

A SYNTHESIS OF SEXUAL ETHICS<sup>1</sup>

THOUGH in the domain of Dogma much has been done in recent years towards re-establishing the conformity between Faith and Reason, in the domain of Morals this is not so. On the contrary, we are confronted at the present time with a rupture between Catholic moral teaching and secular ethical thought which is far more disastrous than the nineteenth-century quarrel between Religion and Science. In no sphere is this rupture more manifest than in that of the ethics of sexual relationship and in the conceptions of society and of individual conduct dependent upon it. The problem does not, indeed, present itself to the average Catholic in these general terms, but in the more pressing form of the concrete case—in the opposition between the teaching of the Church and of the world around him on marriage, on the family, on chastity, on divorce, on birth-control and the rest. The devout Catholic will loyally accept the teaching of the Church on these several heads, but not many, perhaps, are able to give that teaching an intelligent assent; few are conscious of a consistent, coherent policy or doctrine underlying the Church's precepts, which consequently are apt to appear as so many disconnected, arbitrary and unintelligible hardships; fewer still realise the essential conformity, not to say identity, between Christian moral law and right reason or common sense. Not seldom must the Church's uncompromising teaching regarding, for example, 'hard cases' which seem to indicate divorce, sterilisation or contraception appear to the thinking Catholic as incomprehensibly harsh and irrational, and only by a blind act of faith can he accept it and stifle the protests of his own reasoning. Such

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<sup>1</sup> *La Famille*. By the Abbé Jacques Leclercq, Professor at the Institut Saint-Louis at Brussels. (Namur: Wesmael-Charlier.) The volume is the third of a series of *Leçons de Droit naturel* published under the auspices of the Société d'Etudes morales, sociales et juridiques, 11 rue des Récollets, Louvain.

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faith is heroic and admirable in the highest degree; but just because it is heroic it cannot be widespread. *Credo quia impossibile* nevertheless expresses the attitude which some Catholics seem to adopt at the present time towards the Christian moral law. In this perilous situation a widespread and terrible 'leakage' is not to be marvelled at. Weak and uninstructed faith devoid of rational understanding can ill withstand the force of current ethical ideas in their combined appeal to reason, to passion and to our powerful gregarious instincts.

The situation is truly critical, and a task of immense urgency and complexity confronts the Catholic moralist and pastor. Firstly there is a need for a firm grasp of the principles which underlie Christian moral precepts and a comprehensive and synthetic understanding of their implications and applications in the concrete. Here is a task of no small difficulty. So long has traditional morality, at least in principle, been taken for granted that many of us find ourselves ill prepared to defend and to justify what for centuries had been assumed to be self-evident. Furthermore, the eternal and universal moral law has become, psychologically, so intertwined with ephemeral local customs, taboos and conventions that the labour of disentangling the necessary from the contingent, even the moral from the immoral, is of extreme delicacy. There has arisen, for instance, a confusion between puritan prudery and rational purity, between the 'Victorian' and the Christian ideal of the Family, with the result that reaction to the one has involved reaction to the other and the truth of the latter has become compromised in feeble apologetics for the former. An excessive attention to casuistry at the expense of the study of rational ethics and systematic moral Theology has left many pastors of souls ill equipped to meet intelligently the attacks of the 'new morality' on fundamental moral axioms or to see how the solution of particular cases lies in the application of universal principles. Too often are the best of precepts backed up by the worst of arguments and attacks met only by the unworthy and unconvincing

argument of righteous indignation. It is idle to dismiss the 'new morality' as a euphemism for the old immorality. It may be doubted whether our age is exceptionally immoral: it is certainly more concerned with moral issues than most, even in its defiance of tradition. But it questions the most fundamental assumptions of traditional morality, and that on rational and scientific grounds. Traditional morality must be able to give a *rational* and *scientific* account of itself.

If Christian morality is to claim rational assent, it must first be shown to be intrinsically consistent and coherent. Coherence is not truth, but truth is necessarily coherent and it is our first duty to be able to present our moral precepts as part and parcel of a consistent corpus of doctrine. The *Casti Connubii* of the Holy Father authoritatively and admirably leads the way with a presentation of Christian teaching on sex as an organic whole; but much hard work remains to be done which lies outside the possibility and the scope of a Papal encyclical. Prof. von Hildebrand's *In Defence of Purity* and Mr. Christopher Dawson's *Christianity and Sex* are valuable contributions towards outlining the principles of solution; but this book of the Abbé Leclercq offers us something considerably more comprehensive. Not only does he present Christian sexual morality as a theological or philosophical whole, but he approaches each succeeding problem from every conceivable angle—theological, ethical, historical, ethnological, medical, psychological, legal, pragmatic. He has utilised authors so diverse as St. Thomas and Westermarck, St. Augustine and Lefebvre, De Guchteneere and Freud, Lord Russell, Havelock Ellis and Victor Marguerite, together with hosts of lesser known writers who have approached the problem of sex and marriage from widely differing standpoints. No reader of this book can fail to be impressed with the *Summa*-like beauty and harmony of the Christian conception of sex as here presented.

The author is not, however, content to present his subject as an organic *logical* unity, he succeeds in revealing to

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us its essential *historical* continuity and consistency despite diversities of emphasis and expression in different ages of Christian history. Here he faces what is a real difficulty for many minds. The cynicism of some early and medieval authors regarding marriage, their misogyny, their supercilious attitude towards sex, profoundly shock the modern reader. It is indeed easy to contrast the diatribes of a St. Jerome with the work of a modern Catholic like Prof. von Hildebrand or, indeed, with the official teaching of Pius XI. There has, in fact, been *development*; but only, the author shows, in the sense of increasingly explicit understanding and appreciation of what had always been implicitly held, especially regarding the 'secondary ends' of matrimony. He explains the historical social conditions which occasioned that pessimistic 'twist' in much patristic thought regarding sexual matters which is so alien to our ways of thinking, and the prevailing biological errors and theological misapprehensions (regarding, for instance, the manner in which original sin is transmitted) which made it possible for St. Augustine, inconsistently enough, to suggest wedlock as little more than a necessary evil—seemingly more evil than necessary—subservient procreation. Not seldom, indeed, the Fathers may easily give us the impression that the married state is an intrinsic evil, which the continuance of the race extenuates but scarcely excuses, while they seem to laud virginity as an ideal and norm for all. Yet the essential doctrine as we know it to-day was always *there* and formally recognised. It was St. Augustine himself, whose psychology regarding sex, begotten of bitter experience, coloured his own thought and that of succeeding centuries, who first formulated expressly the idea of the threefold value of marriage.<sup>2</sup> St. Jerome, most

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps a word of explanation is called for. Christian teaching recognises three essential *bona* or values in marriage: the *bonum prolis*—the reproduction and care of offspring, which is a 'good' attained by the sexual union of both men and animals; the *bonum fidei* which *negatively* involves indissolu-

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caustic of theorists, roundly asserted essential sexual equality in a fashion which was diametrically opposed to the anti-feminist prepossessions of his time. But few of the early Fathers seem to have realised the implications of their own principles. It was, above all, the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas with its new valuation of the natural order and of secondary causes, his definitive dissociation of the antithesis between Good and Evil from the distinction between Grace and Nature (which von Hügel has counted his supreme achievement) which made possible the fuller appreciation of traditional doctrine. Not that even he lived to develop his ideas to their logical conclusions: indeed his reverence for Aristotle and St. Augustine made it possible for him frequently to speak of woman as man's chattel, and he could go so far as to quote with approval St. Augustine's tolerance of prostitution as a preservative of public morality. But with St. Thomas

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bity, monogamy and the avoidance of infidelity, *positively* the fostering of mutual love and personal union—values attainable only by human beings; the *bonum Sacramenti*—a divine and supernatural value attached by God to marriage between Christians which makes of the highest expression of human love the symbol of the love between Christ and His Spouse, the Mystical Body. Because the Christian sacraments effect what they signify, it is the source of Grace to the marriage state and contract. These three *bona* are essential to marriage, in such wise that the possibility of their attainment is a condition of its validity. They are intimately interdependent, and no one of them is capable of being realised or frustrated without involving the others. Thus the *bonum prolis*, which is primary and 'most essential,' though not 'principal' (cf. St. Thomas, Supp. xlix, 3), and which includes not only the procreation but the education and upbringing of children, postulates the *bonum fidei* as the guardian of family life and unity (cf. St. Thomas, 2<sup>a</sup>, 2<sup>ae</sup>, cliv, 2). Thus whatever is done to foster the *bonum fidei* fosters also the *bonum prolis*. Hence, even though conception may not always follow upon sexual intercourse, the *bonum prolis* is indirectly but very really fostered if the *bonum fidei* be thereby strengthened. Conversely, if the *bonum prolis* be positively excluded, the *bonum fidei* and the *bonum Sacramenti* are implicated in its frustration.

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Christian thought on sex and marriage takes a new turn. He finally demolishes the erroneous view of the transmission of original sin which had vitiated much previous thought; he asserts with unprecedented insistence the intrinsic sanctity of Christian marriage. Marriage becomes the normal ideal for all; virginity, deliberately chosen, is even 'vicious' unless it be undertaken as a requisite for higher ideals. He makes it clear that the gravity of sexual sin lies in the fact, not that sex is contemptible and degrading, but, on the contrary, that it is a thing so serious and noble that all trifling with it and abuse of it is mortally sinful. It was St. Thomas's principles which initiated the progress in the understanding and appreciation of Christian marriage which finds its culmination in the *Casti Conubii*. It has often happened that reaction to heresies has aroused the Church to a profounder understanding and a fuller development of her heritage of Revelation. It may well be, as the Abbé Leclercq suggests, that the moral errors of our time enable us to appreciate more profoundly the implications of traditional moral teaching. Certainly we may be thankful that, as the Abbé says, 'Catholic writings on marriage are to-day more prone than hitherto to emphasise the sanctity of marriage and to show that married life is a way of holiness.' Just because of the pestilential attack on marriage's primary purpose of procreation, it is more necessary than ever to affirm its sacramental value and its intrinsic worth as a bond of love and fidelity. It is no longer possible to conceive the exigencies of the *bonum fidei* as adequately satisfied by avoiding technical infidelity. It is a positive intrinsic value which must be constantly tended. Similarly it is no longer possible for us to suppose that the sacramental significance and power ceases at the end of the marriage service. It is constantly operative throughout the course of conjugal life and not least in the exercise of specifically conjugal acts.

We are tempted to follow the author in his valuable historical study of ecclesiastical and civil matrimonial legislation. He shows how the Church's successive laws, revolu-

tionary in aim but never revolutionary in method, gradually transformed the corrupt ideas inherited from pagan society and slowly established legal equality of the sexes; how Canon Law succeeded in steering clear of the excesses of the canonists and retained and developed, amid their controversies, a sane and realistic view of marriage. He makes the dull pages of the history of Canon Law to live and reveals to us the spirit behind the letter of the law.

But we have left little space to consider the chief purpose of his book—to reveal Christian teaching on marriage and sex as inherently rational and sane. It is, in fact, no more than the expression of the natural law. For what we call 'Catholic' moral teaching on sex adds nothing, except concerning the sacramental nature of matrimony, to the dictates of natural reason.<sup>3</sup> It is this that our age finds so

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<sup>3</sup> That is to say, it adds nothing of *positive content* to the natural law discoverable by our natural faculties. Our Lord Himself made it clear, for instance, that His strict teaching about divorce was no new imposition, but a reaffirmation of what was 'from the beginning.' St. Thomas, so far from regarding these precepts as new hardships, sees in them a new *help* to keeping the elementary laws of nature (1<sup>a</sup>, 2<sup>ae</sup>, cvii, 4 ad 3). The Christian is not obliged to a more extensive or stricter code of morality than the infidel, though his obligation may be stricter and his sin less excusable. When we Catholics protest against the legalisation of divorce or contraception, we do not seek to impose a distinctively Christian morality on a non-Christian society. This is not to assert that Christianity contributes nothing to morality. Grace perfects Nature in such a way that Nature is apt to be exceedingly imperfect without it. Revelation gives a new sanction and authority to rational ethics of such a kind that the integral law of nature cannot readily be discerned without it. This accounts, as the Abbé Leclercq repeatedly shows, for the fact that human behaviour and custom, as well as positive human law, often fall far short of the dictates of rational ethics which are found intact within the Church alone. Grace, moreover, supplies a new impetus and power and a new, more effective motive for the *carrying out* of the dictates of reason. Again, the Christian, delivered from the bondage of the

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difficult to accept, and even Catholics sometimes tend to regard it as a mystery of the Faith scarcely less incomprehensible than the Trinity. For the intrinsic reasonableness and the 'naturalness' of our moral teaching are being attacked from every conceivable angle. The progress of ethnological studies reveals a variety and contrariety of sexual and matrimonial customs which, *prima facie*, seem scarcely to suggest the identity of Catholic teaching with the natural law implanted in the hearts of all men. Pseudo-Freudianism and kindred psychologies (the author makes an important distinction between scientific and popular Freudianism) convince the multitude that sexual restraint, and consequently the traditional ideal of chastity, are unnatural and unhealthy. Medical opinion is said to condemn all continence; sociologists, economists, lawyers, moralists, favour contraception, sterilisation, divorce. All the authorities are invoked to pronounce the moral law as preserved in the Church to be opposed to every kind of natural requirement, social or individual, and hence to be unnatural and irrational.

The Abbé Leclercq exposes the fallacy of attempting to establish the natural law on such considerations and expounds the method whereby a rational ethic can be scientifically built up. But he does not shirk the difficulties which science arouses and he successfully turns the tables on his opponents. He shows how the multitudinous departures from the dictates of the natural law, both among primitive

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law, will realise more clearly than others that morality is not primarily a compliance with a code of permissions and prohibitions, but a means to his own good and self-realisation. He knows, as St. Thomas says, that 'God is not offended except by what we do against our own good.' Finally, the Christian, impregnated with the Mind of Christ and viewing all things from the standpoint of the Incarnation and its continuance in the Mystical Body, will see the precepts of the natural law in an entirely new light. Thus St. Paul sees fornication, not merely as an offence against social justice or personal temperance, but as the prostitution of a member of Christ.



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and civilised peoples, serve to confirm Catholic teaching; how it alone fully responds to our psychological, physiological and sociological exigencies. It is impossible to condense his argument, which is itself a masterpiece of condensation. Impossible, too, to quote the many good things he has to say on many topics—on Christian feminism and sexual equality; on old maids and flirts and typists; on sex-instruction and nudism; on Aristotle and Aristophanes; on sterilisation and homosexuality: his analysis of Law and of Love: his keen psychological observations. We seek only to call attention to this valuable and eminently readable book.

VICTOR WHITE, O.P.

## CRUX ALATA

How we are handled, dandled like kites in air,  
Running with every wind yet held! We swing  
Wide to the wild winch windward, we forth fling  
And soar to our escaping everywhere.

Thou dost run with us more than mind can dare  
To think upon, wing underneath our wing;  
And hast thou pleasure of our curveting,  
Kite-flyer, a dangerous, oh, a schoolboy care?

Or greater care? Astrain in the bluff gale  
The boom holds, hauls, the world along; our sail  
Is to thy timbers tethered, Crucified.

Thou art the anchor of us, the fast hold  
Of all our taut endeavour; boisterous-bold  
We hurl from thee, the very wood we ride.

BERNARD KELLY.