

FIRSTS AND SECONDS IN SEX

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RESearch scientists and manufacturing chemists lighten many of the burdens of existence, yet sometimes, as when they produce the means for individuals to make love and nothing more, they shift them from body to soul. Only a pill; all the same the weight may prove unsupportable when, leaving behind the world which has been given to us, we launch into another of our own making. The first is a harsh school, exacting recognition of our subordinate place in the scheme of things and acknowledgment of the established rules. Still there are compensations: we can know where we are and where to lay the blame, we can pit ourselves against resistance, we may be broken but at least we have belonged, and to something that was not us. Whereas if we rebel against our limits and adventure according to our merely personal wants, we lose all pattern, for each person as such is an original; we grasp for one shadow after another projected from ourselves, yet, being what we are, we keep our guilt-sense, no longer, however, with an object to prevent it turning morbid. It is as though we have strained to become pure persons and have ceased to be human beings, as though we have set ourselves the goal of absolute freedom and, having reached it, found ourselves empty.

I

Strip ideas and you simplify the opposition between the anarchism which stirs at the root of personality and the subjection to law which is the consequence of having been born into human nature as a specific *kind* of thing. Real life is more intricate and shows an oscillation between the extremes. To be healthy is to remain a mixture in rapid motion, not to be precipitated and stuck to one side apart from the other. The purpose of this paper is to relate this principle to the subject of sex and marriage.

There we have on one side two lovers adventuring together in shared experience, and on the other side male and female co-operating in the work of nature. The right balance is not the same in every individual case, and therefore not to be uniformly defined. All the same we can observe when it is dangerously tilted, either because the couple are refining their delight to the detriment of what they really are or because brute generation becomes reckless of the dignity of human persons. Our argument will treat mainly

of the first disorder; it will urge that if a man and a woman are to love completely they must take one another for better or for worse, and that this includes the drag of their male and female natures. Moreover the giving flows into their physical conjoining, as much gaily and playfully as grimly and purposively. They should come clean and without protection, candidly and without reservation. Sex should be taken neat; when diluted it should be given another name. Furthermore it will be suggested that the overemphasis on emancipation from the biological bonds of sex ends by becoming unsexed: one reflects that though his paternity is doubtful Eros was certainly the child of Aphrodite.

We are likely to beg the question until we have shown that the personal values released in sex-activity are such that they cannot be separated by human art from its generative purpose: by art is meant contrivances rather than contrivance. Now it is apparent at once that with regard to purely physical processes performed below the moral order, conscience need not hesitate over our warrant to shape and twist and clip them by art. They are ours to tame as well as we may; the test is human amenity, not intrinsic right or wrong, for we have no duty of obedience to the laws of physics as such. So also with regard to conventional *mores* that are of our own making; we are not required to enthrone the laws of the Medes and Persians with absolute power, though we shall be advised to think twice before gainsaying them. Take, for instance, the faculty of speech: no one method of voice production or of noise arrangement is a moral imperative, for we can squeeze our notes, as in Chinese music, or sing falsetto, or play with words, or change the rules of grammar, or declaim nonsense verse. On this ground the 'artificial' can do what it likes with the 'natural', limited only by what is feasible and civil. But when speech is set in a moral context the situation alters and we encounter an absolute prohibition: it is always wrong to tell a lie, and no reasons can justify it, neither the highest of motives nor the avoidance of embarrassment, for it deforms the nature of the human act of communication by turning it into deceit.

Apply this to the climax of love between a man and a woman. Were it merely an effect of muscles and glands, conceived in unconsciousness and brought forth without choice, then, although social authority would still hedge in its occasions for obvious reasons, the centre of the Catholic resistance to contraception would collapse. Such also would be the case if at the opposite extreme it could be shown that intercourse was generically and specifically an act of play—the word is used in its noblest sense—and of predilection on

the part of a couple who happen to be of opposite sexes. Why should it be so limited?—if exquisiteness is the count a refined literature will demur. In reality, however, intercourse belongs both to the order of personal choice and of natural functions; it is charged at once with special intentions and a common form; it is, in the full meaning of the term, a *human act*, neither purely spiritual nor purely material, neither the expression of angelic affection nor of animal instinct. In the Christian life it is the adumbration of the marriage of Christ with his Church, and so St Paul spoke of it. Now this sacrament of the incarnation of love stays with us when we descend to the lower slopes of moral theology where human beings act in the world of physical nature to which they belong, and where, far from seeking to escape, they commit themselves to the conditions of their sexuality. We are not spirits using bodies, but substances fused of souls and bodies. Of course there are many other loving communications between men and women, some of them perhaps more precious, but unless they are keyed to this acceptance, let us not call them acts of true sex, but by some other name instead.

Hence to enter into full sexual exchanges after having taken precautions which will prevent or arrest their inner dynamism is not to be compared to entering on a convivial evening primed with cream or limejuice or whatever is supposed to delay drunkenness or deal with a hangover. We cannot agree with the terms of the Report of the Committee submitted to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland this year, 'that it can quite logically be maintained that contraception is but a further step in man's attempt to control his environment, like clothing or the diminishing of distance by radio or aircraft'.¹

II

The censure of contraception passed by moral theology bears directly not on the motives of the partners but on the *type* of action they perform. The intimacy is not biographically evaluated, which would be an impertinence, but co-ordinated in the widespread purposes of mankind. The judgment is consonant with that part of the Natural Law Theory which derives from Ulpian, the authority behind a third of Justinian's *Digest*, who recognized a kind of instinctive law, common to all animals and more primitive than the positive laws men frame for their own convenience. Some rights are presupposed, and have to be respected before we treat of the adjustments civilization makes to their consequences. His example

¹ *The Times* report, May 5, 1960.

is the unqualified notion of the fitting and adequate apposition of a male and a female that they may beget.²

Given that intercourse is a human act on the part of the man and the woman, then it enters into morality, and given that of its nature it is designed to be generative, then it is not difficult to appreciate the traditional reluctance (to use no stronger term) to approve the attempt to separate their seeking of solace as persons from their role as members of the human race. The second supposition is the stumbling-block to many. They allege that the moralists are here inconsistent, since they allow intercourse when there is no prospect of a pregnancy. Instead of meeting this difficulty directly,³ let us pause instead over some implications when we say that we are beings of a certain kind living in a world of beings also of certain kinds (we are much else besides and so are they), for observance of the relationships accordingly set up will be an essential part of our right response to our environment. No Christian will argue that we ought to be submerged in the processes of this world, but he will not agree that we can do with them as we will. It is not a question of remaining with crude nature, but of refining our material without weakening our essential structure.

Some types of human activity, or our responses as a kind of thing to the world as presenting kinds of objects, more immediately than others imply a physical substrate, thus *another's property* is more tangible than another's *good name*, and this is the basis of the distinction between the injustice of theft and of calumny. Similarly *sexual affection* is more organic than *benevolence*. All, however, are translated equally into the moral order when we ask what we should do with them in order to be fitted to our eternal destiny.

To begin with we must observe certain fundamental decencies which we do not institute for ourselves. Catholic moralists call them the dictates of the Natural Law, and they take the term in a sense wider than that of Ulpian. Whether these ordinances pass the test of general acceptance can be disregarded, also for the present whether type-patterns of behaviour really exist. The point is that the Church's position with regard to contraception is based on its conviction that reason can show these essential rights and wrongs; they are not taught as parts of revealed truth nor as pieces of Church discipline which could be easily accommodated to fit new facts. It is not that churchmen have made up their minds but that they feel their minds have been made up for them. The Papacy is a constitutional monarchy when by constitution we mean the inner

² *Summa Theologiae*, 2a-2ae, 1vii, 3.

³ See T. Gilby, *Morals and Marriage*, Longmans, 1954, pp. 37-49.

rational order of creation; if there are 'sophisticated English-speaking Catholics' who according to a newspaper report look for a change of attitude in this matter they will always meet a simple *non possumus*.⁴ Catholic theologians are not unaware of the difficulties, but they can well tend to lose patience at the suggestion that they have been landed in a false position for reasons ranging from religious politics to suspiciousness about sex.

They treat certain decencies and indecencies as being so fundamental that bad motives cannot utterly spoil an action that is good of its kind nor the noblest motives validate an act that is bad of its kind. Most of us would agree that some canons are to be applied irrespective of personal moods. We have a working notion of what constitutes cruelty to children, and though there are differences of opinion about punishment, for some would lecture where others would beat, there is a sufficient unanimity about condemning cruelty, and none the less when it is inflicted with the loftiest intentions, indeed all the more, because then it is most obsessional and dangerous. Where sex is concerned the agreement is less complete. While some restrictions on its manifestations will be agreed on, and affection and a sense of responsibility are expected to be present when it is shared, sex engages so many ideals and wants, and is expressed with so many variations, that we cannot assign an approximate normal to it, as we can for bodily temperature at 98.4. Yet natural science cannot separate its notion from that of fertility, and social and religious systems have always keyed it to the movement whereby one generation hands on its life to another, always, one feels, to the resentment of lovers who have wanted nothing else but one another. For what is called the modern approach to sex is surely as old as the hills, indeed one hopes so. What is modern are the funiculars and ropeways, the use of which can scarcely be called climbing.

III

See there, almost a sneer. Only to be expected, some might say, when the Catholic party-line is advanced. More beating of the drum of denunciation, more recalling of the faithful to the rooted certainties and simplicities of a vanishing peasant-culture. More of that innate Manichaeism which excuses sex only because it is useful for breeding, more of that puritanism which apologizes for pleasure because it is merely a by-product of this. More of that fallacy that the future is more important than the present, and that the child yet to be takes priority over the living man and woman, who after

⁴ *Sunday Times*, May 15, 1960.

all are only potential parents. It is allowed that Rome knows what's what about human nature, and is supple enough with accommodations to its weaknesses, but that these turn out to be fidgety and rather mean concessions, like taking advantage of the safe period. Enter the figure of a cleric beetling his brows at sex unless it sends up the birth-rate of his co-religionists.

Perhaps some of the priests are to blame for this obscuring of their image as the dedicated defenders of true sexuality, who can be depended on until the last ditch, and who are cherishing the present happiness of the partners unpreoccupied with their hypothetical child. Yet they are not the only sectaries, and their opposite numbers among the sex-emancipators are no less easy to caricature, as when they assert that sex is merely a no-nonsense matter of individual hygiene or alternatively descant on it more dizzily as a lyric and perhaps the highest manifestation of the sacred. The subject, however, has too great dignity for us to allow the tension it contains to be divided between the partisans of procreation and recreation respectively. Then we might be faced with some surprises, the former claiming the happier love-songs, the latter the bonnier babies. Human nature is more baffling than would appear from ideologies, not least when we discover that the technique of freeing ourselves from physical consequences may carry with it an increasing psychological anxiety.

We address ourselves instead to the difficulty, commonly unresolved, about the right order for what are called the primary and secondary ends of marriage. St Augustine's enumeration of the threefold blessing or benefits, *proles*, *fides*, and *sacramentum*, which can be translated roughly as fruitfulness, faithfulness, and fun, if the last be understood as play or *quies* with good no longer sought but found, has been variously scaled down to more localized systems of reference. Thus the Code of Canon Law⁵ states bluntly that the primary end of marriage is the procreation and education of offspring, the secondary end being mutual help and a remedy for concupiscence. The Book of Common Prayer varies the order, but without speaking of primary and secondary: 'first, it was ordained for the procreation of children, secondly, for a remedy against sin, third for mutual society'. Following the Lambeth Conference of 1958, the Report of the Committee of the Church of Scotland, already referred to, now contrasts these purposes in order of importance, and submits that procreation is the second purpose of marriage, the first being the life-long companionship, help and comfort of husband and wife.

⁵ c.1013, i.

The shift of emphasis is obvious. But is a change of doctrine necessarily implied? Does it necessarily warrant support or even permission for the use of contraceptives? Certainly many non-Catholic divines are of the persuasion that the personal values released in intercourse are such that on occasion they can be sought even when steps have been taken to prevent conception. Nevertheless the statement that companionship is the principal purpose of marriage could be subscribed to by many who hold firmly to the traditional teaching that procreation is primary. I would not suggest that the differences between Latin and English speaking theologies are merely terminological, but that it is well to define our terms in their proper system of reference. If we are going to distinguish between various purposes in the single business of a man and a woman sharing their lives together we shall be making abstractions, and for these we shall need technical terms, such as primary and secondary, principal and subordinate, first and second, and these form a trio of different contrasts.

For, to cast back to the traditional view, can we conclude that a theologian who teaches that procreation is primary thereby relegates all other considerations to a minor place? The heritage left us by the medieval canonists would be enough to disprove us. Theirs was the effort to set the dignity of persons above tribal demands. And they were the contemporaries of theologians for whom the fact above all about marriage was that it was a sacrament, that is, a means of sanctifying or personal grace to the parties engaged. The question is both simple and subtle, and calls both for plain statement and methodic observation.

Let us look at two sets of distinctions, together with some of their applications, others being left to the reader. The first relates to the different levels of sex, the second to differences in logic when sex is taken as a collective and institutional idea and when it is taken as a general idea entering formally into every marriage.

IV

Students of Thomas Aquinas notice his habit of treating a topic in layers. For the sake of convenience these may be represented geologically, as though they were different strata lying on top of one another. This picture, however, needs to be corrected, since it does not do justice to the interpenetrating and unifying analogies of his thought which sees the complexity fused into a single substance. The main example is the division between the orders of nature and of grace, where the mistake of regarding it as the superimposition of one system on another has prompted a copious

theological literature. Another example is the successive consideration of sex rising from the biological through the psychological to the theological stages, and descending to the moral and the juridical.

Here again we should be warned. This is not so much a build-up as it were of different slabs, but a difference of types (or formal objects) revealed by taking a cross-section of what is in fact a single activity between two living persons. All the same it does represent a development through stages, not necessarily in a sequence of time, which we can call lower and higher, the higher manifesting fresh properties which cannot be reduced to the lower. Nor, and this is cardinal, do they abrogate what has gone before. A thing is no less vegetative because it is also sensitive, no less sensitive because it is also rational. Similarly a couple are no less animally sexual because they are man and woman, no less man and woman because they are also lovers, no less lovers because they are also married, and, we may add, no less married because they are also subjects of legislation by Church and State.

There is a continuity all the way up—or better, from a theological point of view, all the way down. However freely it may range away from physical compulsions and exactions, the noble intercourse of persons is sexual only when, respecting the conditions of its material, it is in harmony with that kind of human act which of its nature is able to produce life. This purpose has not to be explicitly intended, nor, because of factors outside what the partners seek to share, need it be executed. On the other hand, if it is excluded the act is no more sexual than any fizzy drink is champagne. The highest perfection of marital communion should offer no violence to the laws of human biology. This is not so much a surrender to our limitations as an acceptance of our nature as God has made it. Moreover it is the law of survival and health. As the Eighth Army would not have been able to fight without a line of supply, though this stretched all the way from the United Kingdom round the Cape, so human loving cannot be maintained when it is cut off from its bases in the material world though it may voyage far away from them.

*God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he them; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful.*⁶ Theologians would not have this primordial constitution subverted, and their condemnation of contraception is prompted less by the fear of human beings giving way to unregulated pleasure than to their fear of what will happen to them when they are uprooted. Here Catholicism is hardly a religion of uplift to

⁶ Gen. i, 27-8.

another world—but then, like the Apostles, it preaches the resurrection of the body, not a release from the body.

It is downright about the facts of life, and its working moralists call a spade a spade. Too down-to-earth, is the comment of divines of a dewier complexion, too much of the shovel and too little of the agricultural implement. And we can partly sympathize with them, for solemn writing confined to the rudiments of sex can be no less objectionable than the coarse humour which says that all women are the same in the dark. The classical measures need to be charged with the romantic spirit. Although sex may be fundamentally genital, its so-called secondary characteristics are even more important outside the biological system of reference. Diffused sexuality belong to poetry and politeness. With this, however, the Latin moralists are not directly concerned, but with what men are for and women are for when they make love together, this *for* being conceived as a clear-cut type of activity, embedded in the physical nature of things, and expressed in impersonal and sometimes quasi-legal terms. Their temper is that of the Mediterranean, not of the mistier Baltic.

They recognize that their concepts are abstractions, but they are not nominalists to whom general ideas provide a merely verbal coverage for a group of facts, but realists dealing with specific notes embodied in reality. There is no attempt at reducing the rich variety of individual experience to one flat formula, not even of reducing the manifold values in that type of action called marital loving to plain masculinity or femininity. A psychologist could well be worried by a patient whose reactions were exclusively either virile or womanly. A marriage is all the happier when husband and wife know when to switch roles, and not just with washing the dishes. So the Latin moralists are well aware that they are isolating one element, namely the male-female relationship, and do not mistake it for the entire situation. What they are insisting on is that it cannot be removed without changing the whole.

As to the ranking of purposes, we observe that what is basic is primary in the sense that it comes first. An order of sequence is indicated. So we speak of primary rocks, primary schools, and presidential primaries; so St Thomas says that a starving man's primary need is food, not religious instruction. Yet it is not paramount in the order of importance.

V

Let us now lift from the compound activity of sex another sense in which its generative power is said to be primary, by considering the distinction between collective and distributive generalizations

on a subject, that is, between notions which apply to a class of things as a whole and thence can be referred somehow to its members and those which apply formally to each individual in a class. There is a difference between the purpose of the whole considered as a group and the purpose of the whole as exemplified in each particular. The end intended by a team is not precisely the end intended by the players taken singly, though all have their diverse functions in bringing it about. Similarly when we consider the Church as an organism stretching through time and displaying a hierarchy of powers and graces, we can ascribe purposes to it in which every Christian somehow shares but which are not formally effected in him. On the other hand, if we consider the Church as a companionship of friends in Christ, then the essential goal of every Christian is the same.⁷

When moral theologians describe procreation as the primary purpose of marriage, in what sense are we to take the generalization? Do they signify marriage *en bloc* or each and every marriage without exception? Something more than the first, but less than the second, for they pass beyond a collective judgment to a judgment about what is to be expected from the majority of cases, which, however, does not amount to a genuinely universal idea about marriages.

They notice that the divine command, *Increase and multiply*, is laid on the race, not on every capable adult, otherwise it would be difficult to defend the vow of celibacy. Much of their argument is about the domestic community as an institution of nature, the purpose of which is to bear and educate children. It is the stable foundation of the wider political community, and so is established by law and custom. The generative purpose will be carried out in the normal marriage, but normal here has a statistical sense, not indeed of the average, but of the most. They also require that nothing must be intended or executed in sexuality which is contrary or positively opposed to its generative nature. But they do not deny the true nature of marriage to unions which are childless for other reasons, whether by choice, chance, or physical circumstances, nor the true character of sexuality to intercourse from which conception will not follow. Clearly, then, they do not mean that procreation is primary in the sense that actual generation or its reasonable expectation is an essential condition.

What they are doing is to consider marriage by and large. The very term *primary* tends to go with a class. When Thomas Aquinas

⁷ For the distinction between the good of each and all and the good of the group, see *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. xli, 2. St Thomas is considering marriage. For a fuller social development, see T. Gilby, *Between Community and Society*, Longmans, 1953, pp. 105-23, 194-202.

wants to emphasize the dominant, and notably when he is speaking of the action of causes, that is, individual and personal substances, he uses the term *principal*: I can only wish that his usage had been consistent in this present question. What then is principal in marriage considered not as an institution nor as in most marriages, but as in the life of as lived by all persons who enter into it? The answer is straightforward: the grace of God through their mutual giving and taking. Indeed the fruitfulness which is the blessing of marriage is not confined to offspring, but is found whenever the partners are helping one another to grow, and to grow together. We touch here the Christian mystery, the sacrament signifying the conjunction of Christ with his Church, and remember St Paul's echo of Isaias: *Rejoice thou barren that beareth not; break forth and cry thou that travaileth not; for more are the children of the desolate than she which hath an husband.*⁸

So Hugh of St Victor gave eminence to the sacrament of choice over the office of begetting in wedlock, so the great canonists and theologians of the Middle Ages purified the crudities of their predecessors and, discerning the form in the matter, stressed the dignity of consent above the physical commingling.⁹ And so recent Catholic moral theologians have set themselves to heighten the personal values which should shine through marriage, not by turning upside down the traditional order of purposes, but by lifting the service of life into the companionship of charity.¹⁰ Rome

⁸ Gal. iv, 27.

⁹ Suppl. xlix, 3 gives a classical compression. See also G. Le Bras, *Mariage. Formation de la doctrine classique*. DTC, IX, ii, 2162-2223.

¹⁰ Thus in the admirable course of moral theology by the Redemptorist, Fr Bernard Häring, *Das Gesetz Christi* (Wewel, Freiburg; 1957), now translated into French, *La Loi du Christ* (Desclée, Paris; 1959). Marriage is treated in the third volume, pp. 381-510. It is to be hoped that this work will be made accessible to English readers, who at present have to make do with more legalistic manuals. Fr Häring draws on the living springs of the Scriptures and proceeds in the true temper of the science of theology.

Among monographs addressed to the general reader I would mention *Man and Wife*, the Physical and Spiritual Foundation of Marriage, by Marc Oraison, translated by André Humbert, with an Introduction by John Marshall (Longmans, 12s. 6d.). The author, a priest who is also a doctor, writes with dignity and a sense of proportion. Love is taken unaffectedly as divine friendship; this, the central theme, is integrated into a philosophy of our place in nature, which starts from the recognition of the conditions of our physiology, and thence is developed through instinctive and personal relationships.

Then come two Faith and Fact books (Burns Oates). *Christian Marriage*, by Jean Fabrègues, translated by Rosemary Haughton (7s. 6d.), is written in a looser and more colourful style, but gives a useful account of the debate about the ends of marriage. The 'I-Thou' relationship must be rooted in a 'We' which implies others—and God. Romanticism in French religious writers usually turns out to be only skin-deep. *Sex and the Christian*, by Reginald F. Trevett (8s. 6d.) primed with Scheeben and Masure and so forth, provides good fare, but is cooked without salt. A figure of fiction, called 'the Christian', confronts the sexual climate in which the cases of the Kinsey Reports appear to live.

has checked tendencies towards the cult of personality which have showed themselves, which, holding the world well lost for love, would exalt the solace and enrichment of a couple together by detaching them from the living flow of racial processes, and would suggest that a baby was a stranger to their personal values, or that 'companionship' could be independent of the family.

Finally it should be remarked that the formal witness of the Church is more concerned with conditions than with occurrences. It allows for the mistakes we make, not least in the field of sex, where nature itself does not work tidily. Unfortunate incidents, however numerous, can be left to the robust conscience and ready contrition of the faithful. What the Church cannot do is to remain silent when what is wrong is proclaimed not to be wrong. Then an erroneous morality settles on us and from excusing ourselves we present come to believe that we have no guilt. In this respect acts can be good or bad, but habits are better or worse, for what we do is not so profound as what we are. Sins are a difficulty, vices a problem. Consequently the Church takes its stand, not against persons but against the causes that may carry them away, and its condemnation is not of the goings on of individuals but of a settled contraceptive attitude.

PERSONAE

6. Victor White, O.P.

(† May 22, 1960)

D*EUM et animam scire cupio*: St Augustine, it will be admitted, had the right to say this, and those who knew Father Victor can have no doubt that he too, in his measure, could have made the same astonishing claim; though they cannot possibly imagine him ever making it. His modesty, his ultra-English intellectual shyness, was almost excessive; such was his aversion to putting on airs that to get him to talk about any of the deep matters that his mind habitually dwelt on was like trying to capture a squirrel. He dodged and dived away. Yet he was, undoubtedly, a master in Israel, with a very strong sense of the responsibilities of a *magister sacrae paginae*. And he knew his own mind. If he was absent-minded, if he often seemed to be moving about in a prolonged and, to the observer, quite comical daydream, you had only to hear him addressing a class or to read a page of his writings to realize that his judgment, though scholarly and subtle, was perfectly definite and that he infinitely preferred the plainest of downright statements to anything like hinting or ironical obliqueness. Irony indeed is one of the things that his prose lacks. It is unalterably serious; every