

# COMMENT

Somebody from outer space arriving on a desolate earth and having to rely only on stacks of past Catholic periodicals for knowledge of the Roman Catholic Church could not be blamed for thinking that Catholicism must have been some sort of sex cult. We, in this periodical, keep our comments on what the Church has to say about sex to the minimum because the subject is so amply covered elsewhere, and it is not just the Catholic press but the general media in Britain which gave front-page treatment in January to the story of a Catholic diocesan tribunal's initial refusal to permit the marriage of a crippled ex-army man to his nurse, on the grounds of his supposed impotence. The incident angered and embarrassed not only the unfortunate couple but most of Britain's Catholics also, for it was an appalling instance of clumsy press-handling and, worse still, of clumsy interpretation of canon law (which specifies that if—as in this case—there is any doubt that the supposed impotence is “perpetual”, the marriage should be allowed to go ahead).

All this indignation has led to the publishing of lots of words. It has led to little serious theological reflection.

It is right, of course, that people should be very angry about the recent incident. Some, however, are angry because of the Church's insistence on its principle that capacity to have sexual intercourse is intrinsically part of the meaning of marriage. They think it is ludicrous for the Church to insist that ability to marry should, among other things, depend on something “merely physical”. They see the requirement as a survival from a coarser age. Surely, they argue, it is only ability to share a life together that matters to-day?

To pooh-pooh the Church's emphasis on the “bodily aspect” of marriage would, on the contrary, be a big mistake especially today. For seemingly the so-called sex revolution, far from integrating people's erotic life more fully into the rest of their lives, has—to the surprise of some of the revolution's gurus—made “sexual experience” more than ever detached from much of the rest of human experience. Today perhaps it is easier than for a long time to drift into gnosticism (a modern kind, of course): into a perception of the human as the *mind*, into a cerebral Cartesian view of our humanity which fails to take seriously the fact that we are *bodies* and that all our face-to-face relationships are at least to some extent bodily relationships. If we ignore the fairly rare moments when the Church's leaders and spokesmen lose their nerve, we can truthfully say that the Church is not “against sex”. One of its glories

and one of its biggest difficulties today is that (unlike quite a lot of people in the West) it takes sex very seriously, as in a very deep sense part of our humanity and so with its place in God's saving plan.

We can state this while being fully aware that currently many of the Church's leaders do not succeed in putting the Church's basic understanding of human sexuality into words and deeds which touch the hearts and minds of a lot of ordinary men and women. One just complaint, which the much-discussed marriage case reinforces, is that by and large the Church leaders have much too limited a sense of "the bodily". Why, no western marriage—not even a dynastic one—would now flourish for more than a month if "squirting jam in the doughnut" (Germaine Greer's phrase) was all that authentically constituted "bodily relationship" in a marriage. Surely we all know that? Or do we?

It was, by chance, at the same time as that marriage case was getting so much publicity that *The Sunday Times* began to serialise Germaine Greer's controversial new book *Sex and Destiny*, which Secker and Warburg are publishing in March. Its author won fame as one of the sex revolution's most ardent prophets. But in this book, which will be read by many people who would never listen to the Church, we find Ms Greer (who holds no brief for Catholicism) even putting up a case for chastity! Today, if she is correct, for many young women the present mandatory "full sex life" amounts to an interminable succession of hasty copulations hardly more sexual than brushing one's teeth. Oral contraceptives, instead of liberating these women, have imposed on them a new bondage. They must be freed from "the nightmare of unsuitable contraception, promiscuous and uncommitted sexual activity, unwanted pregnancy, abortion and illegitimacy". She pleads for a recovery of the joys and dignity of child-bearing and child-nursing. She urges us not to impose "our coarse notions of sex" on the next generation, but to teach them to love.

Clearly she, too, is now pleading for a fuller and more sensitive understanding of "bodiliness".

A change of mood is possibly coming. In Sweden sex shops are shutting their doors. But we westerners must not slide into a new puritanism, which could be just as arid as "the permissive society" has turned out to be. Rather, we must capture a new sense of what it means to be whole and alive.

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