

Natural Law and Catholic Sexual Morality

1. *Christ: the image and likeness of God.* The understanding of human sexuality that divine revelation and the living tradition of the Church offer us help us to understand the Church's teachings on sexual morality. This involves coming to see sexual morality as truly a part of the mystery of our life in Christ and not just to judge it as "the world judges." How can we come to Christ's view of these things? It is a matter of seeing what faith in Christ implies for our behavior. God created man male and female – in the image and according to the likeness of God. (See *Colossians* on Christ as the image of God in which man was created.) Jesus Christ as the sole norm of what it is to be truly human.

2. *God's Good Creation and Christian Symbols.* God's delight in the material world He has created. The contrast with nature religions in regard to the goodness of matter. The significance of Christ's Incarnation; the material character of the sacraments. Because God has made us to be symbol-using animals, He frequently uses symbols to communicate with us to disclose various divine truths, both to reveal Himself to us in ways that surpass even the highest range of our human powers (e.g., about the Trinity) and also to teach us more about ourselves, in ways that transcend all times, places, and cultures. But because of the terrible *skewing* of symbolic activity in human cultures, God has by the Incarnation and by the Sacraments set aright the symbols that He had built into us and into the world. *Christian symbolism* builds on the *natural symbolism* of the body, including its sexuality, but corrects and sanctifies what has grown corrupted. Understanding the Christian meaning of human sexuality requires grasping the true meaning of the body and the natural word of love in sexual intercourse, and then coming to see how Christ completes what is incomplete, perfects the imperfect, and sanctifies what is sinful.

Some useful definitions:

- "sign" – an object that, when perceived, leads us to a knowledge of something else
- "natural sign" – a sign that works without human imposition of meaning (e.g., smoke → fire)
- "conventional sign" – a sign that bears resemblance to what it signifies because of human decision or custom (e.g., spoken and written words do not resemble what they mean)
- "image" – a sign that does resemble what it signifies (e.g., representational art)
- "symbol" – a sign whose structure or activity or appearance signifies not only what it conveys by resemblance at the level of material likeness but that can lead us to a higher realm by virtue of some sort of likeness to the immaterial and spiritual reality it signifies
- "sacrament" – an outward (material) sign instituted by Christ to give us God's grace

NB: We sometimes distrust symbols as artificial or contrived, and there is further reason for distrust because they are all too easily abused or skewed. Yet, a symbol's intrinsic meaning and its ability to point to a higher, spiritual meaning arises from the sort of thing that it is. That is can be abused or used falsely (to tell lies, to be hypocritical) does not deny that it is intended to be used well, to speak the truth, and that God has so often used symbols for our instruction.

3. *Sexual intercourse: the natural word of love.* Natural symbols are knowable (even by people without revelation and without education) as the meanings that God has built into these physical structures and physical actions that He created. Sexual actions, for example, symbolize love –

but not love in general, for there are many types of love that are not sexual. Marital love is deeply sexual, but there are many modes of love besides intercourse.

What kind of love does sexual activity symbolize? The differences between male and female genitalia and activities and their psychic correlates teach us something about this, including the desire to unite with another person, and to give and to receive the other, not just as an object for our own use or gratification, but as a person. Our bodies are not mere collections of functions; they can express meanings.

The symbolism of physical nakedness as an invitation to acceptance by and of the other, whatever the strength and beauty, whatever the weakness and defects. Natural marriage as something whose full meaning is extremely difficult to put into words, let alone be understood by young people when marrying. Yet it is something one can readily see enough of so as to desire intensely. The commitment of marriage then serves as a means by which those who do not yet know how to say well all that the act of sexual intercourse means by binding themselves to live in such a way as to grow into expressing what are the most appropriate aspects of their activities.

The desire to make one's partner a parent seems to be more prominent in some cultures than others. A man desires to make his wife yet more of a woman by making her a mother, and a woman desires to make her husband yet more of a man by becoming a father.

4. *Sexual symbolism in the Scriptures.* Not only the use of symbols within scripture for sexuality (e.g., a rose) but the use of sexuality as symbols for such things as what God wants to tell us about himself and about our proper relation to Him.

Some important Scripture references

Two-in-one-flesh: *Genesis* 2:20-25, *1 Corinthians* 6:16-17

Israel, bride of the LORD: *Hos.* ch.2, *Jer.* 3:1-12, *Ez.* chs. 16, 23, *Is.* 54:4-7, 62:4-5; *Song of Songs*

The Church, bride of Christ: *John* 3:29, *Mt.* 9:1-15, 22:1-14, 25:1-13; *Eph.*, 5:25-33, *2 Cor.* 11:2

Eunuch-symbol: *Mt.* 19:10-12

Rev. 19:6-9, 21:2,9

Virginity: *Song of Songs* 4:12, 3:6-11; *Jer.* 18:13, *1 Cor.*, 7:1,7-8,32-34

The Bible's ways of speaking about the intrinsic meaning of human sexuality include:

- straightforward narratives about sexual activity, accompanied by God's judgment as to its rightness or wrongness, e.g., the story of David's lust for Bathsheba
- divine commandments that teach us about God's concern of marital fidelity, e.g., the prohibition on adultery and on coveting another's spouse
- sexual symbolism – not the use of symbols of sexuality so much as the use of sexual symbols for other things, including great spiritual realities such as the relations of the persons within the Holy Trinity and our relations to God Himself. God finds in our sexuality something so good that it can be used to express truths about Himself and His love for us.

for Christ and His Bride (some representative texts)

Genesis 2 – The sexual union of man and woman makes them two in one single flesh; their bodily intercourse symbolizes the fullness of their psychological union as a couple.

Hosea 1-2 – The people of Israel as the unfaithful bride of the LORD is used to represent the horror of unfaithfulness to God (adultery symbolizes idolatry). But if Israel repents, God

(in His own abiding fidelity) will take her back as a wife He loves despite her infidelity. See also Ezekiel 16:6-14 and *Song of Songs* (God's joy in His Bride and hers in Him). This fidelity of God to His one bride despite her faults began to clarify to His people the reason for the monogamy expected in human marriage (the doctrine of no remarriage after divorce would only become clear with the teaching of the Messiah Himself).

John 3:28-30 – the use of nuptial imagery by John the Baptist to speak of the kingdom of heaven and of Jesus as the bridegroom of the new Israel the Church

Ephesians 5 – married couples are to model their love on that of Christ and His Church.

1 Corinthians 6:15-17 – on fornication: since a man's union with a woman, even in fornication, makes them two in one flesh, the Christian may not fornicate, for to do so would be to attach Christ's body (whose member the individual Christian is) to the body of a whore.

Revelation 19:6-9, 21:1-2 – on Heaven as the wedding-feast of Christ and His Church

The maternity of the Church (Jerusalem) and our becoming God's children by adoption

Hosea 11:1-4, *Isaiah* 1:2,4, *Deuteronomy* 32: 5-20 – The natural birth of human individuals is attributed to the human parents; God is not called their Father because of creation but by the gift of adoption

Matthew 23:9 – there is only one Father, from whom all fatherhood on earth takes its name. There is only one natural begetting by Him: the eternal generation of His eternal Son and Word (see *John* 1:1-5, 18) and we are made children of the Father by being made the brothers and sisters of Jesus His only-begotten Son (see *Galatians* 4:5 and *Romans* 8:23-30). Unlike human adoptions, this adoption gives a new source of life, the Holy Spirit – see *1 John* and *Romans* 8:13-17

Ephesians 5:25-27 – on the motherhood of the Church. Our adoption takes place in principle when God takes His people as His bride (when Christ died for her on the cross). Yet Christ is nowhere said to beget children of His Church – the sexual union between husband and wife is the best symbol we have for the quality of love between Christ and His Church, and yet Christ's love for the Church is not sexual. Christ's union with her leaves her still a virgin, like the Blessed Mother. She brings forth virginally, as Mary did, the members of Christ's body by the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Christ's free (unmerited) love for His Church

God the Father freely chose His Son's Bride, not on the basis of her merits, and Christ loves her precisely because she is the Father's choice. By His death of the Cross He won her for Himself and made her a bride without spot or wrinkle – her beauty was entirely His gift. He takes great delight in her and seeks to share with her all His gifts, and only through her do His gifts reach the world of men. Chief among these gifts is the Holy Spirit, through whom He guards the Church from harm and keeps her faithful to Himself, pure in doctrine and worship. By the Spirit's action, the Church conceives and bears children for the Father, and through the spirit we are brought to spiritual maturity under the Church's guidance and love.

On her part, the Church needs to be receptive of grace and to respond (not just be passive) to the love Christ has shown her. The missionary apostolate of the Church arises from her urgency in bringing ever more people to the knowledge of Christ and thereby to bring forth for the Father through His Spirit all those whom Christ desires as His brothers. It would be to dishonor Our Lord's fidelity to her if she were to think that all people have access to Him and to

salvation without somehow going through her.

Christ's Fidelity to His Church

Sexual intercourse symbolizes the fidelity that is institutionalized in natural marriage. In the sacrament of matrimony, this natural fidelity comes to symbolize the fidelity of God Himself in a union wholly incapable of dissolution. Christ cannot be faithless: He is faithful to His covenant always, even when we are unfaithful and even when the sins of the children of the Church seem to be many. Knowing our infidelities, He died to deliver us from the evils of our unclean hearts.

Has not the Lord abandoned Israel and married the Church as a new wife? No (see *Romans*): like branches of wild olive trees grafted into the trunk of Israel, we Christians (by being incorporated into Christ) are the new Israel – in the sense that we are made one with the old, as new growth from the same roots and trunk. Further, God in His fidelity wishes to bring back the branches of the Old Israel that have been broken off and graft them in again. There is but one true people of God, and the Church is thus not a new bride but rather Israel grown up, become mature, and bearing children for the Father from among the Gentiles.

The fundamental limitations on bodily union in sexual relations symbolize reverence and awe for one's spouse, who has been created for God and belongs to Him alone. In turn, such reverence signifies Christ's reverence and respect for the freedom of the Church, whose local churches He allows to go her own way (but the Church Universal, like Mary, is by God's special grace indefectible, yet always free). Although a given local church may have to suffer for sins and go into exile from those regions where she is unfaithful, there is always the promise that (as with ancient Israel), if she returns, He will forgive.

Our sexuality in light of the Mysteries of Christ

As members of the Church, all these things apply to each of us individually, to teach us ever more about our own sexuality and to allow us to see things not visible except by faith. Sacramental marriage, for instance, is not just the union of two parties still weak in love trying to help one another, nor a mere contract, but part of a solemn covenant, not so much with each other as with Christ. "Love one another as I have loved you" – husband and wife are called to sacrifice themselves, as far as death if need be, for the true good of one another.

The basic principle of Christian sexual morality: *We ought so to engage in the natural sexual activity of body, mind, and heart that its basic symbolic structure is always preserved and honored, so that this structure may serve rightly to symbolize in turn the relations, in the Spirit of the Father, between Christ and His Church.* This principle applies especially to married couple when it directs them to act in such a way that this meaning and significance is fully preserved in their action and is meant and intended by them, but this principle also contains the full range of all Catholic sexual morality, and it explains much about why the Church has held the positions she has taken on so many different questions. Christ is the norm. His relations to His Father and to His bride the Church form the norms for union among Christians in their marriages and families.

Natural Symbolism for the Misuse of Sex. To restate the above principle, *we may never use sexual activity, the living and naturally symbolic language of marital love, to tell a lie; nor may*

we ever corrupt it by using our sexual powers and organs for actions that are only seemingly sexual but whose meaning has been radically altered. Among the abuses,

– lies, falsehoods, such that one's words or one's body says one thing, but one's mind says something else, e.g., in *adultery*: at least one of the parties has already given him/herself in such a way as to belong to someone else and thus is not able now to bestow him/herself the same way. Even within marriage there can be falsehood, e.g., in an act of intercourse done *without charity*, as when one forces sex upon the other against the other's will, or when one is *inattentive* to the needs and pleasure of the other during intercourse. Likewise, the *pledge involved in remarriage after divorce* is a lie, for its sole basis is a refusal to honor such a pledge made previously. And in *fornication between the unmarried* the word of love in their act says what they do not mean and are not ready or not intending to say; there may even be a contemptuous readiness here simply to use the other person as an object of one's own pleasure and not to regard the person as a person.

– substitute symbols, that is, abuses of the sexual powers that so alter the basic structures of sexual activity as to generate a new and different meaning. The word of love here may be "true" in the sense that the mind and the heart of the person using it may be in accord with what he does sexually, but what he is saying (whether intended or not) is corrupt and evil by the perversion of the very nature of the sexual act, e.g., *masturbation* (a symbol not of love but of frustration, withdrawal from reality, of self-pitying loneliness, of sterility, for what is meant for another is turned into a mechanism for pleasure, tension-relief, or source of genetic material), *homosexuality* (the ostensible symbol of love contains nothing that can truly be received, personally and as abiding gift, by the other person – there is no gift of one's substance for fruitfulness, no openness to the creation of human life, no genuine receptivity). Sexuality implies another whose appeal is in that otherness and who is very different from oneself in body and temper of mind. In both cases, the remedy will require attention to the whole person, for the whole person, and not just the sexual appetite, is ill, often with self-pity, but the capacity for chastity remains if the person is humble enough to want and to seek God's grace. *Contraception*, whatever its mode or variety, likewise substitutes something alien for the symbol of love: physical barriers, chemical withholdings, and so on, so as to enable what seems to be the marital act to be performed in such a way as to negate the most basic effect of sexual power. Symbolically this expresses the sterilization of one's partner or oneself, for the true symbol of love (mutual gift and reception) is excluded.

The Religious Significance of the Misuse of Sex (how divine revelation elevates natural symbols, so as to tell us not just about our own psyche but about God and His love for us)

– the Christian understanding of sexual lies. *Fornication*, for example, symbolizes the old paganisms, for the sexual union of the unmarried cannot represent the God who married Israel and who committed Himself to her alone forever, despite her weaknesses. Rather such a person resembles one of the old pagan deities, who granted his favors by capricious choice. *Adultery* denies the uniqueness of Christ and of His Church, for adultery signifies that there is some other spouse suitable for the Church than the Lord Himself (and thus idolatry), or for the Lord other than the Church (as if He could ignore His marriage-covenant with her for whom He died). While there can be such a thing as *civil divorce* (separation from bed and board if a sufficiently grave crime has been committed), for such separation would correspond to the Exile that made Israel yearn for the Lord and repent, the Lord could never simply abandon His people,

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no matter what their sin, so as to marry another; so too Christian marriage can never be dissolved. *Insensitivity* or *frigidity* is also alien to the Christian, for how could Christ be indifferent or unconcerned with those who love Him and for whom He died?

– the Christian understanding of sexual perversion. As regards *masturbation*, Christ did not come to please Himself, but to seek a bride, a people, at the risk of rejection, and to His own great cost He espoused her on the cross and made her fruitful by giving her His Spirit, to become the mother of all the living. The Church may never refuse missionary efforts without bringing on decay and decline as the result of turning in upon herself. *Male homosexuality* seems to symbolize at the supernatural level man as in love with one like himself, perhaps enamored over the strength of the state and seeking from it the strength to save himself, or secular humanism, for which “the only God of man is man himself” – it is a refusal of the femininity of the Church. Christ did not wed himself to the state or to power, however good such secular things are and however important they are when rightly used, but only to His Church. *Lesbianism* would signify a Church turned away from the Lord to embrace what is like herself: created and dependent for fruitfulness on union with Another who is *not* like herself: in short, nature-worship, the worship of Isis or the Earth-Mother in one or another of the cultural forms this type of religion has taken. Perhaps another candidate is the psychologism of our day that often passes itself for spirituality. Symbolically, *contraceptive intercourse* implies that God might give His grace and pour out His Holy Spirit without permitting them to have their fruit and without granting the Church to bear Him new children. The withholding of self also suggests that one is going through the motions of love, perhaps prompted by genuine love, and yet rendering the love fruitless and inefficacious, refusing to give or to accept the total gift of self.

At both the *natural* and the *supernatural* levels of symbolism, these perversions divert what exists for the generation of new life into a refusal that indicates a certain *lack of hope*, a discouragement as to the future. And all too often in the history of culture there has been seen to be a connection at some level between deviant sexual lust turning into blood-lust; frustration of the life-instincts begets the death-instinct, whether by suicide or a willingness to kill (consider, for instance, David’s adultery with Bathsheba, and his subsequent murder of her husband). Truer lovers, by contrast, have always sensed how much pain their choice may expose them to, and the Christian discovers the full depth of this connection in the cross of Christ. Where we see what Love suffers for the sake of those who are loved. The answer to all sexual problems is to take up this cross, to return in repentance to Christ on his cross, and to accept the suffering that charity will bring to our lives, in great good hope.

Recommended for further reading:

The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality by Paul M. Quay, SJ.

San Francisco: Ignatius, 1985; second edition forthcoming, 2016

The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God by Paul M. Quay, SJ, New York: Peter Lang, 1995

Love and Responsibility by Karol Wojtyła [Pope John Paul II], tr. H. T. Willetts.

New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981 [originally 1960 in Polish]

The Theology of the Body according to Pope John Paul II. Boston: Pauline Books, 1997

Humanae Vitae: A Generation Later by Janet E. Smith. Washington DC: Catholic Univ Pr., 1991