbing the damages that are always naturally associated with the act, and virginity and celibacy were regarded as morally and spiritually higher states of being than that of marriage.<sup>8</sup>

In this negative view of sexuality, celibacy as a permanent lifestyle is encouraged religiously not simply because of its historical link to Jesus’ life or because it enables one to embrace a more egalitarian love that transcends the specifics of a special spousal-familial love. It is advocated because of its religiously *purifying* character. A sexually abstinent person is best able to relate intimately with a God of pure Spirit. The idea here is that there is something spiritually debilitating about sexual experience.<sup>9</sup> Sexual

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<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas also held “the view that masturbation is a worse violation of chastity than rape or adultery merely because it is *contra naturam*”. I think John Grabowski highlights the severe limitations of Thomas’ view of sexuality in suggesting that “this deficiency...may well be the result of a failure to fully appreciate the import of the personal values at stake within sexual intimacy” (2006, 81).

<sup>7</sup> In 1679, Pope Innocent XI condemned within a marital context “the conjugal act, performed solely for the sake of its pleasure” (Messenger 1948, 176).

<sup>8</sup> Jose De Vinck cites a book on the theology of marriage published in 1964 by Joseph E. Kerns, S.J., which claimed “Abstinence from sexual intercourse is associated with nearness to God” (1970, 76). Commenting on how celibacy had been elevated theologically in Christianity as the superior way of life, de Vinck writes in the mid-1960s: “The sacrament of matrimony has long been said to excuse concupiscence in that weaker part of humanity which did not have the courage to practice perfect chastity. Even fairly recent works have been leading novices to believe that the highest mansions of heaven were reserved exclusively for professed religious, and that their greater merit, their aureole, was due to the fact that they had escaped from the danger of sex” (1970, 8).

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note briefly the similarities between this traditional Christian view of celibacy and that historically in Theravadan Buddhism, despite the different spiritual ideals between the two



actions involve passions, motives, and matter which are defiling and alien to Spirit, even if these negative effects of sexuality can be somewhat neutralized by the goodness of procreation and the marriage sacrament.

However, as I mentioned in Section 1 of this paper, more positive perspectives of sexuality have developed in modern Roman Catholic theology. They were perhaps stimulated especially by the teachings of Pope Pius XI in his 1930 encyclical *Casti connubii* (*On Chaste Marriage*), with its shift towards a more personalist view on human sexuality; by the pronouncements on the positive value of sexuality made at the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s; and then by Pope John Paul II's development of a theology of the body in the 1980s. Jose De Vinck cites a number of other earlier writers also as espousing more positive views of sexuality (Clement of Alexandria, Abelard, Alexander of Hales, Duns Scotus, Denis the Carthusian, and Leonard Lessius) (1970, 38-40); and Margaret Farley mentions writers such as Denis the Carthusian and Martin LeMaistre as beginning "to talk of the integration of spiritual love and sexual pleasure and of the intrinsic good of sexual pleasure" (2006, 45). However, the more negative view of sexuality has been extremely influential in the Christian West.

#### 4. Reflections on Celibacy and Sexuality

We have inherited from Aristotle the idea that human beings are rational animals, where sexuality is considered to be an animal instinct in opposition to the rational

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traditions. In Theravadan Buddhist monastic tradition, the monk undertakes vows of strict celibacy which include all activities that might stimulate sexual desire. The ideal in this tradition is to experience through appropriate moral and meditative practice the transcendence of one's cognitive and sensory faculties. One opens to the condition of *nibbana* (spiritual liberation) only through such radical transcendence of the personal aspects of one's being that are associated with desire. Sexuality involves emotional pleasures that are extremely inhibiting to the spiritual ideal. Shundo Tachibana observes that "pleasures which are enjoyed through the sense-organs are always regarded in Buddhism as mean and detestable, and the greatest of these perhaps is pleasure obtained from sexual relations whether physical or mental" (1999, 118). Moreover, sexual relations can lead to children—a family-life which carries with it responsibilities and attachments that greatly inhibit one's movement towards liberation.

All forms of Theravada Buddhism espouse an ideal that involves the transcendence of the mind, emotions, and senses through monastic or ermetic life-styles that includes strict moral practices and meditative activities. Since sexual feeling has such a tremendous affect on the person, it has been regarded by some monks as one of the most spiritually inhibiting activities. Tachibana, for example, refers to it as "the most powerful instinct that human beings are naturally endowed with" and "the basest pleasure" (1999, p. 118). Understood as such, the monastic celibate lifestyle has been highly respected in Theravada cultures, even amongst lay-Buddhists, as a sign of the greatest personal strength: "To cut off the strongest human bond, or to suppress the meanest human desire, is the most significant preliminary to a course of religious life where vigorous mental struggle is needed" (1999, 118)

Today in Theravada Buddhism many monks have a more positive view of sexuality, even if the desire that is associated with this passion is understood as something to be redirected within a celibate context.

nature of the human spirit. Freud later influentially identifies this animal instinct with the human *libido* (sexual or vital energy)—where sexuality is thought to be the source of all of our physiological vitality. This Freudian view has come to be widely accepted in modern times, even within many Christian circles. Our organic urge for sex provides the vital energy that drives all human activity. This happens by way of sublimation. The physiological energy driving all creative actions is sexual energy that is deflected into other channels of the person. Freud argues that this happens quite naturally and unconsciously, where our primitive sexual instinct is transformed into creative cognitive and emotional states through a process of sublimation. Libido energy is used for higher purposes via this transformative dynamic.

This idea of *sublimation* has been drawn into modern Christian pastoral and theological contexts in significant ways, including an acknowledgement of the power and dangers associated with sexual energy. This helps us to understand some of the serious problems surrounding modern-day sexual disorders, whereby repressed and unreleased sexual tension becomes displaced in neurotic and even psychotic behavior, which can be destructive both to oneself and to others. Jean-Marc Laporte observes: “as we have seen, misplaced or disordered sexual energy is often coupled with feelings of violence, anger, domination, as in the various forms of sexual abuse” (2007, 47).

St. Augustine was correct in recognizing that the sexual urge is one of the most powerful instincts of human nature. At least in the case of male sexuality,<sup>10</sup> there is the acknowledgement in contemporary Christian pastoral theology that celibacy requires one to deal consciously and carefully with these primitive urges, to continuously work to sublimate them in appropriate ways, so that one does not unconsciously act out on them in perversely destructive fashion. Laporte writes that sexuality “needs to be acknowledged, befriended, and integrated”. “Ease with one’s own self in all its unique characteristics also means ease with the sexual energy which the Lord has bestowed upon each of us, and the ability to channel it constructively, to bring it to a clear and life-giving focus” (2007, 46, 44).

As I developed in Section 4, historically most Christian theologians perceived sexuality as an activity which involves sensory passions that greatly inhibit the spiritually transformative or redemptive dynamic of the person. So one can understand

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<sup>10</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill speculates that for women the primary issues surrounding sexuality are related to maternity rather than that of controlling sexual drives: “Male sexual drives are more genitally focused and urgent than those of most women; male sexual response may seem to have an autonomy and uncontrollability that accentuates sex’s danger and easily represents all that is obsessive and addictive in human relationships. ...For women, on the other hand, sexual drives assume less importance on the landscape of identity” (1996, 198). Similarly, Sandra Schneiders mentions a 1993 study of Religious in the U.S. done by Nygren and Ukjeritis which found that women Religious reported “greater fidelity to the vow of chastity than did men” and also that the vow of chastity was the most meaningful vow to the women and the easiest to maintain. On the other hand, the men, which included both Religious brothers and priests, found chastity the least meaningful and the most difficult vow to maintain (2000, 24-25).

why in this perspective some men came to regard women as threatening, and one can find examples within the Christian tradition where this orientation became even destructively misogynous. Whether they try to or not, women can trigger in men extremely powerful desires which can be quite difficult to control and which were thought to adversely affect one's spiritual well-being. In some cases in male celibate traditions of Christianity, these sexual desires came to be regarded as evil. Women became the object of mistrust or even hatred for some men, who blamed women for their own sexual desire, which they perceived to be extremely debilitating spiritually. Women became the scapegoats of the fear men have of their own sexual desire.<sup>11</sup>

Such an anti-female attitude is a clear example of how emotional and spiritual distortions have entered historically into celibate traditions, both East and West. It illustrates how negative views of sexuality tend to lead to psychic and emotional distortions. Just as sexual activity can be both degraded and destructive to oneself and others, so too can the practice of sacerdotal celibacy issue forth in extremely negative orientations and actions. Morton and Barbara Kelsey claim quite plausibly that when "celibacy is practiced because sexuality is perceived as evil, it can become demonic and repressive. A host of moral and psychological problems arise" (1986, 177). When attempts to sublimate sexual desire fail under such conditions, this can lead to mean and destructive behavior, as a person re-directs towards oneself or other people the frustration, fear, and anger associated with the tensions of distorted sexual continence. Celibate lifestyles include real and serious hazards.

On the other hand, if celibate men regard sexuality as something that is genuinely good and a grace, they will hardly be able to harbor ill will towards women for stimulating a desire for something so positive. In Section 2 of this paper, I began to outline affirmative Roman Catholic teachings about sexual desire and pleasure that developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1980s, Pope John Paul II developed a theology of the body which draws on a personalist philosophy which stresses the deeply spiritual unitive function of sexuality. He writes of a language of the body in terms of the self-giving intimacy of marital sexuality. John Grabowski summarizes key points of his view: "Just as one can communicate through bodily gestures as well as through words, in sexual union a married couple 'speaks' a language on the basis of their masculinity and femininity. That which is communicated in this somatic dialogue is both a word of fidelity and of total self-giving" (2006, 46). Similarly, in creatively expanding upon a natural law theory of sexuality in the 1960s, José de Vinck writes: "Sex is a good gift from God that greatly enriches those who use it properly in both its reproductive and

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<sup>11</sup> Apparently this danger applies also in a Buddhist celibate context. Geoffrey Parrinder comments on why monks came to perceive women as dangerous: "Sexual relations would bring attachment that would distract the monk not only from his vow of chastity, but from the search for liberation. Moreover, children might be born and family life would bring further ties. Monks therefore denounced sexual intercourse as 'bestial', and looked on women with fear and contempt" (1980, 45).

personalistic functions; there is a virtue and an obligation of gratitude in taking full advantage of it” (1970, 59).<sup>12</sup>

Chaste sexual activity is here regarded as a virtue equal in status to the practice of celibacy. De Vinck observes how sexual relations might greatly enhance the spiritual condition of the participants: “Love-making may be so transmuted, humanized and spiritualized in intent as to become a magnificent prayer in act—for what is prayer if not an expression of love, and what better expression of love than the supremely human surrender by which we love so overwhelmingly so as to lose the consciousness of ourselves?” (1970, 224). Rosemary Haughton also writes in the 1960s of the potential holiness of marital sexuality, and not just the sacredness of other elements of married life: “The physical love anchors love in the flesh, but it is also the means of transforming the flesh by love ... [A] sexual relationship is a normal means of spiritual development” (Haughton 1969, 66-67). Sexuality provides a highly enjoyable way to learn how to shift from self-centered orientations to self-giving stances. Insofar as it contributes in an essential way to a person’s spiritual integration and redemptive fulfillment, sex becomes sacramentalized. Haughton observes that sex “is the normal way in which people begin to discover the meaning of knowledge and love by emerging from the selfishness of the flesh” (1969, 68).<sup>13</sup>

Sexuality is potentially *kenotic* or self-giving. Haughton remarks: “Love grows by its expression in intercourse; it learns, and gains strength, and applies this learning to all the incidents of shared living” (1969, 78-79). Sexual experience also possesses a powerful healing quality which helps a couple respond positively to life’s struggles and set backs. Through sexual relations, one gradually learns to surrender oneself physically and emotionally within the context of an ecstatic delight that is healing and transforming.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, spiritual passions of sexual intimacy might be naturally redirected outwards beyond the couple, manifested as self-less desire and love for their children, and the caring and support for others.

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<sup>12</sup> Along the lines of de Vinck’s development, Lisa Fullam asks, “What are the perfections of our character, the virtues resident inchoatively in our natures that may be developed in the context of sexual relationships?” (2009, 14). She briefly outlines three possibilities: an aesthetic appreciation in relation to incarnation, “an ability of intimacy”, and a deep level of understanding and insight (2009, 16-17).

<sup>13</sup> Along the lines of Haughton’s development, Philip Sheldrake claims that “To give and to receive sexually has a sacramental quality as long as it truly aspires to be a gift of *self* and a joyful receiving of another person, rather than merely an exchange of bodily stimulation. Spirit touches spirit. We might borrow the old catechism language about sacraments, ‘it is an outward sign of inward grace’, of a deeper inner reality” (2001, 35-36).

<sup>14</sup> Again, Sheldrake remarks: “Sexual intimacy is eucharistic, a liturgy that may heal and restore loving partners to a spiritual centeredness” (2001, 36).

Obviously there are various possible degrees of self-giving, and one's sexual experience is affected by factors which can inhibit in serious ways one's ability to be open to the deeper spiritual aspects of the experience. Lisa Sowle Cahill names some of the ways "sexual sharing is hampered or disturbed": couples can be "stressed by economic difficulties, an ongoing disagreement about a family matter, blind spots in seeing one another's emotional needs, a crying child, lack of sleep, or an important project due at work" (1996, 203). Nevertheless, despite such distractions, sexuality can become an intensely spiritual act and couples are encouraged to be open in that direction. Moreover, this spiritual significance of sexuality as *kenotic* would seem potentially to apply to all religious traditions that advocate an *integration* of sexual desire and pleasure with the moral and spiritual facets of the person. It would not have meaning in those religious traditions that insist solely on a radical *transcendence* of sexuality in their spiritual ideal.

In this view, sexuality is an ideal opportunity for a person to come to integrate his or her instinctual impulses with higher emotional and moral passions, within the context of an ecstatic experience that is extremely pleasurable and in its highest forms a radical self-giving to one's beloved. Sexuality becomes a vehicle of self-surrender in intimate emotional and physical relations with one's spouse. Insofar as sexual desire can be integrated with one's desire for God, marital sexual union has the potential of becoming a sacred act of immense mystical power. In sexual relations, a person participates directly in sacred mysteries of creation—the couple become co-creators of human life with God—within the context of an experience of radical self-giving and self-surrender. This spiritual significance of sexuality can color profoundly the physical and emotional experience of it, and perhaps begins to parallel mystical views of sexuality that are present in some Jewish mystical traditions.

William Dinges observes how this very positive regard of sexuality has not yet been effectively integrated into current Roman Catholic pastoral contexts: "What a tragedy that our religious tradition has taken so long to acknowledge in a more positive way the sacred nature of sexuality—including genital sexuality. This is why today so many Catholic couples have a difficult time articulating the sacramental nature of their sexual expression".<sup>15</sup> Moreover, it appears that the traditional emphasis of celibacy in

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<sup>15</sup> This comment from Dinges was given in correspondence. Along similar lines, Wendy Farley writes: "The blind sense of defilement that still haunts sex and sexuality [in the Christian West] must be subjected to relentless criticism and responsible repudiation". In her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, Farley goes on to propose a revision of Christian sexual ethics which would ground it in a framework of "justice in loving", one that attends to four sources (scripture, tradition, secular knowledge, and contemporary experience) in espousing general sexual norms (no unjust harming of others, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice). She writes, "Insofar as there is a focus on justice, the primary concern is with power inequities in gender relations or with more general considerations of social justice as it shapes sexual identity and activity" (2006, 177-178, 207, 182).

the Roman Catholic tradition has led to the exclusion of sexuality from mysticism. Virtually all of the leading and influential Roman Catholic mystics were celibate, and more affective strands of the mystical tradition tend to advocate a redirecting of sexual desire for other persons into passion for God. Although it seems clear that sexual desire is an essential stimulant in the celibate movement of many Christian mystical experiences,<sup>16</sup> traditionally it was thought that human sexual relationships could not possibly be mystical in character, given the distorting character of sexual passions. However, these more positive contemporary understandings of sexuality create the possibility that mystical experience might enter into certain kinds of sexual experience.<sup>17</sup> Dialogue on this with theologians from Jewish mystical traditions might be particularly fruitful, given their experiences of this reality (Laenen 2001, 138-139).

However, with respect to celibate lifestyles, celibate men and women from all religious traditions who genuinely regard sexuality as potentially holy and sacramental will be living within a difficult tension. No doubt it is easier not to act on pressing sexual desires if one thinks of these as evil or negative. If one regards sexuality positively, then sexual desires will be that much harder to resist and to sublimate. This fact perhaps helps to explain the tendencies historically of some celibate traditions cross-religiously to regard sexuality negatively, and I think it supports strongly the contention that celibacy as a permanent vow is a very unusual vocation—a specific calling that is meant only for a few women and men. Moreover, the celibate life can only be understood as a virtuous sacrifice if what is given up in the calling is regarded as something that is good. When one treats sexuality and sexual pleasure as a great good and grants it even a sacred significance, then the willful giving up of celibacy will be something exceptionally valuable.

The value of celibacy seems to be located in its vocational orientation: in most cases, the celibate person possesses a greater freedom to undertake work in harsh,

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Sandra Schneiders seems to suggest that sexual energy of Religious women can be directed towards the person of Jesus. In reference to the traditional nuptial and spousal metaphors in characterizing consecrated celibacy, she writes of the “passion of the personal attachment to Jesus”: “The person...experiences herself in intimate relationship with a glorified human being, Jesus” (2001, 188).

<sup>17</sup> For example, in his personalist theology of the body, John Paul II seems to point towards a mystical experience associated with the unitive ideal of marital sexuality: “The fact that they become ‘one flesh’ is a powerful bond established by the Creator through which they discover their own humanity, both in its original unity and in the duality of a mysterious reciprocal attraction. ...When both unite so intimately with each other that they become ‘one flesh’, their conjugal union presupposes a mature consciousness of the [male and female] body. Better yet, this union *carries within itself a particular awareness of the meaning of that body in the reciprocal self-gift of the persons.*” ...in every conjugal union of man and woman, there is a new discovery of the same original consciousness of the unitive meaning of the body in its masculinity and femininity; ...each union of this kind renews in some way the mystery of creation in its original depth and vital power” (2006, 10.2, 4).

dangerous or isolated conditions, and to concentrate energy over extended periods of time on specific pastoral challenges or tasks that require one's total commitment and attention. Within a Christian context, this might include entering more enclosed settings for long periods or even permanently, to nourish in a more concentrated and isolated way a contemplative opening to Christ. Sandra Schneiders speaks of a "celibate solitude", in arguing that consecrated celibacy is a lifestyle – what she calls a "lifeform" – that involves "an essentially contemplative vocation, a call to mystical immediacy to God that becomes ever more constant and absorbing in the course of a lifetime" (2000, 132). Clearly, some lay Catholics also undertake contemplative practices in serious and significant ways, and some also participate in a movement towards mystical immediacy with God.<sup>18</sup> However, spouse, children and career might require attention and energy which inhibit or at least hinder a married person's ability to undertake certain kinds of pastoral obligations and extended isolated activities.

Schneiders observes, "Consecrated celibacy is a major condition of the possibility of lifelong itinerancy" (2001, 258).<sup>19</sup> I would add that celibacy is also a condition of the possibility of *permanent* contemplative enclosure. However, there would not appear to be anything about married life that would constrain a person from undertaking sacramental responsibilities involved in a Priestly ordination. Just as married deacons are called to minister and assist in certain sacraments, so also married persons might be able to minister effectively the sacramental duties that are associated with the *presbyterium*. There are no Catholic sacraments which require *by their nature* the celibacy of the minister. This is clear from the past and current Roman Catholic union with some eastern traditions which include married priests, and from the fact that some married men have entered the Catholic tradition from other Christian Churches, to minister there as married priests. Moreover, the reasons given to support the requirement of celibacy in the Catholic priesthood do not derive from the nature of the vocation itself.

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<sup>18</sup> Schneiders distinguishes between the "commitment of Religious to Jesus Christ in lifelong consecrated celibacy" and the "commitment of the spouses to Christ through the lifelong commitment to each other in faithful sexual monogamy" (2000, 125). She claims that the former is an "unmediated primary commitment" while the latter is mediated by the "immediate primary commitments" to spouse and children (2000, 313). However, it seems to me that Religious and Married Catholics are both able to make unmediated primary commitments to Jesus, with the difference between the two lifeforms then being that the Religious lives this commitment within celibate community while the Married person lives this commitment within sexual marriage.

<sup>19</sup> Schneiders elsewhere qualifies this condition of itinerancy by claiming: "It seems that matrimony, especially when children are involved, more characteristically gives rise to a householder lifestyle, and consecrated celibacy, especially that of ministerial Religious, to an itinerant lifestyle, although there is nothing absolute about this and it should not be regarded as prescriptive or even normative" (2001, 256).

It would seem that the fundamental difference in lifeform related to the abstention or the expression of genital sexuality is that marriage carries with it commitments and responsibility to spouse and children that will not pertain for celibate Priests, Sisters and Brothers. Their ministerial focus will not include spouse, children and grandchildren. Indeed, this strong social component intrinsic to sexuality has led Lisa Sowle Cahill to stress “that the three ‘Catholic’ values of sex, love, and procreation are all to be understood as ongoing *personal relationships*, rather than as isolated acts or qualities of acts”, and these relationships, she notes, “are intrinsically interconnected” (1992, 70). Sexual pleasure, loving friendship, and parental guidance, creativity, and responsibility are aspects of sexuality that need to be considered *together* in developing a practical sexual ethic.

The way in which community, and not just individual sex acts, is a focus of sexuality is also highlighted in the lifeform of consecrated celibacy. Traditionally Religious life included an extreme renunciation in relation to one’s primary family of birth, as well as the refusal to form a secondary family in marriage. So celibacy in that context precludes the personal family relations that follow from marital sexual expression, insofar as it is associated with a commitment to a Religious community, where one becomes connected with friends that one does not fully choose, where one has no socially exclusive relationships and children, and where one’s community “is composed completely of adults” (Schneiders 2001, 213). In Roman Catholicism, sexual abstinence or activity determines the direction of one’s personal relations, and how one approaches and directs these sexual actions affects their moral and spiritual status. As Schneiders observes, sex is “a language that takes its meaning from intention and relationship, from what is said and meant, as well as from the expression, the act itself” (2001, 231).

## 5. Concluding Comments

The view of sexuality in Roman Catholicism has shifted significantly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the traditional focus on its necessary procreative function for human life was complemented with a turn to personalism that stresses the positive moral and spiritual potential of an exclusive and permanent sexual relationship. Traditionally, sexual desire and pleasure have been regarded negatively in the Catholic tradition, within the context of a hierarchical system that ranked sacerdotal and consecrated celibate lifestyles as spiritually higher than the state of chaste marriage. All sexual activity was regarded as morally and spiritually debilitating by most celibate theologians until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nevertheless, a small minority of Catholic theologians did write positively about the spiritual value of sexual experience for couples themselves, and no doubt many married people had the integrity not to repudiate the authenticity of their positive personal experiences of sexuality. Perhaps these factors helped to stimulate the shift in official teachings. Along with its significance in conceiving human life, genital sexuality,



including the desire and pleasure associated with it, can be drawn into a deeply spiritual, transformative process of the person. One learns through intimate sexual relations to surrender self-isolating passions and inclinations to the ecstatic unity of this emotional and physical self-giving to one's beloved. As I mentioned in section 5, this spiritual significance of sexuality as *kenotic* would seem potentially to apply to all religious traditions that advocate an *integration* of sexual desire and pleasure with the moral and spiritual facets of the person, rather than a transcendence or repression of it.

I also noted possible parallels between celibacy in the Roman Catholic and the Buddhist traditions. Consecrated celibacy in Roman Catholicism includes an abstention from genital relationships within the context of a permanent life-commitment to Jesus. It involves a lifeform that precludes the obligations of secondary family relations, in shifting to an adult-community life that constellates around this relationship to Jesus. Celibacy in Roman Catholicism was also officially associated with Priestly ordination by the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Roman Catholic theology no longer ranks consecrated and sacerdotal celibacy as "higher spiritual callings" than married life, though some theologians argue that the basic nature of the former, as itinerant or monastic and family-independent, secures a ministerial freedom that marital responsibilities might in some cases preclude. Pastorally, contemporary Roman Catholic theology has also come to recognize the dangers associated with celibate lifestyles, both for the celibate individual and for persons who might be affected by the celibate's personal distortions. Sexual abstinence in and of itself does not make one moral or holy and in fact can be extremely destructive for the well being of the celibate person and his social contacts. Sexual distortions related to celibacy have led to fear and even hatred and violence directed at those who stimulate unwanted sexual desire. Rather than being repressed, ignored, or transcended, sexual energy needs to be consciously acknowledged and sublimated or transmuted into creative orientations that are loving and life-giving. Celibacy, just as sexuality, can easily be degraded or distorted.

Related to these Roman Catholic views of celibacy and sexuality are controversial positions within current secular societies on certain issues in practical sexual ethics, including the prohibition against contraceptives and reproductive technologies, and the status of non-marital sexuality, homosexuality, and the possibilities of the Priestly ordination of women. These views all seem to be connected with the insistence on the necessary openness to procreation in all unitive sexual acts, within the context of a particular view of gender differences and complementarities. I have not explored these issues in this paper, though some of the sources I have cited in other contexts provide discussions of them,<sup>20</sup> and it certainly would be interesting to compare them cross-

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Farley 2006, 271-311 and Grabowski 2006, 135-140, for current explorations of the question of homosexuality; Cahill 1992, 217-254, on reproductive technologies; and Schneiders 2000, 264-280, on women's ordination.

religions. Indeed, perhaps other traditions have something to teach Catholics on these matters. However, I simply note in conclusion that some contemporary Roman Catholic theologians have been asking Catholic authorities for stronger considerations of the personal and social context and effects of sexual actions, in their critical reflection on these issues.<sup>21</sup> I would hope that such critical discernment in the Roman Catholic tradition continues within the context of an inclusive *inner*-religious dialogue, as well as an inter-religious openness, one that pays special attention to the attitudes and emotions that underlay and color such discussions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See for example, de Vinck 1970, 101-103; Kosnick 1977, 92-95; Schneiders 2001, 231; and Farley, footnote #15 above. Cahill observes, for example, that “the sexual morality that has surfaced in recent tradition holds sex to be an expression of mutual, reciprocal love and commitment between two equal partners, with children and parenthood as expressing and fulfilling *this relationship*, rather than as required components of individual sex acts. ...This is certainly much more true of “unofficial’ moral theology, some grassroots pastoral practice, and the practice and viewpoints of lay Catholics” (2001, 171). Farley writes: “In much of Catholic moral theology and ethics, the procreative norm as the sole or primary justification of sexual activity is gone. ...new understandings of the totality of the person support a radically new concern for sexuality as an expression and a cause of love” (2006, 278).

<sup>22</sup> This paper benefited considerably from critical responses to earlier drafts given by Dorothy Cummings, Cindy Crysedale, John Dadosky, Bill Dinges, and two anonymous Readers of *JIRD*. I appreciate their help.

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