

Human Relationships, Celibacy and Sexuality

by Enda McDonagh

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In the context of this colloquium it may be as well to begin by indicating the purpose and scope of an opening paper on this topic. The topic itself is so wide that any adequate treatment would presuppose expertise and experience far beyond the range of the author and perhaps beyond any single individual's range. My approach is necessarily conditioned by my professional interest and experience, a moral theologian who is, in fact, a celibate by choice. The more precise meaning of these qualifications will, I hope, emerge later.

I can at once outline my approach and summarize my position by saying that I regard the celibate state as a form of human relationship in the way I regard the married state; that I see it as having in common with all other human relationships a sexual dimension; and that I am naturally concerned as a Christian theologian with the Christian meaning of human relationships and their sexual dimension.

1. *Human Relationships*

It may appear a little unusual to begin a discussion of Christian celibacy in terms of human relationships. In its more conventional presentation, whether in terms of 'eunuchs for the kingdom of God' (Mt. 19) or of nuns as 'brides of Christ' the emphasis was on the 'relationship to God'. It is perhaps one more (overdue) example of how we have begun to translate 'God-talk' into 'man-talk', but it does not need to have the reductionist consequences which some such translations involve. Whatever its fashionableness the procedure will in this instance, I hope, lead to a more careful consideration of the full meaning of Christian celibacy, including its 'relationship to God' dimension.

So many different models and methods are possible in which to discuss human relationships that again one is forced to choose in a way that can only be partly justified. As a moral theologian I have found in recent years that I can work usefully on many problems with the particular model which I now offer. It is clearly not the only one and it does not claim to be the best one for the matter in hand. It simply happens to be the best one I have.

Human relationships arise evidently between people, but occur between groups of people as well as between individuals and, indeed, between the individual and the group. I am not concerned, then, with the kind of I-Thou model usually associated with the name of Martin Buber. This is quite important in discussion of human

relations in general, but too often discussion is confined to individualist terms which considerably diminish its value. Even the I-Thou relationship has to be set in a social and historical context to be understood. It is a focussing of two people on one of their connexions, but they exist in a series of overlapping connexions which enter into their very constitution. They are not separable from their social and historical contexts in this particular relationship. The person to group and group to group interact in this fashion also; their other relationships, in so far as they are constitutive of them, and in the manner in which they are relevant to this particular interaction, play a part in the relationship itself. If celibacy constitutes a particular way of relating to people it will enter into all relationships in some way. But that is more a matter for later discussions.

The model of 'human relationships' which I prefer at present derives from my analysis of morality as a human phenomenon. In the concrete situation involving individuals or groups I see the moral obligation, or as I prefer to describe it, the moral call affecting both poles as a summons to mutual recognition, respect and the further concrete response appropriate to the particular situation. So in this actual situation I see our mutual calls in terms of author/lecturer and readers/audience summoning us to that mutual recognition and respect which takes for me the form of trying to explain as carefully as I can in language and concepts intelligible to you and in a way relevant to the theme of our meeting what I understand by the sexual dimensions of human relationships and for you the effort to listen/read as attentively and intelligently as possible.

When I press the implications of this model I find that underlying the call is the notion of the human participants as gift to one another; gift in the basic sense of being given to one another because neither is the creation of the other, and in the more developed sense of being potentially enriching for one another. They encounter one another as different worlds which have common or continuous or shared factors, otherwise there could be no communication or recognition. But ultimately they are irreducible, the one to the other, and constitute irreducibly different centres of understanding, deciding, acting, relating, loving. They are different centres of creativity and so potentially at least enriching. And this gift-call structure (in my model) operates at the various levels of human existence or in its various dimensions.

Here I am confronted with what seems an equally inescapable component of that model of the human interchange. Gift-call must be balanced by the fact that men are also threat-provoking-fear and may be experienced as such in any situation, including this one. It is and has been common for me to experience readers/audience as threat and not simply as gift. The communication of my world may prove incomprehensible or inadequate or entirely mistaken and foolish. Their comments and questions may quickly

expose these deficiencies and I may find my world gradually destroyed. I have also no doubt that what I say is sometimes experienced as threat by my audience/readers lest their world be seriously disrupted rather than enriched and developed. The situation in the Church at present (and more particularly in the debate on the meaning of celibacy and its relation to the ministry) far too frequently betrays signs of the dominance of threat over gift in the attitude of the differing groups to one another.

The threat element cannot be easily explained or overcome. It betrays a failure collectively and individually to *recognize* one another as gift and so to *respect* and *respond*. It cannot be entirely eliminated from human relationships; but the moral call, which I have spelled out in three moments as recognition, respect and response, involves a deeper call to allow gift to predominate over threat. This deeper call then enters into each of the more specific calls; it requires continuous positive response although this will be for the most part implicit; such positive response does not finally eliminate the threat element any more than continuous negative response finally eliminates the gift element in our human moral encounters; it may issue in a predominant moral stance and its implied life-style which will then be normally expressed in a reaction to others in the particular situation. These others will in accordance with the predominant and basic stance be treated predominantly as gift or threat.

The human being in relationship has a historical as well as a social dimension. As individual or group the relating subject in the present bears interiorly the past in experience and reaction to experience while he confronts the future. All human relationships have a time dimension; they are in process, developing or declining. They become more human as that past is more fully understood, mastered, appropriated; as the future is more deliberately shaped or created. The limitations on this appropriation of the past and creation of the future cannot be fully explored here but do serve to draw attention to the cosmic dimension of man in relationship. His continuity with the universe is a basic condition of his human existence and his capacity for relationship. History should not be reduced to evolution, biological or sociological, but the conditions for human decision and the development based on it cannot escape man's cosmic situation and the physical/biological components together with their psychological/sociological counterparts which form a constitutive element in him.

Man-in-relationship is man-in-society-in-history-in-cosmos. He is the subject to be considered in any particular relationship. Neglect of any one of these factors or their treatment as accidental modifications and not constitutive elements, obscures or distorts one's understanding of the relationship. One or other element may be more emphasized at any one time but they are all relevant all the

time. In considering the gift-call combined with the threat-fear structure of the relationship these different dimensions of human existence, which may distinguished but never separated, all play an important role. An individual's social role, for example, may be considered gift or threat to one in the particular situation if, for example, he be doctor or bus-conductor or guerrilla revolutionary. A particular group may, given its historical record as colonial government or religious order or university faculty, be viewed with the same ambiguity by different people in differing sets of relationships. The physical condition of the starving or the pretty or of simply the male or female can affect the structure of any relationship in the same gift-call/threat-fear terms. That the relationship should develop morally, the persons or groups involved are called to identify and promote the gift aspect at the expense of the threat.

The identification and promotion of the gift aspect at the expense of the threat may be re-expressed as the *recognition* of the other (individual/group) in his true otherness (realized and potential); the *respecting* of that otherness in its unique character as a (real and potential) centre of understanding and feeling, deciding, acting and loving and the *response* to that other in the channel established by this particular context or situation. This other-recognition is at the same time self-identification. By distinguishing the other as other one distinguishes or identifies the self. This is a continuing historical process in the different situations in any one relationship and in the complex of all one's relationships and it operates in the various dimensions already discussed. Other-respect similarly involves self-acceptance in these various dimensions and in the continuing process of history. Finally, other-response appropriate to the situation involves self-development even to the extent of self-creation by bringing into realization aspects of the self which were hitherto only potential and perhaps not even recognized as such. Critical situations and the demands involved reveal and realize potentialities which one may never have suspected that one had. It is in the process of other-recognition/self-identification, other-respect/self-acceptance, and other-response/self-creation that the mutual enrichment of other and self can take place and the mutual threat be diminished. In the continuing process of relating the individual (or group) can acquire, as I said above, a certain stance in behaviour or basic orientation which makes him predominantly gift-conscious and other-centred or predominantly threat-conscious and self-centred. These are not irreversible, of course; they are not easily or quickly acquired; they can be strengthened or weakened by particular opposing activities or even series of activities. They do, however, normally find expression in one's relationships and relating activities once they have been firmly acquired, and it takes time and effort to reverse one and acquire the other. In the actual world nobody

can feel secure about his gift-consciousness and other-centredness; it needs to be continually renewed in face the easier drift to 'threat' and 'self'.

II. *The Sexual Dimension*

What, then, are the implications for sexuality of what I have been saying?

The man-in-relationship whom I have been discussing as man-in-community-in-history-in-cosmos is sexually determined as male or female. This does not apply simply to him as a cosmic being in continuity with the physical, or more specifically biological world. His sexuality is also an aspect of his social and historical characters; of man therefore in his full relational capacity and actuality. The sexual differentiation cannot be reduced to biology any more than biology can be ignored. The social-historical situation provides the matrix in which the biological is personalized, that is, plays its constitutive role in the emergence and development of the particular and unique world of this man or this woman. It is not merely a qualifying role but a constitutive one for the person himself and for all his relationships. Some important general consequences follow from this.

In himself and in all his relationships the person is sexual. He cannot behave or regard himself as if he could abstract from his sexuality. In reacting or meeting with others he/she is always man or woman. The interaction always reflects this, even in situations in which the medium of exchange seems quite remote. I always feel differently and, I think, behave differently when addressing a single sex audience as compared with a mixed one, or when addressing men as compared with women and this even on such neutral matters as the relation of St Ambrose's *De Officiis* to Cicero's. In such situations the biological-sexual interpreted in the sense of genital does not appear, but the biological in its social-historical (cultural) character, as part of self, does. What *kind* of 'part of self' is further determined by the identification, acceptance and creation of self as a sexual being which has already been achieved. In the light of the earlier analysis of relationship this sexual self-appropriation depends on the recognition of, respect for and response to the other as a sexual being which occurs in the history of one's relationships. The sexual aspect of these relationships varies as I have said from relationship to relationship and from situation to situation but it is inescapable. This should not lead one to regard it primarily as a burden or a threat. Indeed, according to my position, it is primarily gift or ought to be. The permanent call in this area of human relating as in all others is to enable the gift to triumph over the threat, although the one can never entirely eliminate the other.

Chastity is to be defined then as the virtue whereby one's sexuality in relationship operates predominantly as gift and not as threat. It

can do this if one recognizes the other in his/her sexuality as gift and so identifies the self sexually; if one respects the other sexually and so accepts the self; if one responds to the other in his/her sexual condition with the response appropriate to the particular situation and so creates or develops the self. The chaste person is the one who integrates his sexual endowment/gift into his relationships in this way, not the one who seeks to repress or ignore it. This will be his predominant tendency but not his exclusive one. There will always be admixture of threat and self-centredness conflicting with gift and other-centredness. And one may move from one predominant tendency or basic stance to another in the sexual area as much as in any other. Chastity then is a continuing call to recognize, develop and integrate one's sexuality in the love and service of others. It is not something one has and (with luck) hangs on to but a life-task.

So far I have been treating sexuality as a general component of all human relationships, which it is. It is necessary to apply what I have said (however briefly and inadequately) to two obvious categories of human sexual relationship in which sexuality finds a more specific expression. Marriage is naturally considered the primary relationship in the discourse. My observations here may omit much that is said better elsewhere while I concentrate on aspects which arise from my own approach to human relationships. In marriage sexuality is also both gift and threat. One does not need very much experience of marriage difficulties to realize how threatening the sexual-genital relationship itself may be or how enriching it may also be in face of other difficulties. And the gift aspect is not easily, quickly and fully realized. It involves a continuing call and response. As a human and sexual relationship marriage is or ought to be continually becoming and developing. It provides a life-task. And it is not an isolated atomic relationship divorced from the whole series of overlapping relationships with their sexual dimensions in which everybody lives. Again, it may be that too much emphasis is placed on the exclusivity of the marriage relationship in its sexual connotation, ignoring the sexual (admittedly different) connotation of all one's human relationships. The uniqueness of marriage sexually should not lead one to ignore the wider sexuality of all human relationships.

Celibacy is also a human and sexual relationship, at least in the general sense of qualifying one's relationships sexually in a particular way. One is free to relate and so to love but one is not free for a particular kind of sexual relationship, marriage or its equivalent. The surrender of this particular freedom cannot eliminate the wider sexual dimension of all one's relationships and does not release one from the obligation of identifying, accepting, developing and integrating one's sexuality in recognizing, respecting and responding to the other. As celibacy is freedom to love in its own way, it is freedom to love sexually as there is no other human form of loving

and relating. The surrender of marriage provides a new context and so a different freedom for love but that must not be divorced from the permanent sexual character of man. Here, too, sexuality operates in relationship in accordance with the gift-threat structure. Just as one might too easily conclude that sexuality in marriage was all gift, so one might conclude that in celibacy it was all threat. For all the contextual and expression differences the task remains for the celibate also of enabling the gift to triumph over the threat, and it is a life-task. Celibacy as form of chastity is not something one has, but something one must (painfully) achieve through the process of love and service in which one's sexuality finds its particular expression.

III. *Christian significance*

I do not presume to offer any developed and comprehensive Christian understanding of the human phenomenon of sexuality. In line with the understanding of human relationships which I have outlined, I would draw attention to the necessity here as elsewhere of understanding human sexuality as a Christian, by attending as fully as possible to the human phenomenon and then seeking a deeper interpretation in the light of Creation, Incarnation, Salvation and Consummation as understood in Jesus Christ.

That fuller attention to the phenomenon of sexuality places it firmly in the discussion of man-in-relationship as person, man-in-community-in-history-in-cosmos, involved in gift-threat interchange with his fellow-man. How the doctrines listed above confirm and interpret more deeply this understanding of man may be indicated very briefly. Creation and Incarnation reveal the depth of the gift character of this person, in continuity with the cosmos and part of it, yet endowed with a dignity above the rest of the cosmos, which has divine origin and significance. This particular dignity not only involves some special relationship to God but hinges on the capacity for human relationship itself and is directly connected with sexual differentiation and love (Genesis 1, 2). The social context of all relations which are, of course, socially constitutive themselves, pervades the whole of God's dealings with mankind in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. That tradition itself is a history which is given its guarantee of meaning as well as its thrust and power in the Consummation already realized in Jesus Christ but still to be accomplished in time by men. The pervasiveness of the threat to this accomplishment, the threat which all men are to one another, becomes in this understanding the universality of sin. The present and ultimate triumph of gift over threat is the achievement of Jesus Christ extended to the rest of us by the presence of the Spirit. Human relationships in their sexual character as gift and threat are assured this saving power of Christ, to the extent indeed that the Catholic Church speaks of the most distinctive and critical of human relationships from the sexual aspect—marriage, as a sacrament.

The crucial way of salvation, of the triumph of gift over threat and of the fruitful, loving unity of mankind, must not be obscured. The other-centredness which is demanded in all relationships and assumes intimate in depth marriage, remains, in a world also characterized by threat and self-centredness, a way of dying to self often in a painful manner. *It remains a way of the Cross.* In quite a different fashion the loving life of the celibate is exposed to the danger of selfishness only to be overcome by his taking the cross as it is offered to him. As far as cross-bearing is concerned and precisely in the area of sexuality, there seems no compelling reason to believe that the married will get off more lightly than the celibate. In the world of gift and threat, however, the celibate's surrender of the fulfilment of one aspect of his gift can, in combination with the married's affirmation of that precisely as gift for others, and in the context of joyful generous community service, bear witness to the power of God in Christ as he invites all men to enjoy the Consummation already achieved in Christ.

Notes after Foucault¹

by Bernard Sharratt

'... the slightest alteration in the relation between man and the signifier... changes the whole course of history by modifying the lines which anchor his being.

It is in precisely this way that Freudianism is seen to have founded an intangible but radical revolution. No need to collect witnesses to the fact: everything involving not just the human sciences, but the destiny of man, politics, metaphysics, literature, art, advertising, propaganda, and through these even the economy, everything has been affected.²

Lacan: The Unconscious as Language

The original 'slightest alteration' underlying Freud's intangible but radical revolution can be conveniently dated to 1898, when Freud, travelling to Herzegovina, turned to ask a travelling companion whether he had ever seen the famous frescoes of the 'Four Last Things' in Orvieto Cathedral, painted by —: the painter's name would not come; 'Botticelli' and 'Boltraffio' came to mind instead. Freud's account of why he had failed to recall the right name, 'Signorelli', contains the core of his later theories. 'Signorelli' had

¹This article began as a review of Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Gallimard, 1966; English translation: *The Order of Things*, Tavistock, 1970.

²Lacan, *L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient, ou la raison depuis Freud*, *Écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, 1966, p. 527.