

## Luke Gormally

Before addressing the specific topic of Catholic sexual morality, it may be helpful if I outline some very general assumptions which inform the exposition.

First, we should understand any systematic study of morality as a study of the conditions and requirements of human flourishing. We flourish as human beings by realising in our lives some share of the basic goods of human existence: life itself, the knowledge of truth, the appreciation of beauty, skills of work and play, justice and friendship in our relations with others, and friendship with God.

Secondly, we grow in our ability to flourish as human beings, and the most important feature of this growth is the development of dispositions to choose rightly - dispositions to readily respond to people and situations and the challenges and opportunities they present in ways which make for our flourishing and fulfilment. Dispositions to choose well are traditionally called virtues. Opposed to the virtues are dispositions to choose badly, called vices: tendencies to respond to situations in ways which do not make for our deepened sharing in basic goods, but rather damage, destroy and distort our capacities to share in those goods. When this happens we are damaged and diminished as human beings. Certain kinds of choice always have this effect.

Thirdly, if virtues are dispositions to choose and act well, and vices dispositions to choose and act badly, choice itself is an exercise of the ability freely and decisively to settle on

a course of action intended to realise what we think of as good. Of course we may be correct or mistaken in thinking something good. A choice to act with a view to achieving a certain purpose, which appears to us in some way good, does not merely bring about a state of affairs, more or less external to us, in which that purpose is realised, but also, and perhaps more importantly, serves to shape our dispositions, so that in consequence we become more inclined to make that type of choice. This shaping of our dispositions is what we call the formation of character.

Fourthly, we should consider why it is that people overlook the importance of virtue and vice. One of the reasons why people have in recent centuries failed to see the central importance of virtue and vice is because of underlying views about the relationship between emotion and feeling, on the one hand, and rational choice, on the other. One set of views about the character of this relationship rests on mistakes about the nature of human beings. Human beings have been seen as fundamentally divided between a part characterised by animal passion, which can be curbed, constrained and channelled, but which is inherently irrational, and, on the other hand, reason, which does not set the motivational agenda, does not determine what is to be found attractive or repellant, but helps curb and channel passion and works out the best ways of achieving what we are drawn to achieve. According to this picture of human beings, we are not moved by an intelligent sense of what is good, but by more or less tameable

brute impulse. This particular dualistic picture of human life has influenced much secular morality in the modern period (but not just secular morality).

Fifthly, we need to understand that the tradition of moral understanding which emphasises the importance of the virtues and vices rests on a unitary view of human life. According to this view our spontaneous emotional responses are inwardly transformable precisely by our understanding of what is good and worthwhile, and what is evil or worthless. Our emotions are given an inner direction by understanding, and are not just brute impulses to be curbed. False attraction can be transformed into attraction for what is genuinely good, and our aversions can be made reasonable from having been unreasonable.

### **Sex and virtue**

I have said that we need a range of specific virtues if we are to choose to act well in ways which make for our fulfilment as human beings. What do we need in the way of virtue when the choices which face us arise from sexual desire which engages our bodily sexual powers?

It helps to put the Christian answer to this question into perspective if we begin by considering a characteristically modern response to it. It is a commonplace among many influential contemporary secular philosophers to deny that there is any distinctive human good at issue in human sexual activity. If there is no such good then no distinctive dispositions are required in us if we are to act well in regard to sex. According to this view, sexual activity no more requires distinctive moral dispositions in us than does driving a motor car. In both kinds of activity considerations of justice and prudence are relevant. We

should not endanger others when we drive, we should respect their space, we should avoid killing people. And in a similar way, in sexual activity we should avoid endangering people by, for example, getting them pregnant, or giving them AIDS, and we should respect their rights over their bodies and not assault them. On this view the objection to rape is that it is common assault. The vice which makes for most assaults is anger. But the vice which makes men into rapists is not simply anger, even if anger tends to be involved. The vice, the bad disposition which makes a man a rapist, is lust - a disorder in our feelings and desires in connection with sex.

Conventional secular wisdom, according to which you can do what you like with your sexual capacities, providing you do not harm non-consenting parties to the activity, is completely at a loss in face of what is specific to sexual disorder -- the vice of lust in its multiple manifestations. Doing what you like can leave you in such a distinctly disordered condition that you are not rightly disposed to respect the solitary secular injunction not to harm the non-consenting. The fact that there is a disordered disposition specific to sex, the vice of lust, argues the need for a good disposition, a virtue, specific to the sphere of sexual feeling, desire and activity.

The inclination of the secular philosopher to say that there is no virtue specific to the sexual sphere follows, as I remarked, from his denial that there is any specific good at issue in sexual activity. This denial is one of the glaring hoaxes of modern secular liberal philosophy when you come to consider it. The secular philosopher talks as if the begetting of children were only contingently connected with

sex, something that happens to be the case as things presently stand, but something we don't need to take into consideration in making sense of sex in human lives. This position is all the more baffling when one considers the tendency of many thinkers to regard human beings as just very complicated and sophisticated animals.

If we ask a scientist studying animal forms and behaviour what is sex for in the life of animals he will answer that it clearly exists for the purposes of reproduction. The fundamental good that sex secures is not primarily a good of the individual but a good of the species, realised in the generation of new members of that species. Sexual activity presents an obvious contrast with an activity like eating. If we ask 'why do animals eat?' the obvious answer is 'To preserve their lives'; but if we ask 'why do animals copulate?' the obvious answer is 'To preserve the species'. Each answer gives the natural point or purpose of the activity. The built-in focus of sex as a natural activity is outside the individuals who engage in it. That is why sex is the great engine of social life in animals.

Human beings are indeed animals, but we are not merely more complicated than other animals. We are animals who can understand the meaning of our abilities and give them a depth of meaning which other animals are incapable of realising (in the sense of making real) in their lives. But sex will not bear the weight of having meanings assigned to it which are at odds with the fundamental point of sex or which seek to displace the central significance of sex in human life. That central significance is similar to its significance in the life of other animals.

It ought to be clear what the basic

point of sex is in human life. The facts about sexual differentiation and sexual complementarity show that it exists for the sake of reproduction. Such differentiation and complementarity are required neither for sexual pleasure nor for sex understood purely as a means of expressing affection.

The connection between human sexual activity and the begetting of children is not one that we invent; fertilisation is a natural causal consequence of normal intercourse. Because there is this natural, built-in connection between sex and the begetting of children, our chosen sexual activity necessarily involves us in some relationship to the good of the transmission of human life. We are involved in some relationship to this good, even when we deliberately make our sexual activity non-generative, either by doing something to it beforehand, or by deviating from the normal form of the activity, or by doing something afterwards.

If the human good which is at issue in chosen sexual activity is the good of the transmission of human life, what is required if we are to be well-disposed towards that good? The transmission of human life is not a purely biological activity, as though fertilisation, pregnancy and birth were sufficient to accomplish the task. For the task is necessarily also a task of rearing children so that they develop in ways which enable them, through their own free choices, to flourish as human beings. So they need to be nurtured in a sense of human dignity, in a true sense of the meaning of life and of the human goods which are worth pursuing, and in the beginnings of the virtues.

The scope of the good which is at issue in human sexual activity is, then, broad

and deep in the commitment it requires. Exactly what commitment it requires I shall shortly discuss. But at this juncture I would like to make two crucial observations about the disposition, the virtue, which human beings will need if they are to choose and act well in regard to sex. Recall that a specific disposition is required because of the specific good which is at issue in sexual activity. Recall that this good is the good of the child, and that the good of the child is secured not just by his or her begetting. The first observation is that because children are of quite central importance to any human community it is not possible for us to remain indifferent to whether human beings possess whatever virtue is required for the good of children. The well-being of each of us depends on the common good -- that complex of conditions necessary to human flourishing. It is particularly clear in our day and age, when there is so much evidence of child-abuse, that the virtue of chastity is not an optional extra for any human being if we are to secure a basic condition of the flourishing of children. The second observation is that, given we have an objective conception of the good of children we will have an objective account of what counts as the virtue we need if we are to respect and honour the distinctive good which is at issue in sexual activity.

Let me then approach the question of what is required for virtue in regard to sex -- what is required for chastity -- from some consideration of what is required for the good of children. Fundamental to the good of the child, I remarked, is the child's sense of his or her dignity. Now human dignity belongs to people in the first place in virtue of their humanity and independently of achievements or defects. What a child needs at the

outset, then, is to be born into a relationship the character of which is conducive to recognition of the dignity of the child. This is what the institution of marriage fundamentally exists to serve, more particularly as that institution is understood in Christian teaching. For the human reality of indissoluble commitment which the grace of marriage creates and fosters involves a distinctive type of personal commitment: in marriage a man and a woman unreservedly commit themselves to a self-giving love, in which each is treated by the other as irreplaceable. Marriage vows demand a very fundamental commitment to recognition of the dignity of one's spouse whatever the circumstances which overtake him or her.

When Catholic tradition, taking up the language of St Augustine, says that the primary end or purpose of marriage is procreation it is in fact saying that what fundamentally makes sense of the peculiar institution of marriage, with its peculiar interpersonal commitment, is the good of the transmission of human life. That is what makes sense of a sexual relationship acquiring the character of a marital relationship. For it is the good of children which requires that a husband and wife are committed to an unconditional acceptance of each other, and that their intercourse should be the expression of this unconditional love. For when that is the case the child who is conceived is conceived precisely as the fruit of an unconditional love. The child, therefore, belongs within a community of persons founded on the unconditional love which is consummated in marital intercourse, and it is only such a love which is adequate to the dignity of the child. In entering the relationship of husband and wife precisely as the fruit of an unconditional love the child has a

claim to be accepted unconditionally. It is only such acceptance which is adequate to the true dignity of the child. As the fruit of unconditional parental love the child enters the relationship recognisably equal in dignity to the parents.

What explains the distinctive character of marriage and the character of the commitment of husband and wife is, then, procreation understood in the broad personalist sense in which Catholic tradition has understood that good. The basic good of children is realised, St Augustine says, by "the receiving of them lovingly, the nourishing of them humanely, the educating of them religiously." [*De Genesi ad litt.*,9.7]

When the Church has spoken of procreation as the 'primary purpose' of marriage she has not been talking about what she supposes must be uppermost in the mind of a couple as they contemplate marriage, still less what she supposes must be uppermost in their minds in engaging in intercourse. What talk of 'primary purpose' does is to identify the fundamental explanation for why we have the institution of marriage: namely, to do justice to the good which is at issue in sexual activity, and thereby to make proper human sense of sex. Marriage is not about providing a socially approved context for just any kind of sexual activity which might be taken to be expressive of affection between consenting adults. If that is what we think sex is about we don't need marriage in order to go ahead with it.

It should be clear that as a race we need human beings to be disposed to marital sex rather than recreational sex: that is, we need it to be the case that human beings recognise that virtue in

the matter of sex requires that its genital expression be the expression of an unconditional love between husband and wife, open to the gift of life. It is because we need human beings to be well-disposed to marital sex (for the good of children) that a disposition to engage in sexual activities which are deliberately made non-generative is to be counted as a vice; such a disposition aspires to make sense of sex precisely to the exclusion of children.

The insistence that sex can be genuinely fulfilling only if it is marital sex is at odds both with the strongly individualistic outlook common in our culture and with the privatization of sex: the tendency to think that each of us must make sense for ourselves of sex, in accordance with whatever inclinations and attitudes we happen to have. But sex in human as in other animals is a primary engine of social life and if the dispositions we bring to it are not conducive to the good of children then they will have a pervasively destructive effect on social relations.

The insistence that good sex has to be marital sex is not a procrustean formula designed to destroy the possibility of individual fulfilment. In choosing to make their sexual activity truly marital, a man and a woman are thereby acting in ways which make for their own fulfilment. For, firstly, when two people undertake to treat each other as irreplaceable, and seek to give themselves unreservedly to each other, what they are committed to is a particular kind of friendship which, like all true friendships, involves loving the good of the other as one's very own good. So, insofar as the relationship is a true friendship it makes for the flourishing of each. And, secondly, since the friendship of

husband and wife is essentially open to the gift of new life which embodies their love, they are involved in a relationship which of its nature demands that they transcend selfishness and egoism. Insofar as they do transcend selfishness and egoism in raising a family their love is strengthened and deepened. So the structure of the marital relationship as essentially open to children is the kind of structure which makes for the true fulfilment of husband and wife. That kind of relationship, whether or not it is fruitful in begetting children, is clearly a good in itself.

But what is required for intercourse to be open to the gift of life? There was a period during the 1960s when it seemed to me, along with many other people, that acceptance of the belief that marital intercourse should be open to the gift of life did not require one to hold that contraceptive intercourse was absolutely impermissible. There was an argument then current, referred to by Pope Paul VI as 'The Principle of Totality' (in section 3 of *Humanae Vitae*), which sought to defend some limited recourse to contraceptive intercourse within marriage, as serving the unitive function of intercourse, provided the marriage was also responsibly open to the gift of new life, at times when the parents felt they were well placed to care for another child.

I best remember from the debates of that time the analogy developed by the Dominican theologian, Fr Herbert McCabe, between marital sex and football. When you are playing football, he pointed out, you don't have to aim all your shots at the opponent's goal: occasional back-passes make sense as part of a general strategy aimed at winning. Similarly, he argued, contraceptive intercourse can

belong within a pattern of sexual activity which overall is open to the gift of life. So, the requirement of openness to the gift of life is seen as adequately satisfied by the overall pattern of the marital relationship, into which children are accepted when parents feel ready for them.

Theologians who argued in this way at the time thought they were simply making room for contraceptive intercourse within marriage, but it soon became clear that their position made it impossible to offer a consistent defence of the Church's traditional teaching about the virtue of chastity as it is to be lived outside as well as inside marriage. That teaching requires all chosen sexual activity to be marital and it requires that for it to be truly marital every act of sexual intercourse should be of the generative kind, i.e. should not be deliberately rendered sterile in some way.

Why every act? To understand the answer we need to recall one of the preliminary points I made about moral development. Our chosen actions do not merely bring about effects external to us, they also form our dispositions and character. If I lie, I thereby make myself a person who is apt to lie; I undermine in myself recognition of the need to respect the good of truth when I engage in the activity of stating what is the case. Similarly, if I engage in contraceptive intercourse I undermine in myself the disposition to recognise that the good of sex is essentially connected with children. I act on the assumption that it has a separate meaning which makes good and adequate sense of it. This is to act as if there is a true good of sexual activity apart from marriage. It is important to get this point clear. To engage in contraceptive intercourse is to choose to make that intercourse sterile, in

circumstances in which it might otherwise have proved fertile, precisely for the sake of having intercourse. One thereby chooses to suppress the significance of sex as generative -- as a type of activity apt for the procreation of children. Of course, there are a number of dimensions to the significance of sex in human life; sexual intercourse will often, for example, (though certainly not always) be expressive of strongly felt affection. But if one rejects its significance as generative one is in effect saying that other distinct dimensions to its significance in themselves make sexual intercourse worthy of choice. And that is to say that sex which is not marital sex is worthy of choice. So if one rejects the Church's teaching that contraceptive intercourse is wrong then the logic of that rejection is that sex which is not marital sex is worthy of choice. On that view there ceases to be a specific good which is to be honoured in our sexual activity, and with the loss of the recognition of that good goes the *raison d'être* of chastity. When that happens in the mind of a Christian he's inevitably hard put to find grounds for distinguishing his view of virtue in the matter of sex from the view of the secular thinker for whom sex for the sake of pleasure or as an expression of affection requires no distinctive virtue.

This effort of elucidation brings us to the central statement of *Humanae Vitae* in section 12: "The doctrine that the Magisterium of the Church has often explained is this: there is an unbreakable connection between the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning [of the conjugal act] and both are inherent in the conjugal act. This connection was established by God, and man is not permitted to break it through his own volition."

Sexual activity lacks integrity, lacks the wholeness it is meant to have, unless there is inseparably a procreative and unitive meaning to what is done. Why does generative behaviour have to have a unitive meaning? Because human generation needs to be integrated with the commitment to self-giving love. Human generative behaviour is given, through the sense of this behaviour as unreserved self-giving love, the depth of meaning it needs to have if those engaging in it are to be adequately disposed to the good of children. Why does unitive sexual behaviour have to have a generative / procreative meaning? Because if it doesn't this can only be because we have sought to make sense of sex to the exclusion of the very good which is the distinctive point of sexual activity. And in so doing we dissociate sex in our own lives from the good which demands that self-transcendence of egoism through which the commitment of the couple is deepened in authentic love.

This integration of the unitive and the procreative meanings of sexual activity is possible precisely because of what I earlier referred to as the unitary character of our lives. One of the most obvious facts of sexual experience is that we are very easily prone to the disintegration of our humanity in sexual activity. Why this should be so is obvious. There are three aspects to sexual activity: it is reproductive; it produces pleasurable sensations; it can unite two persons, setting up a bond between them. These three aspects can be related to the three levels of human life -- the organic, the animal, and the rational. For every kind of organism can reproduce; every kind of animal has sensation; and, in virtue of our distinctive abilities of intellect and will, we can enter into different kinds of interpersonal relationship. People's

views of sexuality differ in fundamental ways according to whether they see these three aspects of sexual activity as essentially linked or not essentially linked. They are not of course essentially linked in the sense of being practically inseparable. One can have pleasurable sensations without doing anything which is at all apt either for reproduction or for personal bonding, as when one masturbates. One can reproduce nowadays without any personal interaction with the other parent: this separation occurs with artificial insemination by donor and with 'in vitro' fertilisation. But the question about whether these three aspects are essentially linked is a question about whether they can be separated consistent with respect for the good of sex, or whether they must be kept united. *Humanae Vitae* insists that the teaching of the Church is that they must be kept united in all our chosen sexual activity. Our bodily behaviour must be adequately and properly expressive of the kind of relationship we enter into when we enter into an authentic sexual relationship. If, in our choices, we hold together the different aspects of sex (the generative, the pleasurable and the unitive) we show that we recognise that our humanity is personal at every level, through and through. But if we dissociate one aspect from another we depersonalise sex, making the body a mere instrument of our dominative, manipulative wills.

### Reflections on two objections

Two objections are often thought to count against the reasonableness of the Church's teaching. They are:

1. How can sexual intercourse be said to be essentially generative when most acts of intercourse are infertile? And if it cannot be essentially generative then

the inseparability thesis collapses. 2. The distinction between contraception and natural family planning (NFP) is a distinction which marks no morally significant difference; both are ways of ensuring that one does not have a child. Nothing of moral significance hangs on whether one does this by artificial or natural means. Since the Church accepts NFP it is inconsistent in rejecting contraception.

Each of these objections is worth discussing for the light one can thereby throw on the teaching of the Church.

(1) Certain types of behaviour have what we might call a built-in significance because of the role such behaviour plays in human life. We can respect that significance or we can seek to negate it.

Normal sexual behaviour is one such type -- it is generative behaviour; it has the built-in significance of being generative / procreative behaviour because of the central role it plays in human life -- of being a cause in the generation of human beings. As far as human performance is concerned it remains generative behaviour in being left to be normal sexual intercourse by those who engage in it, whether or not it is fertile. Fertility is not precisely a state of affairs brought about by our behaviour but is a function of conditions which are produced independently of performance, by hormonal changes, for example.

Human beings can negate the built-in significance of certain types of behaviour. The built-in significance of eating as essentially nutritive is negated if one behaves as the ancient Romans did: taking emetics during a banquet to provoke vomiting in order to continue enjoying the pleasures of

eating. One could not, however, be said to negate the built-in significance of eating as nutritive if it happened to be the case that because of some condition outside one's control (say, some gastrointestinal disorder) eating in fact failed to nourish one.

In saying that certain types of behaviour have a built-in significance one does not imply that the significance they have has to constitute one's conscious purpose in engaging in that behaviour. When I go out to dinner with my friends I often do not principally have in mind the purpose of nourishing myself. Nonetheless, the significance a dinner has as an expression of friendship builds on the built-in significance of eating as nutritive -- as something that nourishes and sustains my life. Negate that significance and the symbolism of a meal (as expressive of shared love and affection which nourishes a common life) is destroyed.

It is something similar with the built-in significance of normal sexual intercourse. The Church does not teach that in engaging in intercourse one has to be acting with a view to procreating, an objective one could realistically have in mind only when one was fertile. What she teaches is that sexual intercourse will not make for an authentic unity of two-in-one-flesh if those engaging in it set out to negate its built-in significance as generative/procreative behaviour. And they negate that significance in setting out to render infertile any sexual activity which might otherwise be fertile. They do not negate its significance as generative (its "procreative significance") by having intercourse when they happen to be infertile, since fertility is not required for the act to be of the generative kind. This brings us to the second objection.

(2) In answer to the second objection I want to show how aiming to avoid conceiving children by abstinence during fertile periods is not merely significantly different from contraception but can be an expression of virtuous respect for the procreative good.

As I have already noted, for humans procreation means not only bringing a child into the world, but giving that child a humane upbringing, and, for Christians, a Christian upbringing. The demands entailed in making such provision, as well as the health of a spouse, can mean that there may be periods in a marriage when it is reasonable to aim not to have children. That being so, *Humanae Vitae* says, one must achieve "mastery over one's sexual impulses", so that what one chooses to do (or refrain from doing) in securing the aim of not having children continues to be expressive of spousal love in its integral character (as unitive and procreative).

The precise notion of mastery involved here is important. Virtue in relation to sexual desire does not essentially consist of continence. Continence is a halfway house to virtue. We are virtuous in respect of sexual desire when its manifestation is rational because informed by an understanding of the requirements of authentic love. Sensual desire, I remarked at the outset, is transformable from within by understanding, precisely because of the unity of our being. But in being so transformed it does not cease to be sensual desire. The sensual enjoyment of the virtuous person is greater, St Thomas Aquinas says, than the sensual enjoyment of the vicious person. The jaded palate of the libertine is a commonplace of many cultures.

If it is reasonable to seek to avoid

having children for some period of time, then sexual desire needs to be responsive to this requirement. In being made responsive, it is integrated in a person's exercise of procreative responsibility. The exercise of procreative responsibility is central to what chastity means in married life.

It is important to emphasise that what serves to avoid conception is abstaining from intercourse, when one knows one is fertile. One may have a method, such as the Billings method, or the sympto-thermal method, for determining when one is fertile, but it is not the method as such which serves to secure one's objective but the continence one displays in abstaining from intercourse.

When a couple for serious reasons abstain from intercourse at times at which they might conceive, their abstaining is itself chosen sexual behaviour, and virtuous sexual behaviour because it is expressive of a recognition of the demands of the procreative good. But how could it be said to be unitive? The answer lies in noticing that what motivates and informs the abstinence, with whatever difficulties it involves, is the loving marital commitment of the couple, a commitment to help bear each other's burdens arising from their joint sense of procreative responsibility. A commitment so lived is itself unitive, for it makes for the deepening of their love.

The relevant contrast that contraceptive behaviour presents to avoiding conception by periodic abstinence, is that contraceptive behaviour involves no need to modify sexual desire. Sexual behaviour as such is not rendered responsive to the requirements of procreative responsibility. One merely takes

measures of one kind or another to prevent its natural consequences. And so, with contraception, human sexual behaviour remains uninformed by the requirements of responsibility to the good of procreation. Human behaviour intrinsically connected to a basic human good is engaged in as though it did not have to be shaped by the requirements of the virtue we need in order to honour that good.

Contraception undercuts both the individual and the joint process of development necessary to modifying sexual behaviour so that spouses act responsibly in regard to the procreative good. This domain of bodily behaviour is treated as manipulable in its consequences rather than transformable in its character. It is typical of the way in which the human body in our culture is not regarded as integral to the moral subject, sharing in and expressing the fundamental aspirations of that subject, but is treated rather as an object to be modified. This characteristic stance of our culture is symptomatic of the deep dualism which runs through it.

Sexual desire needs to be integrated into the order of personal love. Marital friendship, the love of husband and wife, requires of each that they love the good of the other. But the defining good of the community of marriage, a good common to both, is the procreative good, the good of children. So love of one's spouse requires that one acts in ways which are consistent with each spouse having, in his or her heart, a right relationship to the good of children. One cannot have such a right relationship if the intentional character of one's chosen behaviour is anti-procreative. If it is, and continues to be, it destroys the true character of the friendship of husband and wife; it depersonalises their bodily

relationship, and the body of each becomes an alienated object, both to himself or herself, and to the other. This is the background to so much profound misery in our society.

### **Chastity and conversion**

Christian realism bids all of us recognise that in face of the need for unreserved self-giving love in marriage, all of us are more or less crippled, more or less slaves to the idols of comfort, egoism, self-cultivation, and pleasure. We cannot break with these idols because they represent the fragile securities and forms of self-confirmation to which many of us cling. But as long as we cling to them we cannot live the vocation of Christian marriage.

We cannot speak realistically about the Christian vocation of marriage unless we see it as a call to holiness. The bond of Christian marriage is a holy bond both because it is a graced reality and because it signifies the union of Christ with His Bride the Church, a union effected by his self-sacrificing love for us.

Husband and wife existentially witness to the relationship of Christ to His Church through exhibiting self-sacrificing love for the true good of each other. But the capacity for that kind of self-sacrificing love cannot be the fruit of one's own moral endeavour: it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit poured abroad in our hearts. Unless a man first knows in his heart that, even though he is a sinner, God has first loved him, he will not find it in his heart to give himself unreservedly in loving bodily union to his wife when, as it appears, she has been acting as his enemy. For if you are attached to comfort, pleasure and your ego, there are limitless possibilities for your wife to appear to you as an enemy. But if the bodily

union of spouses cannot be unreserved, and comes to be hedged about by numerous conditions, it is unsurprising if they become hostile to the good of children.

One cannot talk realistically about chastity inside or outside marriage without discussing both the necessity and the possibility of personal religious conversion, at the heart of which is the experience of the charity of God in one's own life. For without the charity which can transform us we can hardly acquire chastity.

The deep reason why so much that is said in the contemporary Church about sex and marriage is shallow and defective is that we are unwilling to face up to the power of sin in our lives. Everywhere one finds what amounts in effect to a denial of the reality of Original Sin, of the extent to which we are powerfully attracted by illusory visions of human fulfilment, and these become idols in our lives. So much sex education, in particular, is designed to reinforce one form of idolatry: that sex is a key to happiness quite independently of the significance God has given it in His plans for our fulfilment. The Church is simply not facing the task of evangelization necessitated by the reality of much contemporary sexual experience if it does not seek to unmask and break the grip of this idolatry. But that sort of task cannot be tackled in a brief set of lectures, or in a short-term parish renewal programme. What the people of God urgently need is a rediscovery at the level of parish life of a structured way of living which makes possible a radical and deep conversion of life and offers them a context in which they can transmit to their children a faith and a way of living which is a real alternative to what the world presses upon them.

© The Linacre Centre for  
Healthcare Ethics,

38 Circus Road,  
London NW8 9SE  
England

Tel. +44 (0)20 7266 7410

Fax +44 (0)20 7266 5424

[admin@linacre.org](mailto:admin@linacre.org)

Registered Charity No. 274327