

Sexuality and Conscience

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This is based on a lecture delivered at the Annual Conference of the Catholic Theological Society of South Africa, in St Augustine College, Johannesburg, September 2005

Introduction

Human sexuality receives endless coverage in the popular media and in theological dissertations. In the mass media one has the impression that sexuality is something that exists merely as a casual source of pleasure and entertainment. On the other hand, Catholic hierarchical and theological statements sometimes give the idea that sexuality is a dangerous phenomenon that can be indulged in only under the most stringently controlled circumstances. Confronted with these two apparently irreconcilable views, I have attempted to summarise what might be a balanced approach to sexuality for Christians under nineteen headings or 'theses'.

- 1 **Conscience has always been the ultimate source of morality for individuals.**
In spite of the fact that at various stages in the history of Christianity there have arisen strongly authoritarian and controlling leaderships, it can not be denied that an individual can be guilty of a sin only when he or she freely and knowingly performs an action that is seriously offensive to God or neighbour. The fact that civil and Church laws may sometimes attach a penalty to an action which does not have all those traits does not take from the reality that sin always requires full knowledge and consent.
- 2 **The autonomy of the individual conscience is the consequence of the freedom of each person, created in the 'image and likeness of God'.** It is therefore not something that is based on a particular theological or philosophical system, and is not open to disputation. The autonomy of Conscience was clearly stated in the Vatican II document '*Church in the Modern World*' but does not depend on that or any other document for its validity.
- 3 **The autonomy of Conscience (and the responsibility to act according to it) does not change even if it is 'erroneous'.** At any given time one has one set of moral principles and one body of information. With the exception of what might be called 'contrived error' (which is not really error, but malice) someone has no other reference point for moral action than the principles and data available at that time. It would, in fact, be immoral not to act

according to those principles and information. There is no reputable theologian that could deny this.

- 4 **In the domain of human sexuality the possibility of erroneous conscience is greater than in other areas ... given the enormous emotional influences that come to bear even in very wise individuals and cultures when clarifying teachings about sexuality.** This does not change the reality of the individual's autonomy. Nor does it change the fact that erroneous actions can frequently be extremely harmful. All of this highlights the importance of an enlightened teaching about sexuality.
- 5 **From the beginning, the teaching role of the Church has been fulfilled by example, motivation and reason. In recent history this teaching of the Church has been compromised, abandoned and challenged.** While Christ's 'methodology' was clearly based on example, witness and the highest motivation of love, the History of Christianity is replete with eras when the Church thought fit to use force and constraint in bringing about conformity with its teaching. The Church of the 21st century may not have the problems of the Crusades and the Inquisition, but it is still grappling with the problems of discarding its authoritarian image and methods.
- 6 **Judging is expressly excluded from the Church's mission.** The instruction "Judge not so that you may not be judged" is clear and repeated in the New Testament. In spite of that recurring instruction from Christ the Church can hardly be seen other than as a judgmental one. The distinction between the 'internal forum' (of conscience) and the 'external forum' (of external actions) has not always been respected, so that the popular notion of the Church and its ministers being a sort of 'moral police force' is widespread even in our time.
- 7 **In the past, and to a great extent today, the judgmental image of the Church persists.** This is a clear denial of the real mission of the Church, which is to make present in each culture and age the compassionate Christ. There have been and still are obvious exceptions, but one cannot escape from the fact that the Church is frequently seen as more interested in imposing rigid morality than ministering a compassionate and forgiving Christ.
- 8 **The judgmental image of the Church damages or destroys its ability to teach effectively.** The duty of the Church to "go ... teach" is binding in moral as well as dogmatic matters. However that teaching role cannot be adequately fulfilled if it is hampered by

credibility issues. The well-documented crisis that arose when Pope Paul VI published '*Humanae Vitae*' (1968), forbidding the use of artificial contraceptives, is taken by many as the beginning of the modern-day credibility crisis in the Church in our time.

- 9 **The teaching of the Church on many moral issues has changed. The possibility of further change (including about sexuality) can not be excluded.** Clear cases of reversal of moral teaching have emerged ... on slavery, on usury, on capital punishment, on political structures etc. Even on matters of sexuality and marriage, the Church has changed its doctrine about the ends of marriage, and a more enlightened knowledge of biology has changed the attitude to masturbation. The perception that sexuality is 'sacred moral ground' might therefore not be quite accurate.
- 10 **The general belief that moral teaching about sexuality is of 'divine origin' may not be valid.** The ongoing debate about homosexual activity being explicitly condemned by Scriptures is an example where certain theologians believe that the Scriptures are being misinterpreted to serve a particular agenda. The regulation of Marriage by the Code of Canon Law, including certain cases where a valid marriage may be annulled, reflects a changing tradition about marriage in Christianity and can not always be seen as 'revealed'.
- 11 **Teaching based on fear does not work, and is probably counterproductive.** The practice of discouraging unacceptable sexual practices by installing fear (of Hell, of being barred from Sacraments, of 'detection, conception and infection') appears not to have worked, and certainly does not work at present. This attitude does not encourage the process of maturing in young people, and fosters a careless attitude towards authentic teaching about sexuality, which is what the Church should be engaged in. (One is slightly encouraged by the recent announcement of the establishment of a 'Christian Institute of Sexuality' in Nairobi, staffed by medical practitioners as well as theologians.)
- 12 **For there to be sin (serious subjective guilt) there must be grave matter, full knowledge, full consent.** This is not a construct of some theologian, but a direct consequence of the doctrine of humanity's dignity, arising from rationality and freedom. Thus, if anything hampers the acquiring of full knowledge by an individual, it also destroys the possibility of grave sin in that matter. Likewise, anything that interferes with an individual's freedom (e.g. intoxication, fear, external force, anger etc.) also renders grave sin impossible. In a recent discussion on this subject a number of

Catholics asked me: "Why does the Church not teach us about such things?"

- 13 **In spite of the history of casuistry it is conscience that decides if matter is grave or not.** The possibility that the conclusion of a person of good will may not conform to the Church's authoritative teaching, even in matters of sexuality, must be accepted. This is more likely to happen where the level of education of lay members of the Church is now much higher than in any previous era of the Church's life.
- 14 **Assuming that there is 'objective rightness' in moral matters, it is difficult for there to be 'full knowledge' in the pervasive counter-witness of the modern permissive global village.** In many instances the Church's teaching role in matters related to sexuality has been confined to frequently incompetent homilies and judgmental statements from authorities, while the mass media have access to the most advanced technologies and competence in promoting its permissive and promiscuous doctrines. This highlights the urgent need for the Church to re-assess its methods of teaching, and the need to provide emotional support for young people who are being bombarded with negative messages.
- 15 **In immature people, especially in sexual matters, the possibility of full consent is diminished or destroyed.** In the last century many studies have been done to illustrate the manner in which people grow in moral awareness. The names of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg come to mind, but similar conclusions to theirs have been reached in other disciplines than psychology. The emerging conviction is that young people are unable to act on the basis of moral principles, but act on the basis of the accepted norms of peers and role models. The accepted norms are frequently alien to those of Christianity.
- 16 **Psychosexual and moral immaturity are extremely common, to the extent that some say that maturity is the exception rather than the rule.** Some studies have put the percentage of adults that are immature as high as 90%. The consequence is that all youths and many adults are determined in their moral behaviour, not by internally owned principles, but by the accepted norms of the society to which they belong. In a sexually permissive society like the present one, the consequences are enormous. To combat this situation which is clearly destructive of family life and society in general, the Church (and, indeed, society) must set in place processes to foster growth in maturity. Those processes can never be authoritarian. Likewise support structures must be set in place to

provide nurturing environments for those who are still at the maturing stage.

- 17 **The 'traditional' view that all 'unacceptable' behaviour in matters of sexuality is objectively grave, is being challenged theologically and is gradually disappearing.** The origins of this '*semper grave*' principle are obscure, but whereas it was an accepted principle in the Moral Theology Manuals of the early twentieth century, it is difficult to find it being proposed in modern theology.
- 18 **The past tendency of the Church to legislate rather than foster growth and maturity is not the result of 'malice and stupidity' but of an exaggerated paternal / maternal awareness of human weakness, especially in sexual matters.** It is similar to what can happen in families. Parents are sometimes hesitant to allow their older children the freedom to exercise their maturity, not because they do not wish their children to be happy, but because of an exaggerated fear that they will hurt themselves or others. In practice, while teaching the doctrine of freedom of conscience, the Church has frequently failed to grant the liberty to exercise conscience.
- 19 **The Church's traditional role of 'imposing moral standards' in the external forum (especially where there would appear to be departures from moral norms) is legitimate, but can contribute to its judgmental image and consequent lack of credibility.** The practice of refusing sacraments (especially the Eucharist) to unmarried mothers, statements about not ordaining men with homosexual tendencies, disciplining parents for the 'misbehaviour' of their children who are of age, are examples of where such 'standards' are imposed. As mentioned, this can give a negative image of the Church and, therefore, should be used sparingly. The secular media were amused recently when the Church was reported to be 're-instating' Judas Iscariot. However, if this action is a sign that the Church is realising that judging is not part of its duties, it might well be a progressive step.