

SEMINAR ON MORAL THEOLOGY

THE SEXUAL AND THE SOCIAL IN THE CATHOLIC MORAL TRADITION

Following a pattern begun last year in Minneapolis, the seminar first gathered for a plenary session (attended by about 75 persons) and then divided into three working groups. The speaker for the plenary session was Professor Joan Timmerman of the College of St. Catherine, who provided an historical overview of "The Sexual and the Social in Catholic Teaching," a topic that had emerged from one of the working groups at last year's convention.

Author of the recent volume *The Mardi Gras Syndrome: Rethinking Christian Sexuality* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), Timmerman described continuities, discontinuities, similarities, and differences in Catholic sexual and social teachings during early, medieval, and modern periods of Christian history. She noted that teachings on sexuality, instead of "leveling off" (as did early Christian teachings on private property and military service) "to a generous and realistic acceptance of embodiment," remained generally quite rigorous from the late first century on. She drew a parallel between the question of "private property and wealth with its potential for abuse through greed" and the question of "sexual pleasure with its potential for abuse through obsessive lust," implying that a consistent ethics would have achieved more parallelism in its resolution of these questions than has been reached by official Catholicism.

In her discussion of the medieval period Timmerman suggested that one reason for this lack of parallelism has been a tendency to see "sexuality, particularly women's sexuality and reproductive function as 'natural' phenomena, unaffected by cultural and historical change, while questions involving the rest of 'nature' are approached without the same static assumptions." She also observed that the greater role assumed by the Church in the 12th century concerning marriage had a beneficial effect for individuals and "tipped the balance of power in favor of the Church over the powerful feudal families of the time." In general, moral teaching of this period was characterized by a mix of adjustment, rigidity, and constancy: "While questions of wealth, war, [and] labor were being adjusted to circumstances and matters of sexual practice were grounded in philosophical absoluteness, the Christian compassion for the poor, sick, and defenseless was as constant as in the first three centuries an expression of the imitation of Christ in his earthly life."

Contrasts between social and sexual teaching were stressed in her treatment of the modern period, with Timmerman pointing to very basic differences in the ways church officials today address sexual and other social issues. With respect to the latter, "Fruitful exchange is sought on all levels. There are structures to facilitate such exchange among the

churches, especially the World Council of Churches and the Holy See. There is open and honest use of advisors who are participants in the economic, political, and military arenas. There is recognition that these questions are complex because they involve the interaction of free men who have inherent rights." By contrast, with respect to sexual questions, ". . . there is no exchange sought or honored. There is no recognition of the need to inquire of participants, certainly not women. It is considered a simple matter, concerning only the individual in relation to the law of nature."

There were three observations offered by Timmerman after she had surveyed these historical periods. In the first place, she pointed out that whereas Christian spirituality has generally managed to overcome literalist biblicism, "adjusting social teaching to the real needs of people," in the case of sexual teaching there has remained "legalism," "abstract moralism," and "the most slavish biblicism." Secondly, she noted that because of various dualisms that have affected the tradition over the centuries, "the compromise necessary for adjusting the social teaching of the gospel to the world of work, property, and politics seems to have been bought at the expense of preserving the illusion of perfectionist purity in the world of sexual pleasure." Finally, she declared that whereas other social teaching has taken a teleological, rational approach to natural law, sexual teaching has been associated with a deontological, absolutist approach. In her discussion of the contemporary period Timmerman had observed that "a sexual *Rerum Novarum* of sorts" had emerged with Vatican II's "emphasis on the integral character of human sexuality, the notion of marriage as primarily a community of love, and the location of ethical thinking in a consideration of the person and her acts." She concluded her presentation by stating, "We await the *Progressio Populorum* of sexual teaching."

Following this presentation seminar participants moved directly into working groups that dealt with the topics of "Moral Rules in their Social Setting: Abortion," "Catholic Social Justice and the American Economy: Prospects for the Bishops' Pastoral," and "The Role of the Affective in the Moral Life."

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A. MORAL RULES IN THEIR SOCIAL SETTING: ABORTION

The session was introduced by three presentations. Patricia Jung developed a position on abortion by defining Christian life as a gift. In this context she compared the act of conception and gestation to the gift giving involved in organ donation. Jung then argued that the Christian response to the gift of life was to reciprocate by one's own giving. On this basis she made a strong case for carrying a fetus to full term, even in the event of the conception occurring after a rape.