

Catholicism in the Third Millennium

Second Edition

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With focus questions, glossary,
and additions to the bibliography
prepared by Catherine E. Clifford



A Michael Glazier Book

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For Michael Glazier

forms and emphases in its history. The new rite stresses healing of the sick from the effects of evil and sin, that is, from sickness, suffering, and our fear of death. It brings Christ's healing grace and strengthens those close to death with the promise of the resurrection.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. When Christians express concern today that we no longer pay sufficient attention to the reality of sin, what do you think they mean? How would you respond to their concern?
2. Compare the experience of the sacrament of reconciliation as it was celebrated in the "old way" (anonymous confession in a darkened confessional box) with the "new way" (face-to-face confession in a reconciliation room with Scripture reading, more informal dialogue, and varied penance). In what ways can the "new way" be seen as a return to a more ancient practice?
3. Have you had any experience of the sacrament of anointing according to the old rite and/or according to the new rite? Compare and contrast the varied emphases of these two approaches.
4. What would you say to a person who expressed fear over receiving the sacrament of the sick?
5. Do you see reconciliation as part of the ministry of Christian leadership? How do you give witness to God's mercy, forgiveness, and healing in your context?

8. Sexual Morality and Social Justice

Christian discipleship should inform both our interpersonal and our social lives. Sexual morality is concerned with the appropriate expression of the drive for intimacy, love, and generativity, which plays such an important role in our interpersonal relationships. Social justice describes what happens when our societies are organized in such a way that each person is respected and all are able to participate in the social, political, and economic life of the community. The issues raised by both of these areas touch us personally. Both have been addressed extensively by the teaching authority of the Church, and both are areas of controversy that generate considerable emotion, concern, and very different reactions to Church authority.

Some Catholics today disagree with Church teaching on questions of birth control, divorce and remarriage, sexual relations outside of marriage and between committed homosexuals, and (to a lesser extent) abortion. Other Catholics, who accept the Church's teachings on these issues, have considerable difficulty accepting its teaching in the areas of social justice, for example, on the right of peoples to immigrate, the question of using nuclear weapons as a deterrent, and the implications of the principle of distributive justice, which affirms the right of all members of a national community to participate equitably in its economic life. Similarly, in the past some Catholics disagreed with the Church's teaching on the right of workers to join unions or with its condemnation of the evil of racism and segregation. In this chapter we need to consider both sexual morality and social justice.

SEXUAL MORALITY

It is only honest to acknowledge that the Catholic Church has been profoundly ambivalent in its attitude toward human sexuality. On the one hand, it has always recognized sexuality as a good, a gift of God given to our first

parents for their mutual love and for bringing new life into the world. This has remained the deepest conviction of the Catholic tradition. On the other hand, the Church has often seemed fearful of sexuality's mysterious power. Echoing Augustine's pessimism, it has too often narrowed the meaning of sexual union to procreation, barely tolerated the pleasure in each other that accompanies it, and developed around it a moral theology that has tended to view sexuality in terms of disembodied acts rather than complex human relationships.

The Catholic view that human sexuality is a divine gift that finds its appropriate genital expression in a loving and exclusive relationship, open to new life, is rooted in Scripture. The Book of Genesis teaches that sex is for procreation (1:28) and mutual love (2:18-24). The Song of Songs, a frankly erotic poem, celebrates the physical love of man and woman. Jesus presupposed the divine institution of marriage and affirmed its permanence. By rejecting the provision of the Mosaic Law that allowed a man to divorce his wife but not the reverse, he taught a mutuality in sexual relationships that had not been honored in the tradition. Paul recognizes marriage as a charism, a gift of grace for the building up of the Church (1 Cor 7:7). The Letter to the Ephesians sees the intimate union of husband and wife as a great mystery (*mysterion*) that images the union of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:31-32), an intuitive understanding of what the later Church would recognize as the sacramentality of marriage.

Lisa Sowle Cahill emphasizes that the Bible sees sexuality not in isolation but always in relation to the community. Still, there are biblical texts condemning certain types of sexual acts that are considered deviant from the general norm of heterosexual, monogamous, permanent marriage. These include

adultery (Lev 20:10; Gen 39:9; Prov 2:17; Sir 23:16-21; Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18; Mark 7:22; Matt 5:28; 15:19; 1 Cor 6:9); fornication (Sir 42:10; Deut 22:13-21; Lev 19:29; *porneia* or "sexual immorality" as including fornication, Mark 7:21; Matt 15:19; 1 Cor 5:9-11; 7:2; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3, 5), homosexual acts (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:27; 1 Cor 6:9).

Cahill presents these texts not to suggest that the Bible offers a systematic reflection on sexuality but because these acts are seen by the biblical authors as being incompatible with the life of faith in the religious community. Much more important is the nature of the community and the characteristics of the life of its members.¹

¹"Humanity as Female and Male: The Ethics of Sexuality," *Called to Love: Towards a Contemporary Christian Ethic*, ed. Francis A. Eigo (Villanova, Pa.: Villanova Univ. Press, 1985) 87.

Certainly the expectation is present from the beginning that those who have been baptized into Christ and into the community of his disciples should live in a way that reflects those two fundamental Christian realities. Paul instructs the community at Corinth to excommunicate one of its members who has been living in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother; his concern is not just for the individual but for the well-being of the community (1 Cor 5:1-13). Similarly, in the case of some Christians who are involved sexually with prostitutes, he argues that a union already exists between each of them and Christ, and therefore, any sexual union should reflect the holiness of this relationship (1 Cor 6:15-20). He is suggesting here a theology of sexual relations.

Development of Moral Theology

The early Christians, formed in part by the great conflict in Paul's time over circumcision and the Mosaic Law, did not understand their life in Christ in terms of a new moral law. They knew the teaching of Jesus that love of God, inseparably joined to love of neighbor, sums up at the commandments (Mark 12:29-31; Matt 22:37-40). They sought to internalize the gospel call to conversion. They were conscious of discerning the Spirit's presence in their communities and in their lives. Thus a post-New Testament Christian author, writing about how Christians lived among their neighbors but were different from them, pointed out that they didn't expose their children or share their wives with one another (*Ad Diognetus* 5).

How then did Catholic teaching on sexuality become so legalistic in its expression, so concerned with sin? John Mahoney, in his fine study of the development of Catholic moral theology, points especially to the legacy of Augustine and to the preoccupation with sin that developed in conjunction with the practice of auricular confession.²

Few thinkers have had a greater influence on Christian theology in the West than Augustine (354-430), bishop of Hippo. The doctrines of God, Trinity, grace, original sin, Church, sacrament, the Roman primacy—to mention just a few—bear his influence to this day. But as many have observed, there was a dark side to Augustine's thought, a profound pessimism evident in his view of the damage done by original sin to human nature and in his preoccupation with the problem of sin and evil.

This dark side was to mark Catholic theology in at least two significant ways. First, his principle that God does not command the impossible, formulated to stress the sovereign power of grace against Pelagius' emphasis on what human freedom could accomplish on its own, was to impart a rigorist dimension to Catholic moral teaching that has carried down over the centuries.

²*The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

Pius XI appealed to this principle in his condemnation of contraception in *Casti connubii* (1930),³ and John Paul II cited it in his 1993 encyclical on the principles of moral theology, *Veritatis splendor* (no. 103).⁴ Some today would see his same rigorist reasoning in the Church's teaching that the only moral option for a person who is homosexual in orientation is a life of celibacy.

Second, no doubt affected by his own long and difficult struggle for chastity, Augustine saw human sexuality after the fall as so dominated by lust that the only moral end of intercourse was procreation. This Augustinian doctrine also was to have a long history in Catholic theology. In the Middle Ages theologians following Augustine continued to teach that marital intercourse for pleasure rather than for procreation was sinful—mortally according to the rigorists, or at least venially in the view of the greater number of moral theologians.⁵

Another major factor that contributed to moral theology's preoccupation with sin was the introduction in the sixth century of the practice of auricular confession. Before that, sacramental reconciliation was reserved for apostasy, adultery, and murder; it was a public ritual and could be received only once in a person's lifetime, as we have seen. But the introduction of private confession, a practice borrowed from the monastic tradition, led to the development of the penitentials, books designed as an aid to priest confessors in discovering and classifying sins and assigning their proper penances. The first penitentials, simple and unsophisticated theologically, gave way later to more systematic *summas* for confessors, particularly after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) mandated yearly confession and Communion during the Easter season. These *summas* continued to proliferate—*summas* for confessors, *summas* of moral cases (particularly favored by the Jesuits), *summas* of moral theology—down into the mid-twentieth century. From this tradition a moral theology developed that was designed for confessors. Unfortunately, it was a moral theology cut off from dogmatic and spiritual theology. Trent's emphasis on the *judicial* role of the priest in confession contributed to its legalistic tone. Its preoccupation with sexual sins was heightened by a seventeenth-century declaration of the Vatican's Holy Office that "classified every transgression in matters of sexuality as objectively serious matter constituting mortal sin."⁶

The traditional teaching on sexuality coming from this moral theology was presupposed by Catholics—if not always honored—down to the time of the Second Vatican Council. But after the council the credibility of that teaching began to erode. In this process Church teaching on artificial con-

traception played a key role. Many had hoped that the council's reforms would soften the Church's strict approach to questions regarding sexuality. There were some encouraging signs. The council, in avoiding the traditional language of the "primary and secondary ends of marriage," finally moved away from the subordination of the mutual love of the spouses to procreation, which had been the Church's position since at least Augustine's time (GS 48–50).

In 1963 Pope John XXIII appointed an international committee to investigate the Church's traditional ban on contraception, particularly in response to the anovulant "birth control pill" developed by Dr. John Rock and others in the late 1950s. But in 1968 Pope Paul VI rejected contraceptive methods in his encyclical *Humanae vitae*. Commentators on Catholic theology have made the point that *Humanae vitae* dealt the teaching authority of the magisterium a blow from which it has yet to recover.⁷

But there were other factors as well that contributed to a loss of confidence in the Church's sexual doctrine, among them the so-called sexual revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, helped by the wide availability of contraceptive pills, the women's movement, and an increasing dissent from the magisterium's sexual doctrine (particularly after *Humanae vitae*) on the part of Catholic theologians.

In 1976, concerned that even faithful Christians were "unsettled," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics."⁸ The declaration reaffirmed the Church's traditional teachings in no uncertain terms. These teachings, it argued, are based on certain precepts of the natural law that have "an absolute and immutable value" (no. 4). According to Christian doctrine, "every genital act must be within the framework of marriage" (no. 7); thus any sexual acts outside of that context are forbidden. The declaration singled out masturbation, premarital sex, and homosexual acts for special consideration and reaffirmed the tradition that there is no "parity of matter" where sex is concerned: "The moral order of sexuality involves such high values of human life that every direct violation of this order is objectively sinful" (no. 10).⁹

It is not the place in a book such as this to enter into an involved discussion of all the questions raised today in regard to the Catholic Church and sexuality. It will have to suffice to present the Church's official teaching and, at the same time, to point out some of the questions that are being raised today by Catholic moral theologians. We will consider birth control, abortion, masturbation, premarital sex, and homosexual relations.

³Ibid., 53–54.

⁴*Origins* 23 (October 14, 1993).

⁵John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965) 251–52.

⁶Mahoney, *Making of Moral Theology*, 33.

⁷See, for example, George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli, *The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Values* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987) 51.

⁸*Origins* 5 (1976) 485–94.

⁹For a survey of reactions to the declaration, see Richard A. McCormick, "Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 38 (1977) 100–14.

Birth Control

Although contraception by any means had been condemned by theologians since at least the fourth century, it did not become a critical question until the end of the nineteenth, when the practice of birth control began to become more common in Europe. After a number of statements against contraception by national hierarchies and a qualified approval of contraceptive methods by the 1930 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops, Pope Pius XI condemned any form of contraception in his encyclical on marriage, *Casti connubii* (1930). Pius XII moved Catholic teaching forward a step in 1951 when, in his address to the Italian Society of Catholic Midwives, he approved periodic abstinence during a woman's fertile period for the purpose of avoiding conception, provided there was sufficient reason. This was the so-called rhythm method.

With the appearance of contraceptive pills in the 1950s, the question of artificial contraception was raised with a new intensity. Paul VI did not want the Second Vatican Council to enter into the discussion of the question; instead, he expanded to sixty-nine members the international commission set up by John XXIII to study the Church's teaching on contraception.

In 1967 the commission voted sixty-four to four (Archbishop Karol Wojtyła—later Pope John Paul II—did not attend the meeting) in favor of changing the traditional teaching that all use of contraceptives was immoral. Nevertheless, after an agonizing consideration of the issue, Paul VI reaffirmed the traditional ban in his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, arguing that "each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life" (no. 11) because of the inseparable link between the unitive and procreative meanings of the sexual act (no. 12).

Few questions have been as divisive for contemporary Roman Catholicism as this papal teaching against contraception. The encyclical represents an authoritative but noninfallible exercise of the magisterium, as the Vatican pointed out at the time it was released. Episcopal conferences in as many as thirteen countries showed a tendency to mitigate the papal position in their responses.¹⁰ Charles Curran, a moral theologian at that time at The Catholic University of America, authored a statement dissenting from the pope's position; Curran argued that spouses could responsibly decide according to their conscience that artificial contraception in some circumstances is permissible and indeed necessary to preserve and foster the values and sacredness of marriage. Over six hundred theologians, priests and academics, signed his statement. Today many theologians take the position that the unitive and procreative meanings of sexuality need to be kept together in principle, but not necessarily in every act of intercourse.

¹⁰See Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1987) 237–38.

The debate sparked by *Humanae vitae* has continued over the years.¹¹ At the 1980 Synod of Bishops on the family in Rome, Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco spoke for many—laity, clergy, and no doubt a number of bishops—when he observed that there was widespread opposition among Catholics to the encyclical's teaching on the intrinsic evil of each and every use of contraceptives. He cited a study that indicated that 76.5 percent of American Catholic women were using some form of birth control, and 94 percent of these were using methods condemned by the encyclical. Quinn suggested that the Church try to create a new context for its teaching on contraception emphasizing what the Church has said about responsible parenthood; that it begin a dialogue with theologians on the problems raised by dissent from the teachings of *Humanae vitae*; and that careful attention be given to the way in which encyclicals are written and communicated.¹²

Abortion

If the traditional teaching of the Church against contraception has not been widely received by the Catholic faithful, the situation in regard to abortion is quite different. Most Catholics today believe that to directly terminate life in the womb is a serious moral evil, even if not all of them are agreed on how best to address the problem of abortion in a pluralistic society such as the United States.

From its earliest days the Catholic tradition has been against abortion.¹³ The *Didache*, which dates from the early second century, teaches that "you shall not kill a child by abortion, nor kill it at birth" (2.2). It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that this tradition began to be challenged by an increasingly secular world, giving rise to a number of papal and episcopal statements concerned in part with the relation between law and morality.¹⁴ On January 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its *Roe v. Wade* decision on abortion, permitting the direct termination of pregnancy up to the end of the third trimester. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its *Declaration on Procured Abortion* in November 1974. The 1983 revised Code of Canon Law states that "a person who procures a completed abortion incurs an automatic excommunication" (can. 1398). Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* reaffirmed in the strongest terms the Church's teaching on abortion, stressing that all are called to a greater responsibility to protect innocent human life.

¹¹For a survey of reactions to the encyclical see Richard A. McCormick, "Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 30 (1969) 635–44; 40 (1979) 80–97.

¹²"New Context for Contraception Teaching," *Origins* 10 (1980) 263–67.

¹³See John Connery, *Abortion: The Development of the Roman Catholic Perspective* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1977).

¹⁴Richard A. McCormick, "Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974) 325

Although the Church has not determined officially when human life actually begins, it has taken the course of maintaining that human life is present from the moment of conception or fertilization. This means that it considers any intervention such as an I.U.D. (intrauterine device) or a "morning after" pill, which prevents a fertilized ovum from becoming implanted in the wall of the uterus, as an abortifacient.

A number of Catholic theologians such as Richard McCormick, Charles Curran, Bernard Häring, and Karl Rahner suggest that discoveries in reproductive biology make it unlikely that an individual human life can be present until two or three weeks after fertilization. "Hominization" requires two changes to take place in the early embryo. First, it must pass the stage of "twinning," the stage during which the embryo can divide into two or more, after which there is the certainty that the individuality of one or more embryos has been established. Second, it must change "from a cellular form of human life to a form which begins to display the differentiation characteristic of the human organism."¹⁵ This argument leaves a limited period of fourteen to twenty-one days, a gray area within which, for serious reasons such as rape or incest, an early embryo might be terminated. Others, however, argue that human life is so sacred that even potential human life must be protected. Indeed, it is important to note that Church documents "generally place the fight against abortion in the larger context of respect for life at all stages and in all areas."¹⁶

A therapeutic abortion, removing a fetus for medical reasons such as an embryo that has become lodged in the fallopian tube and thus cannot develop to term (ectopic pregnancy) or in the process of removing a cancerous uterus, is a different question. Such procedures would constitute an indirect abortion; they are permissible and necessary to save the life of the mother.

How can the Church win a greater hearing for its position on the sanctity of life? In a recent article Todd David Whitmore has made the case that the Church's position would be much stronger if it subsumed the language of "right to life" under its traditional notion of the "common good," and if it set abortion in the context of the issue of gender roles in society. Using a survey that lists as the most common reason for having an abortion the inability to continue work or education if the pregnancy were brought to term, he argues that the Church needs to more adequately recognize women's rights to participate in the public realm, so that "reproductive freedom" is not perceived as the only way to guarantee that right.

At the present time, despite some helpful steps in this direction on the part of the American bishops, the Church continues to treat social roles along gen-

der lines, stressing women's role in the home and family without adequately recognizing their right to participate equally in the public realm. One way to do so would be to teach that men also have responsibilities in the domestic realm, so that the question of child care would be a joint discernment within a family and not merely the responsibility of the woman. In the case of single women, the Catholic community as an eschatological community should be willing to provide support for raising a child that is at least commensurate with the sacrifices it expects of the woman. Since raising a child is an eighteen-year commitment, that means much more than offering one year of support.¹⁷

Masturbation

Magisterial pronouncements against masturbation occur as early as the eleventh century.¹⁸ The doctrine of no "parvity of matter" where sexual sins are concerned has contributed to masturbation assuming an inflated importance in Catholic moral theology and probably in the lives of many Catholics as well. Today opinions vary widely on the subject. Many see masturbation as a normal part of adolescent sexual awakening and maturing. In such cases there is often a diminished freedom and thus a lessening of responsibility. A compulsive habit of masturbation suggests that a healthy integration of one's sexuality has not yet taken place; it would seem to have different meanings in an adolescent and an adult, a married person and someone who is single.

Most Catholic moralists are reluctant to take the view that masturbation is merely a neutral form of sexual release. They point out that phenomenologically it suggests an expression of sexuality that is self-centered, solitary, and hedonistic rather than relational, mutual, and giving and thus is a frustration of the integrative dimension of our sexual nature. To engage in masturbation knowingly and deliberately is to inhibit the integration and personal transformation that is the fruit of life in the Spirit. Vincent Genovesi wisely observes that the fact that many people who experience periods of regular masturbation that alternate with periods of abstinence suggests that these people do not accept masturbation as a good; they see it as a sign of weakness, an embarrassment. "But a person's very lack of complacency, the unwillingness to grant masturbation a permanent and undisputed place in one's life, argues strongly that in such circumstances masturbation may more inspire a person to humility than be an expression of basic and serious sinfulness."¹⁹

¹⁷Todd David Whitmore, "Notes for a 'New, Fresh, Compelling' Statement," *America* 171 (October 8, 1994) 14-18.

¹⁸See John P. Dedek, *Contemporary Sexual Morality* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1971) 51-55.

¹⁹Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love*, 318.

¹⁵See Carol A. Tauer, "The Tradition of Probabilism and the Moral Status of the Early Embryo," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) 5-6.

¹⁶McCormick, "Notes on Moral Theology," 35 (1974) 490-91.

Premarital Sex

One of the most difficult topics to raise in a homily with undergraduates today is the subject of premarital sex. Instantly one senses a chilling of the atmosphere; heads go down, eyes are averted, the chapel becomes uncomfortably tense. Some of the couples sitting side by side are living together. As they leave the chapel at the end of the liturgy, most will look the other way rather than greet the presider. It is clear that the Church's teaching on premarital sex for many of them is unwelcome; they are not interested and some will say so explicitly.

Nor do they receive very helpful guidance from the colleges and universities they attend. At most, including Catholic ones, responsible administrators and professionals presume that students are sexually active. They are more concerned with respecting the diversity of their students than with giving anything that could be interpreted as narrowly "confessional." "Sexual responsibility" for eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds means that sex be consensual and safe. As Michael Hunt, a Paulist priest with many years experience as a university campus minister, observes, the message is usually something like this: "We don't care how you behave sexually as long as you don't force yourself on anyone and you use a condom for safety."²⁰

Catholic theologians "always and everywhere" have held that premarital intercourse is a grave sin.²¹ Yet Catholics have been as much affected by changing societal attitudes toward sex as anyone else. According to Andrew Greeley, "at the present time only one out of six American Catholics thinks that premarital sex is always wrong."²²

The Church's deepest vision in regard to human sexuality is that the unitive and procreative meanings of sexual intercourse are intrinsically related, and thus it sees an inseparable relationship between matrimonial fidelity and sexual expression. Sexual intercourse represents the total gift of each to the other; if it is loving it implies commitment. But if the outward or physical sign is not the manifestation of an inner, spiritual reality that includes an unconditioned love and gift of self, if the union of a couple's bodies is not the symbol of the union of their spirits, their sex easily becomes exploitative. Without this self-gift and faithful commitment of each to the other, there is no community of love into which new life can be received and nurtured. The tragedy of abortion, some 1.5 million every year in the United States, occurs most often because couples enter into a sexual relationship before they are ready to welcome the new life to which it is ordered.

Today many young people use the term "relationship" to describe an exclusive but nonbinding sexual friendship. Because such relationships are essen-

²⁰*College Catholics: A New Counterculture* (New York: Paulist, 1993) 52.

²¹Dedek, *Contemporary Sexual Morality*, 36.

²²"Sex and the Single Catholic: The Decline of an Ethic," *America* 167 (1992) 345.

tially temporary, they are not able to realize either the unitive or the procreative meaning of sexuality. According to Richard McCormick, the Christian view is just the reverse: "It has been a Christian conviction that it is a relationship lived in the promise of permanency that prevents the collapse of sexual expression into a divisive, alienating, and destructive trivialization."²³ Or as Greeley has observed, "sex without public commitment is fraught with dangers of deception, self-deception and exploitation, particularly of women by men"²⁴

Some moralists today distinguish preceremonial from premarital sex, suggesting that once the commitment is there, sexual expression might be in some cases appropriate. But others ask, is the commitment really there if it is not yet able to be made publicly? And isn't it possible that consummating their union before they are ready to make that public commitment is to cut short a process of discernment—the whole point of a period of engagement—as to whether each is able to make that commitment?

One of the reasons so many marriages fail today is that too many couples short-circuit this discernment process. Rather than letting their sexual union be the seal and expression of a love that has grown to the point where they are deeply committed to each other, they begin living together before they have learned how to talk to each other, to share their innermost feelings, to be comfortably quiet in each other's presence, to be intimate with each other in various ways short of genital expression. It is easy to confuse "good sex" with genuine love, and when the sex is no longer new or exciting, they find out that the love it was supposed to express is not there. Unfortunately, this discovery often comes too late.

A different case is presented by the adult who is neither married nor given the charism of celibacy but who may be in an intimate relationship in which there is sexual expression. Lisa Cahill raises this question; she observes that our traditional framework for evaluating sexual relations is not particularly helpful here and suggests that in such cases the Christian community must take itself as a source of moral insight. Her argument is clearly challenging the tradition. But it is difficult to disagree with her comment that "responsibility in sexuality is no more an either/or, black-and-white matter than it is in other spheres of human moral existence, such as economics, war and peace, or respect for life. Exercises of sexuality which fulfill or depart from the norm are not all equally good or equally bad."²⁵

Homosexual Relations

One of the most difficult questions facing the Christian community today is posed by its official inability to recognize faithful and exclusive relations

²³McCormick, "Notes on Moral Theology," 35 (1974) 461.

²⁴Greeley, "Sex and the Single Catholic," 343.

²⁵Cahill, "Humanity as Female and Male," 91.

between those who are "constitutionally homosexual" or homosexual in orientation as appropriate expressions of intimacy and love.

There are a number of explicit condemnations of homosexual relations in both the Old and New Testaments, but many contemporary commentators and biblical scholars do not see in them a condemnation of homosexual relations as such, as the concept of the constitutional homosexual was unknown until modern times. In their judgment the biblical texts are concerned with participation in idolatrous worship by consorting with male and female temple prostitutes (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Deut 23:18; cf. 1 Kgs 14:24; 15:12), a common practice in the ancient Near East, or with violation of the duty of hospitality (Gen 19:4-8), or with pederasty (1 Cor 6:9-10; 1 Tim 1:10). A more difficult text is Romans 1:24-31, where Paul is clearly talking about homosexual relations in themselves; but the fact that he sees those he is condemning, both men and women, as giving up natural relations and choosing homosexual ones is taken as evidence that he did not understand homosexuality as a condition.²⁶ Other scholars of course do not agree with this interpretation, or they judge it irrelevant to the biblical condemnation.

It is clear today that a person does not choose to be homosexual, even if we are not yet sure just what causes a homosexual orientation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges that a homosexual orientation is not a matter of choice (2358). Thus the term "sexual preference" is inaccurate. The Church distinguishes between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity; it is only the latter that is considered immoral. The American Catholic bishops have stated that "homosexuals, like everyone else, should not suffer from prejudice against their basic human rights. They have a right to respect, friendship and justice. They should have an active role in the Christian community."²⁷

Irresponsible, promiscuous, or violent homosexual acts are as morally evil as heterosexual ones. The moral dilemma facing the Church today is what it might say to gays and lesbians who are in stable, exclusive, and faithful relationships and who want to express their love sexually. The official Church has not been able to move beyond its traditional condemnation of homosexual acts. But many moral theologians are questioning this position today. They ask, why cannot the question be seen in a broader context, so that it includes not just the act, but the quality of the relationship? Is it realistic to insist that the only moral possibility for homosexuals is celibacy, particularly given the recognition that the charism for celibacy is precisely a charism, given to some and not to others? Should not true homosexuals be encouraged to form stable and lasting relationships, even if these relation-

ships may sometimes involve sexual expression? These are difficult questions that will continue to trouble the Christian community.

Veritatis Splendor

Recently Pope John Paul II, himself a moral philosopher and former professor of ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin in Poland, intervened in the conversation over fundamental moral theology and its applications. In his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* (1993) his concern was to reaffirm the traditional teaching of Catholic moral theology that the negative precepts of the natural law are universally valid (no. 52). Showing a remarkable familiarity with the contemporary debate, he specifically rejected teleological, proportionalist, and consequentialist ethical theories for holding "that it is never possible to formulate an absolute prohibition of particular kinds of behavior" that would in every case be in conflict with the moral values indicated by reason and revelation (no. 75). Thus he was reaffirming the existence of "intrinsically evil acts," actions that are always wrong in themselves apart from the circumstances and intention of the one acting (no. 80). He also reaffirmed the traditional concept of mortal sin, maintaining that one's fundamental option or orientation toward God can be radically changed by particular acts (no. 70).

Veritatis splendor is a powerful restatement of the tradition. It deserves careful consideration, the religious respect, and the obedience (*obsequium religiosum*) that is owed to an authoritative teaching of the ordinary papal magisterium (LG 25). But Catholics and other Christians will probably continue to raise questions of their tradition and the teaching of their Churches as they seek to integrate their personal and sexual lives with the gospel call to discipleship.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Perhaps one of the Second Vatican Council's most significant documents was its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*. This document, with its vision of the Church at the service of the world (GS 3) and its call for Christians to come to the relief of the poor (GS 69), was to inspire many Catholics to play an active role in the various liberation movements that have marked the latter part of the twentieth century.

But it is by no means the only example of recent Catholic magisterial teaching on social justice and human rights. The roots of the Church's social teaching are to be found in the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Scripture and in a rich tradition of Catholic social thought that includes over the centuries thinkers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Suarez, von Ketteler, Maritain, and John Courtney Murray as well as a tradition of papal social encyclicals reaching back over the last hundred years.

²⁶For a review of this discussion see Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love*, 262-73. See also Jeffrey S. Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

²⁷*To Live in Christ Jesus: A Pastoral Reflection on the Moral Life* (Washington: USCC, 1976) 19.

The Social Encyclicals

The social encyclicals of the popes represent the most recent ecclesial expression of the Church's social teaching. From Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* (1891) on the rights of workers, these social encyclicals have expanded in focus to embrace issues of development and economic justice between nations, technology and the arms race, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and a critique of both communism and capitalism. At the heart of this social teaching and grounding its pro-life stance is Catholicism's profound conviction of the preeminent value of every human person created in the image of God (GS 12). It is, unfortunately, a tradition too little known to most contemporary Catholics.²⁸ Richard P. McBrien distinguishes three periods in this tradition.²⁹

Stage I: 1891–1939. Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* (1891) was set in the context of the Industrial Revolution, which in both Europe and the United States allowed the laws of the marketplace to completely dominate the rights of workers. Wages were miserable, child labor was taken for granted, and any attempt of workers to form protective associations was resisted, often with force. *Rerum novarum* focused on those rights, particularly the right to a just wage that would support the workers' families and the right to join unions. The encyclical affirmed the right of private property but stressed that it must serve the common good; in other words, it was not an absolute right. It stressed that governments should intervene to prevent harm to individuals or to the common good.

According to Donal Dorr, by defending the rights of workers to join associations, including "workingmen's unions" (no. 36), Leo was moving beyond a call to conversion of the oppressors to address the problem of what would today be called the structural level of injustice. Yet the pope's approach was still quite conservative. Suspicious of the emerging trade-union movement because of its secularist and sometimes anti-Catholic character, he encouraged Catholic workers to form their own associations, with the result that the Church was not able to influence or support the labor movement as much as it might have.³⁰ Nevertheless, in calling attention to the issue of justice in the social order, Leo was raising the voice of the Church on behalf of the poor.

²⁸See Michael J. Schultheis, Edward P. DeBerri, and Peter J. Henriot, *Our Best Kept Secret: The Rich Heritage of Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington: Center of Concern, 1987).

²⁹See *Catholicism*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1994) 913–14. For the texts, see Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, eds., *Proclaiming Justice and Peace* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1991); Joseph Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching Since Pope John* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1976) covers from 1961 to 1975 and includes the more important documents from Medellín.

³⁰Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 26–27.

His encyclical provided a firm foundation for Catholic social teaching, one that would continue to function as a standard and a point of reference for subsequent popes.

Forty years later Pope Pius XI developed Leo's social teaching in his *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), formulating for the first time the principle of subsidiarity (nos. 79–80), the idea, based on the priority and rights of the individual and the family, that larger social bodies should not take over the responsibilities of smaller groups or associations. He also introduced the concept of social justice (*iustitia socialis*) as a "directing principle" or norm for public institutions and the economic order (nos. 88–90).

In 1937 Pius XI issued *Mit brennender Sorge*, an encyclical sharply critical of the Nazi government for violating the rights of the Catholic Church; it was read from all Catholic pulpits in Germany. In the last year of his life he was preparing an encyclical on the unity of the human race. A major section of the document, reportedly analyzing and condemning anti-Semitism in Germany and racism in the United States, was prepared at the pope's request by the American Jesuit John LaFarge. Unfortunately, someone in Rome thought the document, with its specific condemnation of anti-Semitism, inopportune, given the inflammatory political situation in Europe, and the completed draft was prevented from reaching the pope's desk. Pius XI died in 1939, without publishing what was to be his encyclical on racism.

Stage II: Post-World War II. The period after the Second World War saw an internationalization of Catholic social teaching. The documents appearing in this period dealt with the organization of the international community, the demands of social justice on the international level, and the moral issues raised by warfare in a nuclear age.

John XXIII's first encyclical, *Mater et magistra* (1961), called attention to the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The encyclical stressed the social function of private property and called for a reconstruction of social relationships. *Pacem in terris* (1963), his encyclical on peace, was an appeal to all people of good will. The pope called for a ban on nuclear weapons and stressed the responsibility of each individual to protect life: "If civil authorities legislate for, or allow, anything that is contrary to . . . the will of God, neither the laws made nor the authorizations granted can be binding on the consciences of the citizens, since 'we must obey God rather than men'" (no. 51).

The social teachings of the Second Vatican Council were contained in two documents that appeared in 1965. *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) treated the practice of social justice as part of the mission of the Church.³¹ *Dignitatis humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, was one of the most controversial of the council's documents. It was

³¹See Timothy G. McCarthy, *The Catholic Tradition: Before and After Vatican II* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Press, 1994) 251.

drafted by John Courtney Murray, the American Jesuit who had been silenced by Rome in the 1950s but was invited to the second session of the council at the insistence of Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York.

Pope Paul VI's *Populorum progressio* appeared in 1967. Besides repeating the traditional teaching that the right to private property is not absolute, the pope addressed the issue of land reform: "If certain landed estates impede the general prosperity because they are extensive, unused or poorly used, or because they bring hardship to peoples or are detrimental to the interests of the country, the common good sometimes demands their expropriation" (no. 24). He also rejected liberal capitalism as "a system . . . which considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligation" (no. 26). A nervous *Wall Street Journal* denounced the encyclical as "warmed-over Marxism."³²

Justice in the World (1971), the document of the Third Synod of Bishops, linked evangelization with a commitment to the transformation of the world: "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation" (no. 6).

Stage III: 1971- . The most recent stage of Catholic social teaching has dealt with the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the problems caused by technology, the arms race, torture and oppression, and includes a critique of both communism and capitalism.

Octogesima adveniens (1971), a letter sent by Paul VI to Cardinal Maurice Roy, president of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, deals with problems stemming from urbanization, including the condition of women, youth, and the new poor. Gregory Baum notes three significant points in the letter. First, it recognizes that socialism was an option for Catholics. Second, it takes a more nuanced approach to Marxism, rejecting it as a complete philosophical system and as a political form of government associated with dictatorship but acknowledging its usefulness as a form of social analysis, though one that must be used with the greatest care. Finally, the encyclical manifests an appreciation of the critical function of "utopia," a notion borrowed from the revisionist Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch that is able to provoke a vision of an alternative society.³³

Pope Paul's apostolic exhortation on evangelization, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975), stresses that evangelization has a social dimension as well as a personal

one. The former involves human rights, family life, peace, justice, development, and liberation (no. 29). The pope sees profound links between evangelization and liberation because the person "who is to be evangelized is not an abstract being but is subject to social and economic questions" (no. 31). He notes that though some base communities are characterized by a bitter criticism of the Church and its hierarchy, others cause the Church to grow and can be a place of evangelization (no. 58).

Evangelization belongs to the very mission of the Church; it is the responsibility of local Churches as well as of the universal Church. All Christians, clergy and laity alike, have an important role to play in evangelization.

Pope John Paul II's first social encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, appeared in 1981. It has been praised for being a genuine teaching document, one that seeks not just to instruct but to clarify and explain. Stressing the priority of labor over capital and of people over things, it offers an evenhanded critique of both liberal capitalism and Marxism. Developing a spirituality of labor, the pope sees work as necessary for human dignity and for the development of the kingdom.

A key concept for the pope is solidarity (no. 8). Its frequent appearance in the encyclical at the time when the Polish solidarity movement was engaged in its struggle with the country's Communist government "undoubtedly had the effect of giving a certain discreet aura of Vatican approval to the Polish Workers Movement."³⁴

Sollicitudo rei socialis (1987), John Paul's encyclical on the social concerns of the Church, was designed to celebrate and develop further Pope Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*. It emphasized the widening gap between the developed countries of the Northern Hemisphere and the underdeveloped countries of the Southern, attributing much of the blame for this situation to the existence of two opposing blocs, liberal capitalism in the West and Marxist collectivism in the East. The Church's social teaching is critical of both systems.

The pope makes it clear that the Church does not have a solution for the problem of underdevelopment, some "third way" between the two competing systems. Echoing liberation theology, he calls for "the option or love of preference for the poor," a concern for the poor that must condition "our daily life as well as our decisions in the political and economic fields" (no. 42). The encyclical represents the pope's strongest challenge to the affluent countries and is noteworthy for calling attention to ecological concerns (no. 39).

Centesimus annus (1991), marking the centenary of *Rerum novarum*, was published after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The encyclical is more positive toward capitalism, with its

³²March 30, 1967.

³³Gregory Baum, "Faith and Liberation: Development Since Vatican II," Gerald M. Fagin, ed., *Vatican II: Open Questions and New Horizons* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1984) 90-93.

³⁴Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983) 248; Dorr notes that the pope first analyzed solidarity as a concept in 1969 when he was archbishop of Cracow; see p. 245.

recognition of the positive role of business and its allowance for human creativity in the economy. Yet capitalism has its own inadequacies. It cannot be simply the goal of Third World and developing countries, where there is need to circumscribe freedom in the economic sector within a juridical framework that respects a more comprehensive notion of freedom rooted in ethical and religious values (no. 42).

Evangelium vitae, John Paul II's lengthy encyclical on human life, appeared in 1995. Taking as his point of departure "the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end" (no. 2), the pope calls on all people of good will to affirm "a new culture of human life" (no. 6). Examples of the contemporary lack of respect for life include the unjust distribution of resources that leads to poverty, malnutrition, and hunger for so many millions, the violence of wars and the scandalous arms trade, the reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance, the spread of drugs, and the promotion of certain kinds of sexual activity that present grave risks to life (no. 10).

In particular the encyclical concentrates on "attacks affecting life in its earliest and in its final stages" (no. 11). The encyclical breaks new ground in speaking out so strongly against the death penalty, arguing that today, "as a result of steady improvements in the organization of the penal system," cases in which the death penalty would be justified in order to protect society "are very rare if not practically nonexistent" (no. 56).³⁵ It reaffirms the Church's position that "abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder" (no. 62) and condemns "the use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation" (no. 63). Though it rejects euthanasia, suicide, and "assisted suicide" as contrary to God's law, it respects a patient's decision to forgo "aggressive medical treatment" that "would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted" (no. 65). In the final chapter the pope calls for the creation of a new culture that respects and protects each human life. Christians should show special concern for the poor and the disadvantaged; their communities should support single mothers, marriage and family counseling agencies, treatment and care programs for those with drug addictions, minors, the mentally ill, persons with AIDS, and the disabled (nos. 87-88).

The Church and the Environment

Though *Evangelium vitae* includes the abuse of the environment among the modern threats to life, the Catholic Church has been late in incorporat-

³⁵At the release of the encyclical (March 30, 1995), Cardinal Ratzinger announced that the reservations on the death penalty present in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would be reformulated in light of the pope's teaching; see *Origins* 24 (April 6, 1995) 690.

ing a concern for the environment into its official teaching.³⁶ The bishops at Vatican II did not raise the issue and the council documents reflect what is today called a "domination theology," one that sees the natural world as existing for the exclusive use of humankind (cf. GS 34). This theology can be found in Paul VI's 1967 *Populorum progressio*, which quotes the command in Genesis 1:28 to "fill the earth and subdue it" (no. 22). The second creation story in Genesis suggests a greater responsibility toward the natural world; according to this account the Lord God "took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it" (Gen 2:15). The image here is not domination but stewardship.

Pope Paul's 1971 letter *Octogesima adveniens* expressed a concern for the environment (no. 21), and Pope John Paul II made several references to the exploitation of the earth in his first encyclical, *Redemptor hominis* (nos. 8, 15, 16). But his report on the 1984 Synod of Bishops on reconciliation, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, missed a great opportunity to include the growing alienation of human beings from the environment that sustains them as among those relationships in need of reconciliation. His 1988 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* was the first to include a strong emphasis on environmental concerns. And his January 1, 1990, message for the World Day of Peace, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation," was entirely devoted to the environment.

The World Council of Churches has had environmental concerns on its agenda since at least 1975. In 1983 at its Vancouver Assembly, it broadened a concern for a "sustainable" society to include a concern for "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation."³⁷ Regrettably, the Catholic Church declined an invitation from the WCC to cosponsor a 1990 world conference on justice, peace, and the integrity of creation held in Korea.

Documents of Episcopal Conferences

Since the council some national and regional conferences of bishops have produced a number of important documents and pastoral letters on social issues. Even if these documents do not represent an official exercise of the magisterium, they have already played an important role in the development of the social conscience of Catholics.

CELAM

The first postconciliar meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM II) took place at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. The

³⁶Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1990) 175; see "The Environment in the Modern Catholic Church," 175-203.

³⁷According to Sean McDonagh, Pope John Paul II's January 1, 1990 document, mentioned above, is heavily dependent on the WCC JPIC program, though this is not acknowledged in the text; see his *Passion for the Earth* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) 106.

meeting marked a turning point for the Church in Latin America as the bishops began to reflect on the reality of life in their countries in light of the council, the social teaching of the Church, and the new theological reflection taking place in their Churches, which would be known as liberation theology. The sixteen documents of Medellín locate the problems of Latin America not in underdevelopment itself but in "a situation of injustice that can be called institutional violence."³⁸ They call for a solidarity with the poor on the part of the Church, one that will include a redistribution of resources, and for "conscientization" of the poor so that they will begin to take responsibility for their own lives. The word "liberation" appears frequently, and Jesus is spoken of as a liberator from sin, hunger, oppression, misery, and ignorance.³⁹

This "turn toward the poor" was recognized immediately by government officials in the United States. In 1969 Nelson Rockefeller in a report prepared for President Nixon warned that the Catholic Church in Latin America had become "a force dedicated to change—revolutionary change if necessary," pointing to the Medellín documents as an example. Somewhat condescendingly comparing the new spirit in the Church to youthful idealism, he argued that it was "vulnerable to subversive penetration."⁴⁰

CELAM III took place in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979. Reviewing the situation in Latin America, the bishops found that it had worsened; most of their countries faced greater poverty, more foreign debt, a growing urban underclass as the greater percentage of their populations shifted from rural areas to the cities, and an increase in repression.⁴¹

The conference lacked the unanimity experienced at Medellín; it was more divided between progressives and conservatives. Nevertheless its final document supported the vision that had emerged at Medellín; it called for liberation without violence and for lay participation in the work of evangelization, and it encouraged the movement for Basic Christian Communities. The expression "preferential option for the poor," appearing as a chapter title in the document, has come more than anything else to symbolize the direction taken by the Latin American Church since Medellín.

CELAM IV, timed to coincide with the 1992 quincentenary of the arrival of Columbus and thus of Christianity in the "New World," was held

³⁸CELAM II, "Peace," no. 17; the Medellín documents can be found in Gremillion, *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*, 445–84.

³⁹See Edward L. Cleary, *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985).

⁴⁰"Rockefeller Report on the Quality of Life in the Americas," *The Department of State Bulletin* 61 (December 8, 1969) 504. For a fascinating report on the Church's struggle for human rights in Latin America and the conflict with U.S. policy, see Penny Lemoux, *Cry of the People* (New York: Penguin, 1982). Her book was finished shortly before some of the worst periods of violence began.

⁴¹McCarthy, *The Catholic Tradition*, 275.

in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. The spirit at Santo Domingo was even more divided than at Puebla. The majority of the bishops, many of them appointed by Pope John Paul II, were more conservative. A new concern was the number of Catholics in many Latin American countries being lost to proselytism by the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches. Still, the conference reaffirmed the direction taken at CELAM II and III.

U.S. Catholic Conference

In the 1980s the U.S. bishops published two pastoral letters to assist Catholics in the formation of their consciences on the issues of peace and the economy. Each letter was the product of a broad consultative process involving conversations with theologians, representatives of business, the defense department, and other government officials. Three separate drafts of each letter were published before a final document was approved by the bishops. The entire process models an exercise of the episcopal teaching office, which allows for input from other important voices in the Church.

The Challenge of Peace (1983) is concerned chiefly with the question of nuclear war.⁴² It argues that neither the use of nuclear weapons against population centers, the threat to so use them even as a deterrent, nor the initiation of nuclear war can be justified morally. The bishops give no more than "a strictly conditioned moral acceptance of the principle of nuclear deterrence" (no. 186); they reject the concept of "prevailing" in a nuclear war and the quest for nuclear superiority; and they state that nuclear deterrence should be used as a step toward nuclear disarmament.

Economic Justice for All (1986) is an attempt to apply the principles of Catholic social teaching to the U.S. economy.⁴³ Its thesis is that the morality of every "economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person," regardless of that person's social or economic status (no. 13). The bishops are careful to distinguish between the principles they enunciate, having behind them the authority of the Church's social doctrine, and the concrete but admittedly controversial recommendations they offer (no. 22).

Both letters were widely read and much discussed. The letter on peace was more positively received; the one on the economy was more controversial, but it also might be the more prophetic. In 1992 the bishops abandoned an effort to write a letter on women after a number of interventions from the Vatican. Among their other efforts are pastoral letters on African Americans, Hispanics, and persons with disabilities.

⁴²*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (Washington: USCC, 1983).

⁴³*Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington: USCC, 1986).

Catholic Social Principles

While Catholic social teaching is built on the principle of the dignity of human person, its approach is communitarian rather than individualistic. In this way it stands in stark contrast to the individualistic ethos of contemporary American and Western culture. A systematic review of Catholic social teaching would uncover the following basic principles:

1. *The dignity of the human person.* Each human being is created in the image of God, and therefore each human life is sacred and may never be treated as a means. A consequence is that everything in the economic and social realm must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines human dignity. This is the foundational principle of Catholic social thought.

2. *Importance of community.* Because the human person is social by nature, no person must be seen in relation to the community which is necessary for the person's full development. The family is the basic unit of society.

3. *The common good.* A commitment to the common good rejects the individualist bias of modern secular society which privileges individual rights at the expense of the good of the community. Human rights must be protected if the dignity of the individual is to be respected, but individual rights have correlative responsibilities. Pope John Paul II has emphasized the virtue of "solidarity" as a commitment to the common good. Thus Catholic social teaching is opposed to the extremes of both individualism and collectivism.

4. *Distributive justice.* Of principal concern to the common good is just distribution. Without it the right of each person to have access to what is considered essential to a dignified standard of living cannot be realized. The purpose of the economy is to serve the common good (rather than the maximization of profit).

5. *Priority of labor over capital.* Persons are more important than things. Material goods are not the sole reason for the economic community, for the dignity of persons is primary, and work must serve this dignity. Work has an inherent dignity, and the person's dignity is inseparable from his or her work. Through work the person becomes more human.

6. *Right to participation.* All people have a right to participate in the economic life of a society. This includes the right to work, given that work is essential to human dignity. Full employment is a primary goal. Unemployment cannot be allowed as a means to some other goal, for then capital has priority over labor. Work is the primary means to participate in the economic order, and workers should not be denied access. Workers should also be given the opportunity to participate in the day-to-day decisions of the organization. Work is not merely an economic function but also an activity that influences the psychological and spiritual character of the person.

7. *The principle of subsidiarity.* Whenever possible decisions should be made at local levels rather than by higher bodies, thus giving primacy to individual initiative. Intermediate associations (families, local communities,

unions, societies, etc.) should be free to perform operations proper to themselves without interference from the state.

8. *Limited right to private property.* The right to private property is not absolute; it cannot be separated from one's obligation toward the common good.

9. *Obligation to the poor.* Both individuals and civil societies have obligations to those most vulnerable. Not everyone has an equal start in economic life, and hence blame for poverty does not lie exclusively with the individual. Regardless of the cause of poverty, the poor have equal dignity with all others.

CONSCIENCE AND AUTHORITY

So far in this chapter we have reviewed the Church's teachings in the areas of sexuality and social justice. Now it is time to consider the role of conscience. In the Catholic tradition both conscience and authority have important roles in helping the individual recognize what he or she ought to do in a particular situation. But both conscience and authority can easily be misunderstood.

Conscience

Catholicism values conscience as the person's ultimate guide. The Second Vatican Council described conscience as "the most secret core and sanctuary" of an individual, where he or she is alone with God (GS 16). The council here was echoing Aquinas, who taught that conscience in its most general meaning was a habit (*synderesis*), an intuitive sense deep within each person to do good and avoid evil. Aquinas understood conscience in the strict sense as the process of searching out what this sense of our obligation to do good and avoid evil means in some particular situation.⁴⁴ Since this involves a process of discernment in which the particular good may not be immediately clear, it might involve using natural reason or appealing to the revelation entrusted to the Church.

Today many Catholic moral theologians follow Timothy O'Connell's analysis of the tradition: Conscience refers to our human moral consciousness, which includes (1) our basic grasp of the moral imperative, to do good and avoid evil; (2) the process or "moral science" of discovering the particular good to be done or evil to be avoided; and (3) the specific judgment made in a particular case.⁴⁵

Since conscience must ultimately terminate in a practical judgment reached after a careful consideration of a situation, it is important not to reduce it to a subjective inner feeling or voice. Nor should it be identified with

⁴⁴*Summa theologiae* I.79.12-13.

⁴⁵*Principles for a Catholic Morality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 109ff.

what Freud called the “superego,” a superimposed censor that represents the “oughts” of various authority figures in our lives and relies on guilt to bring about compliance. Conscience involves the whole person: intellect, intuition, moral sensitivity, and practical judgment.

Though a person must always follow his or her conscience, that conscience can be in error, either because he or she has not developed the maturity to move beyond self-interest and social conformity in making moral judgments, or through ignorance, or because the person has not made the effort to discover the truth. Thus each person has an obligation to form a correct conscience.

Authority

The Church, which Catholics recognize as both mother and teacher, assists in this process. This is where authority comes in. As the community of the disciples of Jesus, the Church’s authority is expressed in its Scripture, its tradition, and in its magisterium, or official teaching office.

Sacred Scripture relates for us the story of God and God’s holy people. It gives us the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2-17), which spell out the parameters of living in covenant relationship with God. That covenant relationship is violated if we worship other gods or dishonor our parents, if we commit murder or adultery, steal, ruin the reputation of our neighbors or covet what belongs to them. From the prophets we are reminded of God’s love for justice and constant command to remember the poor and the powerless—“the resident alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jer 7:6; cf. Deut 24:21). Through the Gospels we come to know Jesus; as Pope John Paul II said in *Veritatis splendor*, following Jesus is the essential and primordial foundation of Christian morality (no. 19). The Gospels enable us to become familiar with Jesus’ words and teachings, offer us the wisdom contained in his parables, and challenge us to model our lives on his example of faithful service.

The tradition bears the Church’s accumulated wisdom, the wisdom that comes from the Christian community’s proclamation, celebration, and transmission of its faith through countless generations. The tradition is exemplified in the lives of the martyrs and saints. It includes the Church’s conviction that God has infused into each human heart the “natural law” to do good and avoid evil, as well as the Church’s understanding of what the human good is in particular circumstances, based on the biblical revelation and its own reflection on the moral order revealed in creation and in the dignity of the human person.

The magisterium teaches in the name of the Church and so in the name of Christ; through it the authority entrusted by Christ to the apostles and their successors, the bishops, comes to expression. Thus the magisterium not

only reminds Catholics of what the Church has taught officially in the past, it also functions as a living teaching office, proclaiming moral principles and applying those principles both to our personal lives and to the social order.

Catholicism has a deep sense that every aspect of human life—personal, sexual, economic, and social—is to be transformed in light of the promise of God’s reign in Jesus. Much of the Church’s official teaching in the area of sexuality and marriage stands in sharp contrast to the values of popular modern culture. Catholics take this teaching mission of the Church seriously and respect it; perhaps this is why some people think that Catholics are always talking about morality and sexuality. The Church continues to insist on the sanctity of life, the indissolubility of marriage, and the inseparable relationship between matrimonial fidelity and sexual expression. At the same time, in this area of applying principles of Christian morality to everyday life, conscience and authority may occasionally come into conflict.

An Informed Conscience

How are these conflicts between conscience and authority to be resolved? The principle remains that in the final analysis one must follow one’s conscience. But conscience is not autonomous. Since one’s conscience can be erroneous, the primacy of conscience can never be used to avoid the responsibility of forming a correct conscience, which includes for Catholics a serious and prayerful effort to incorporate the moral vision emerging from the Catholic tradition, understood in its full sense of Scripture, the tradition of the Church, the sense of the faithful, and the teaching magisterium exercised by the pope and the bishops.

In this process of forming conscience, the magisterium has a special role to play. For example, Catholics who say that “the Church has no right to tell me what I do in my bedroom” or who argue that the Church’s social teachings are an unwarranted intrusion into the realm of the political may be acting more out of self-interest or class consciousness than from a genuine desire to discover the truth. In a narcissistic and secularized society like our own we need a moral vision we can live by. It is important that the magisterium continue to perform this prophetic function of assisting Christian people in the formation of their consciences. Yet in the final analysis it remains true that authority can never be a substitute for responsible decisions made in accordance with a well-formed conscience.⁴⁶

⁴⁶See the helpful little book by Philip S. Kaufman, *Why You Can Disagree and Remain a Faithful Catholic* (Bloomington, Ind.: Meyer-Stone Books, 1989).

CONCLUSION

These issues of sexuality and justice that we have been considering are important because they attempt to express the implications of discipleship and the Christian vision of the kingdom for our personal and social lives. If they are controversial, it is because they touch each of us so personally.

Catholic teaching on sexuality is of long standing. That it has changed so little with the times is not necessarily an argument against it. Christian life should be informed by the gospel, not by the values of a particular culture. However, an ethical vision should never blind one to compassion and a recognition of the uniqueness of the individual. If the Church is uncompromising in its role as teacher, it generally is compassionate in its pastoral practice. There are also other voices in the Church that deserve a hearing.

The social doctrine of the Church is of more recent articulation, but it also has roots deep within the tradition. The Acts of the Apostles presents the Christian community as one in which "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). That may represent a vision of the ideal, but perhaps our age needs such a vision.

We live in a world of an ever-increasing gulf between the rich and the poor, not just within nations but globally. At the present time some countries are simply dissolving into anarchy; their economies are no longer functioning, and their cultural, religious, and civil systems of restraint are beginning to collapse. The ensuing chaos in countries where even teenagers have automatic weapons threatens the security of even the most powerful nations. Beyond these economic divisions our natural environment itself is in crisis. The exhaustion of nonrenewable resources, the elimination of the tropical rain forests, the resulting loss of topsoil, the poisoning of the rivers, lakes, and air, the depletion of the ozone layer, the amassing of tons of toxic waste—all this has brought into jeopardy the very ability of the planet to sustain human life.

In a world so much under threat, a communitarian tradition that speaks of the common good, distributive justice, the right of all to participate in the goods of society, and a limited right to private property may be a rich resource. But it is a threatening one because it calls those in prosperous First World countries to reexamine and perhaps to change their way of life.

For Catholics it is a given that God speaks through the Church, though not *only* through the Church. If there are times or situations when a person cannot in conscience accept what the Church teaches, then after sufficient prayer and study that person must follow his or her conscience.

But it is equally necessary today to affirm the right of the Church to teach, and the obligation Catholics have to acknowledge that teaching (cf. LG 25). If magisterial teaching must be received by the faithful in order to be effective in the life of the Church, it is also true that the bishops of the Church who constitute its magisterium have an important prophetic role to

play in bringing the light of the gospel to bear on issues faced by the Church in the contemporary world.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. The text states that "the Catholic Church has been profoundly ambivalent in its attitude towards human sexuality" (p. 143). Do you know of any Catholics who have left the Church because of this ambivalence? Do you know of other Catholics who are upset because the Church seems too permissive on sexual matters today? What is your own impression of the present state of Catholic moral teaching in this area?
2. It was stated that Catholic social teaching is "a tradition too little known to most contemporary Catholics" (p. 156). What, in your opinion, might be some of the reasons for this?
3. The chapter summarizes a number of Catholic social principles (pp. 164–165). To what extent do you see an awareness of these principles in the expressions of Catholicism around you?
4. Pope John Paul II teaches that "the option or love of preference for the poor" must condition "our daily life as well as all our decisions in the political and economic fields" (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 42). What do you make of the connection between the Christian faith and the preferential option for the poor? What does this mean for your daily living?
5. Do you think the Catholic Church and other Christian churches have become too concerned with social, economic, and political issues today, or are they not concerned enough? How would you respond to those who say that religion should stay out of economics and politics?