

Comment

All those people who thought that the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was in favour of fornication now stand corrected. So do that even smaller group who expected the Congregation to say something illuminating and helpful about sexual morality. ('In fact it is from sex', we are told, 'that the human person receives the characteristics which . . . make that person a man or a woman.')

The document is a restatement of a respectably ancient conventional Catholic approach to sexual matters, sensibly rejecting the idea that morality depends 'solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives.' This older view is, however, defended on the dubiously relevant grounds that 'all evolution of morals and of every type of life must be kept within the limits imposed by the immutable principles based upon every human person's constitutive elements and essential relations—elements and relations which transcend historical contingency.' This piece of gobbledygook does not really mean that the Curia is laying down conditions for the evolution of every type of life; it means that what made fornication an unreasonable and bad thing a thousand years ago still makes it unreasonable and bad today. Sex has the same 'finality' (purpose) then as now. Insofar as we keep close to human biology this seems fairly obviously true; it is not quite so clear when we begin to talk of 'sexual union before marriage' for, of course, just what counts as marriage, and when it occurs, certainly does not 'transcend historical contingency.' Again, even if we agree that whatever was true of reasonable human behaviour a thousand years ago is true today, it is by no means clear that what was commonly accepted amongst Christians a thousand years ago was true then, and even less clear that it must be binding upon us today. The conventional Christian views on sex were formulated, for example, in the context of a form of marriage from which most Christians today would recoil in horror, both because of its impersonality and because of the status it accorded to women. Christians of those days had some generally accepted rules of thumb about sex and they also had some generally accepted rules of thumb about, say, executing heretics; it is not clear why we should reject one while accepting the authority of the other. Curial congregations in the past have told us that no Christian could be a socialist and that the author of the Pentateuch was none other than Moses himself (to take examples from this century); indeed less than fifty years ago the late Fr Thomas Gilby of our province was in trouble for teaching that the rhythm method was an acceptable form of birth control.

It simply will not do to say that 'with the Holy Spirit's assistance she

(the Church) ceaselessly preserves and transmits without error the truths of the moral order' at least it will not do unless you distinguish very sharply between what Curial congregations have to say and what the Church says. Are we seriously expected to take it as part of the gospel Good News that 'every violation of this (sexual) order is objectively serious (i.e. all sexual sins incur damnation unless there be some special subjective excuse) simply because the Inquisition decreed this on March 18th, 1666? Yet this is the 'authority' appealed to in this document. It is depressing to see that questioning about 'grave sin' is confidently said to arise 'especially among less fervent Christians.

The question is: do we regard the Church as a movement living by the Holy Spirit which, in the course of its history, through disputes and many mistakes and disagreements, through hard experience and trying to learn from anyone, will tend broadly speaking to talk sense about what is or is not reasonable human behaviour—a movement which when it conflicts with a recently fashionable teaching is pretty likely to be right—or do we see the Church as having already in some occult way worked out the answers to most moral problems.

Christians who have thought about the matter at all will have recognised that a great deal of information about the psychology, anthropology and sociology of sex, not to mention the spirituality of sex, is available to us now which was not available to our ancestors. This does not make us wiser than they were, but we would show ourselves decidedly less wise if we did not take it into account. We have had centuries of literary exploration into sexual relationships (the kind of thing, no doubt, that the Monsignori of the Vatican dismiss for its 'so-called aesthetic purposes'). Augustine and Aquinas would never have dreamt of ignoring this source of truth had it been before them. It is because of all this that we cannot be quite so confident as we might once have been about the precise 'finality' of sex. The more we consider it the more we recognise its mystery, the more we acquire a humility (an attitude equally missing in *Penthouse* and in the Sacred Congregation—both seem quite sure what sex is all about) the more tentative we become in moralising. It is one thing to condemn a frivolous and commercialised approach to sex as a form of human exploitation only to be expected from bourgeois society in its decline; it is quite another to suppose that the rather simplified theorising of a pre-bourgeois age will serve as a corrective.

The puzzling thing is why the Curia thought it worthwhile publishing this non-contribution to the exploration of moral theology. I am afraid that the answer may well lie in a thoroughly sinister little note towards the end. 'It is the Bishop's mission to see that a sound doctrine enlightened by faith and directed by the Magisterium of the Church' (by this they clearly mean themselves) 'is taught in the Faculties of Theology and in the Seminaries.' A harmless platitude, perhaps; but just possibly the prelude to yet another witch hunt.

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