

Comment

Most right-thinking men and women will surely be grateful for and relieved at the much publicised comments of Pope John-Paul on the possibility of a husband committing adultery in his heart by looking lustfully at his wife. Sections of the press, suitably appalled at this shock-horror story, (has he invented a new sin? one Italian paper wanted to know), found space to report it between the sexually titillating page 3 pin-ups and the increasingly hysterical pillorying of Tony Benn. (The British Press is for ever outraged at the impudence of the Labour Left actually achieving some small successes by democratic process – the union ‘block vote’ is ‘un-democratic’ in such instances, but ‘the will of the party as a whole’ when the reverse is true.)

It is possible, of course, (but let us hope *not*), that the Pope’s words, especially when crudely wrenched out of context, could be understood as a dismal reminder of that all too familiarly glum and gloomy fear of sex popularly supposed to be characteristic of catholic moral teaching, and all the harrowing guilt and crippling hang-ups that that teaching fostered. There is little point in tediously cataloguing it all again, but it is an odd paradox that while condemning as heretical the debasement and trivialising of sex that was part and parcel of Manicheist hatred of the body, the church doesn’t seem to have tried all that hard, until recent years, to exalt and exult in human sexuality – “If God invented anything better, he kept it for himself” in the words of Ken Dodd. Even worse, it seems to have connived at, collaborated with and colluded in the abuse and exploitation of women by men, even, and some women would say *especially* by their husbands. Nor were celibate church officials especially notorious for chastely restraining *their* lustful yearnings; the ribald priest and the bawdy friar are familiar figures in medieval literature. “The most sly, dangerous and cunning bawds are your knavish priests, monks, Jesuits and friars. . . . Women cannot sleep in their beds for necromantick friars”.

So, had they been couched in a different vocabulary, say the more familiar one of the Women's Movement, (i.e. looking lustfully at your wife = using your wife as a sex object), no doubt Pope John-Paul's words would have been welcomed and warmly applauded by liberals everywhere, and catholic feminists could count him as an ally.

Fortunately, throughout the shabby history of the church's distaste for sex, and collusion in the male abuse of women, we have clung on to the belief that marriage is a sacrament. Hopefully, through the development of the theology of that sacrament, enriched by the rapid growth of women theologians, the church will be able to prophetically proclaim the true meaning of human sexuality. For in the sacrament of marriage, we say, is revealed the love of God in Jesus for humanity. In the exchange of vows in the marriage service, the man and the woman publicly proclaim their mutual giving and acceptance of all that each other not only *is*, but *has been* and *will be*. They promise, in other words, to love one another with a kind of vulnerability which is made explicit and celebrated in sexual union; offering to each other their bodies, naked and unshamed, (anti-typing the fallen man and woman of Genesis 3, "naked and ashamed"). The mirroring here of the naked Jesus on the cross, exhibiting the vulnerable love of God for humanity, is obvious. The true meaning of human sexuality is that it is the language of free love.

In the light of that meaning of human sexuality, the lie of so-called sexual freedom is exposed; rape (in or out of marriage), carefree casual sex, the page 3 pin-ups, the tawdry sex shops and porn films, are shown to be, at best a frivolous pretence, at worst sacrilege. They are the fruit of sexual unfreedom, signs of a broken world.

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