

INCULTURATION AND MARITAL BEHAVIOR

Christ presented his church as a leaven which is to transform the world, but not without some adjustments to culture. While he provided us with a philosophy of life, he did not cover all the concrete aspects of living. In this light we visualize the Church as integrating many elements of different cultures.

The practice of accommodation appeared in many realms, including conjugal life. Several forces affected marriage, such as the high regard for virginity, and the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ.

Marital sex was seen as partly sinful. It had to have an "excuse" in the generation of children. Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) defined the generation of children as morally good, a point he defended vigorously against the Manichaeans of the time. However, later writers denigrated marital sexuality during pregnancy, the woman's sterile period (though very uncertain), menstruation, penitential seasons, and before sacred rites. Human seed was to be used exclusively for the creation of new life. Medieval penitentials recommended punishments of up to ten years for conjugal contraception. The trend climaxed in 1585, when Pope Sixtus V decreed that a waster of sperm was to be treated as a murderer (though his decree was withdrawn by Gregory XIV two years later).

The ancients had little more than rudimentary knowledge of how spouses should relate. They remembered the orgies of the pagans; and they wanted to protect the faithful from such excesses. The record is very scanty, filling hardly more than one page in some three centuries. Writers were reluctant to write about something that might make them blush.

There were no signs of the thought expressed much later by Vatican Council II, to the effect that sex also had a non-procreative role in promoting the marriage bond. Asceticism was the order of the day.

It is to be noted that the Christian view of marriage was contaminated by the Greek philosophers, who encouraged the use of sex with the economy manifested in the animal kingdom; large mammals were regarded as models for humans, whose structure did not include estrus and rut. Official teachers implied that spouses should not be open to sexuality on a continuing basis. There was no realization that the majority of spouses were crushed by the fear of excessive progeny in the face of scanty material resources.

One can therefore sympathize with the Christians who practiced coitus interruptus, which was widespread throughout the known world and dates back to papyri times, or some three millennia. There is ample circumstantial evidence that birth control was resorted to for family planning. Thus, Monica, the mother of Augustine, was married to her pagan husband for eighteen years, and yet left only three or four children. The growth of Christianity was slow, mostly by conversions, especially of women who wanted equal rights with men.

When Augustine came on the scene, he was quickly hailed as an intellectual giant, which he has remained to this day. At that time Manichaeism was rampant in all of Christendom. He himself was an auditor in that sect for nine years. When he was in his late teens, his mother gave him a concubine, until he could move into an advantageous marriage. His Manichaeism served him well, as he did not want to be burdened with a family, but he did have a son at the outset. In his early thirties, he gave up this plan, received baptism, and a few years thereafter he was ordained to the priesthood; not long thereafter he was elected Bishop of Hippo, and functioned as such for some thirty-five years. He thereby became an official teacher in the North African Church, and at once began to combat Manichaeism, which condemned the procreation of children. Augustine insisted that the generation of children is morally good, and he repeated himself in numerous works.

Nevertheless Augustine was quoted by many writers after him, in their eagerness to promote the limitation of conjugal sexual behavior, but the use of his authority is not justified. He censured feticide, infanticide, child exposure, but he never denounced coitus interruptus, except as a Manichaean precept.

In his *De bono conjugali* he wrote to the effect that whatever happens sexually between spouses beyond the generation of children is tolerable, pardonable, excusable, and ignored (composite sentence). He did not think of our modern concept of artificial birth control, but he did imply the equivalent. In the same work he wrote: "Have we ever heard anyone say that he never had intercourse with his wife except with the hope of having a child?" He also said that he never spoke with a single husband who did not have non-procreative intercourse with his wife. In other words he never implied that all marital sexuality had to be productive. Yet two cardinals, members of the Pontifical Commission on Family Planning, quoted him as at the origin of the papal ban; the passages quoted actually refer to abortion.

On several occasions Augustine refers to the sins of the married, viz., adultery, sodomy, abortion, and child exposure, and nothing else. When he refers to the avoidance of the generation of children, he had abortion in mind.

In early Greco-Roman times there were few births among the pagans, who revelled in adultery and sodomy (the Greek vice). The Christians likewise had few births, but because of poverty; yet they had as many children as they could afford. Obviously they knew how to limit their families. It is difficult to assume that they achieved this purpose solely by abstaining from sex. This style of life requires significant progress in prayer and ascetical practice on the part of both spouses. Without this condition, spousal abstaining can easily weaken the marriage bond and damage the family. Also, the very generative faculty in the man is known to diminish from prolonged disuse, a point which has been grossly neglected in the current debate on marital sex. Sex cannot be turned on or off like a light-switch.

Augustine saw the legitimacy of a voluntarily childless marriage provided there was no termination of pregnancy. Coitus interruptus was a legitimate way of limiting a family, or of not having any children at all, if circumstances dictated such a purpose. Surely no one was obliged to produce children.

Furthermore, the behavior of married couples must be analyzed to enable them to understand the workings of marriage. Nowhere does Augustine speak against the interruption of intercourse. Family responsibility begins with conception, and

not with marital sexuality. He characterizes sexual behavior between spouses for purposes other than procreation as a venial sin, something which does not separate one from the Body of Christ; else he would certainly have railed against it.

The idea that human sperm is only for conception is foreign to Augustine. For him sex is a process relevant to the stability of a marital union. This point is implicit in the idea of St. Paul to the effect that those who cannot contain themselves should marry. If the opposite were true, they would just have to continue to burn. Marriage, Augustine explains, places an honorable mantle over actions which would otherwise be sinful. Placing limits on marital behavior in terms of frequency and manner constitutes an unwarranted restriction on the wording of St. Paul, and emasculates the marriages of those who cannot restrain themselves. Augustine may have been aware of the sterile period, but he would most likely not have countenanced prolonged periods of abstinence, especially for the young, as this would have gone against his very humane view of marriage as spousal living. He visualizes marriage as a sexual way of living with total sharing. He shows no signs of imagining a reason why spouses should be half-hearted in pursuing their purpose in marrying and in strengthening their union.

After Augustine there appeared a strategy to limit marital intercourse, which grew with the centuries. It stemmed from a systematic selective reading of Augustine. It was the style to regard marriage otherwise than as a human experience, with physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. The medievals perceived nothing of the communicative potential of conjugal intercourse. They disregarded the well-being which resulted from conjugal sexuality. They overlooked the powerful motivational force of conjugal sex in the whole of human life.

Most later writers were conscious of fidelity, but were oblivious of the means to foster it. In a thirteenth-century book on the city of Troyes, spouses are presented as sleeping naked in a double bed. In such circumstances the restriction of conjugal sexuality is sheer folly.

Modern Consideration

The so-called Catholic tradition for the papal ban on conjugal contraception has come under very close scrutiny by modern scholars. The point is not at all clearly made before Augustine.

Scripture does not offer any basis for it. Early Christian writers add very little.

The argument from structure does not establish a genuine obligation always to utilize sex to its full potential. Lesser purposes have been deemed legitimate, such as the relief of sexual pressure, fostering the spousal relationship, motivating the couple to pursue the education of their children. Besides, this type of argumentation originated with the pagan Greeks who related to their wives to beget children, but spent most of their time with beardless youth.

It is well to bear in mind that what is older is not necessarily purer and more authentic. The early Christians were in fact befuddled about sexuality. We must not let their complexes inhibit our own creativity about marriage. We may not have fully recovered from their awkward language. We should continue research, and not only in old literature.

Our society is presently in a crisis about the issue of conjugal contraception. No fewer than 80% of Catholics pay no mind to the papal ban. This situation should have an impact on theological opinion.

All major religious groups outside the church approve of conjugal contraception for justifiable reasons, such as family planning, economics, and parental health.

The psychological argument is very probative. The ban has destroyed numerous marriages; many divorces have occurred. Greeley showed that no fewer than twenty-six percent of church dropouts are due to the ban.

The natural method of birth control, among the most competent, has a failure rate of twenty percent, and probably accounts for families of five to six children, which are too large for our times. This is especially true of the third world. There is implied here that marriage is for the wealthy, who can pay for their mistakes.

Early church writers failed to show proper respect to the married state, which is a way of life designed to seek perfection for spouses and their children. Actually marriage requires prayer and the frequent remembrance of Christ crucified.

Conclusion

Under the contraceptive ban, it is difficult to imagine spontaneity in marriage, which is falsely assumed to be a static, rather than a dynamic state. Frequent sexual contacts are needed to make the spouses feel that they are deeply "two in one flesh."

The papal ban is a doctrinal outgrowth from a tiny minority of ancient writers. In time, statements were given an appearance of increasing certitude, without considering the pertinent human factors. This was never how married life is lived. It creates a moral impossibility for the average Catholic.

The church's reference to marital union as being symbolized by Christ's union with His church leaves much unsaid about why spouses should not have the right to be spouses fully. On the other hand, the theological concept of grace perfecting nature suggests that human love be maximized for the Holy Spirit to propel them to magnificent family achievement.

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