

Sex Scandals in the Church

April 2002

A friend of mine was in a high school seminary of a Catholic religious order in the late 1960s. Years later he told me about how one of the older priests had tried to deal with some of the new attitudes in the Church following Vatican II: “I used to say that sex is bad. But now I have to say that sex is good. So I say: Sex is good. But it is not good for you, and it is not good for me.”

Now, over thirty years later, the revelation that some priests, especially in the United States, have sexually abused boys at various times over the years has become an acute and grave scandal in the Church and the larger society. Various pundits—Catholics, lapsed Catholics, concerned observers, and chronic enemies of the Church—now offer their opinions in the press. Many rebuke the Church in horror that such a thing could happen. Many blame the celibacy of the clergy practiced in the Western Church or “the Catholic attitude toward human sexuality.” I believe they have got the wrong end of the stick.

Celibacy is not the problem. Ordaining married men would not eliminate the possibility that a few of those ordained might be child molesters. The newspapers are full enough of reports of husbands and fathers who abuse their own and their neighbors’ children to demonstrate this proposition. While it is perhaps heartening to see that the world retains enough vestigial reverence to hold priests to a higher standard than teachers, say, or men in general—or else they might be angry, but not shocked—priests are not more likely to commit this crime than anyone else. Nor is the Catholic attitude toward sex at fault, if by this is meant the moral teaching and standards accepted by Catholics (and most everyone else) for centuries up to the last one.

The problem is not celibacy, but lack of chastity. Scandal has erupted over sexual acts with children because that is the last offense against chastity that the culture is still willing to consider wrong. Offenses against chastity are nothing new, nor are they limited to Catholic clergy; but it is getting harder and harder to avoid them, whether one is attracted to women, men, children, or dumb animals. The cries of opposition to celibacy are actually part of the campaign against chastity; of this campaign sexual abuse of children is only the most poisonous fruit.

The principle of chastity is not the belief that sex is bad. It is the belief that sexual acts have their proper place within a committed relationship of marriage in which children can be conceived and raised. Chastity is a virtue which everyone needs to practice, and which anyone can violate. The opposition to chastity is the belief that sexual acts are located not in the context of a relationship and in a natural biological purpose, but in the experience of the individual subject. In this view, their purpose is the fulfillment of the subject, and therefore any restriction on them is in the long run arbitrary.

It should be evident on a moment’s reflection that these views of sexuality are but a part of a much larger opposition in philosophy. Historically, the divergence in Western thought goes back to Descartes if not further, and is based so thoroughly on different views of the nature of reality that it is probably

impossible for the conclusions of one side to be reached based on the principles of the other. Fascinating as it would be to plumb the depths of this philosophical gulf, I will restrict myself to discussing its implications for sexual behavior at the turn of the twenty-first century.

While ignoring the virtue of chastity, even scoffing at it, is as old as history, until the last hundred years or so, the intellectual leaders in cultures both Eastern and Western at least professed belief in it. This began to change in the twentieth century with the widespread popularization (and misunderstanding) of Freud's psychoanalysis. Wilhelm Reich's dubious theories and Margaret Sanger's campaigns for birth control during the first half of the century led to the real campaigners for sexual liberation in the second half. By the 1960s, the work of Alfred Kinsey, Hugh Hefner, and Helen Gurley Brown had thoroughly indoctrinated the ideological ruling class in America and throughout the West in the new principles of morality. Sexual activity was no longer considered primarily as the basis of family relations, but as an expression of individual need. No exercise of the sexual faculty could be considered wrong; indeed, it was considered unhealthy and dangerous to exercise any restraint in sexual matters whatever.

Undermining the permanence of marriage in favor of self-fulfillment was the first step in the campaign. The legitimization of fornication and adultery followed, with the acceptance of pornography, and most recently, homosexual activity. While in fact not everyone has accepted these changes, they have prevailed among those who rank as the makers of opinion: writers, intellectuals, educators, and those who support them. Sexual self-control, like other forms of self-control, has never been easy; but the new morality is that it is somewhere between unnecessary and destructive. Teachers can tell teenagers not to smoke or drink, but if they tell them not to fornicate they are likely to lose their jobs.

While the rulers of our culture are prepared to encourage sexual activity among teenagers, we still officially draw the line at sex between adults and children. There have been those who challenge this line, like the North American Man-Boy Love Association or the 1970s cult known as the Children of God, but the law has so far not caught up with their advanced views. But once the ideology of sexual liberation has taken hold, drawing lines becomes difficult, or even arbitrary. Sexual activity as an expression of individual need quickly becomes an individual right. Why then should someone who is attracted to young children not have the same rights as someone attracted to adults of either sex? The principle of what is natural is a part of the old morality; and the pederast can very easily convince himself that he is doing his partner, not harm, but a great favor. And if it's all subjective, who is to say that he is not?

Of course, I think it's evil, but then I am one of those oldthinkers who believe in an objective right and wrong.

In theory, the Catholic Church should be a solid bastion of objective morality. However, Catholic intellectuals and educators are susceptible to the ideas of their non-Catholic peers, as the mass of Catholics have been subject to the social repercussions of the new sexual morality. When the means of discourse is controlled by those who hold a contrary ideology, it is difficult to make an argument, or even voice a teaching, outside its realm of principles.

Catholic leaders trying to defend traditional moral teachings have felt compelled to do so in the epistemological terms of the prevailing intellectual culture, an enterprise doomed to failure. You cannot teach the principles of chastity in the language of sexual self-expression.

Nor can you defend it; that is the problem the Church faces in the present crisis. In the terms of discourse that prevail in contemporary culture, chastity is an atavistic standard and celibacy an arbitrary imposition. When commentators attack the practice of ordaining celibate men to the priesthood, it is not because they uphold the sanctity of marriage in the way Catholics understand it. Chastity as applied to marriage, demanding lifelong faithfulness and openness to children, is almost as great a burden in modern terms as celibate chastity. If the ability to seek sexual fulfillment through meaningful relationships that satisfy one's inner sexual identity is essential to being a complete human person, then why stop with one wife—or with women—or with adults—or even with human beings, if something else turns you on? And yet they profess to be shocked when people act on the logic of their philosophy.

Celibacy is not a universal practice, or one essential to Catholic doctrine. While Catholics East and West, as well as the Orthodox Churches, agree that men should not marry once ordained, and choose bishops only from the ranks of the unmarried, only the Western Church has restricted the priesthood to celibates, and that rule has not always been well enforced. (I have heard it asserted that celibacy began in the Western Church about the year 1000. As a historian, I know that this is not true, but that it was only about the year 1000 that Church authorities began to make a concerted effort to enforce the policy.)

While celibacy is not necessary, I would agree with the present Holy Father that it is a valuable gift, a first line of defense as it were against the spirit of the age. When Pope Gregory and his associates began the enforcement of celibacy in the 11th century, one of the motivations was that it counteracted the prevailing tendency for all positions in society to become hereditary possessions. Today it is also a contradiction, but to the tendency to sexualize all human relationships and activities. The committed celibate, who forswears sexual relations for the sake of the service of God, proclaims that there is a purpose to human life beyond the material, beyond the temporal, beyond the self. It is a life that would not make sense if there were no God; therefore merely to accept it is a proclamation of God's existence and sovereignty.

The ideology of sexual liberation has quickly become the tyranny of sexuality over all of life. Anyone raised since the middle of the twentieth century has been trained by the spirit of the age present in all popular media, as well as by the dicta of the educated, to see sex at the basis of all motivation. Our emotions have been effectively channeled through our gonads. The sexual liberators cannot see any relationship involving strong emotional or affective bonds without seeing it as a sexual relationship, one which, if it does not involve actual explicit sexual activity, involves repression of the desire for such activity. Friendship and simple affection as independent components of the human emotional and relational repertory have been effectively eliminated. The choice of isolation, sexual expression, or repression leaves no room for the ideal of chastity.

The effect of such a climate on youth is particularly powerful. At the age where the emotions are particularly strong and difficult to manage, and where the sexual impulse is a new and powerful force, the doctrine that all strong affection must lead to sexual expression tends to lead a young person into actions that will form both identity and habit in ways that will affect the whole of his future life. The pressure toward sexual activity is hard to resist in this climate, and pervades life at earlier and earlier ages. Here is an example from the popular press: *Parade* magazine, 7 April 2002, ran a column asking teenagers how they handle being “different.” A fifteen-year-old girl from California responded: “As one of the few virgins among my friends, I feel different. But I deal with it by keeping a sense of humor when they make fun of me” (p. 10). At the start of the twenty-first century, purity is the great rebellion.

Thus a corps of dedicated radicals who have given their lives as a contradiction for the sake of God’s eternal kingdom, proclaiming that like martyrs “they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb 11:16), are a beacon and sign of hope to all who desire to practice chastity, which, at some time or other, must involve the renunciation of sexual expression, either because of one’s own circumstances preclude it or because sexual desire is directed at an object inconsistent with the ideal of chastity.

I can speak here for myself. I long desired to be married, but after I did marry, my wife decided—whether rightly or not, I will not judge—that her happiness lay elsewhere, and we were divorced. The Church may decide that this marriage was fatally flawed and therefore invalid. If she does, I should be free to marry, but if not, or if I can find no one willing to take the chance, I am in the same situation as my parish priest. Even if I were married, any attraction to another woman than my wife (or to any other object) would have to be forgone. Any strong temptation is hard to resist; sexual temptations are all the harder in this present age because all of secular society and the media are telling me that happiness lies in the direction of acting on it. In this situation, it is heartening to know that there are some who can live, by the grace of God, in lifelong celibacy.

The present scandal is a trial for the Church, both for the clergy and for the laity. First of all, priests and bishops come face to face with the reality of sin. The Church on earth consists exclusively of sinners, whose only good comes from the grace of God at work in them. While priests are specially chosen by God to bear the image of Christ in the world, and therefore it is especially tragic when they defile that image by sin, they are in the end still sinful men like the rest of us, in constant need of repentance. The only way to holiness is to face the enormity of one’s own sin, and being a priest does not change this. Those who have sinned must repent. Those who have condoned sin must repent. Those who have compromised with the world’s standards of happiness must repent and accept God’s standards, though they may be difficult—even impossible.

Next it is a test for the public image of the Church. We have grown complacent and respectable. We have compromised with the standards of modern society to be accepted, and have caught modern society’s sickness. The secular press is full of solutions, all of which tend in the direction of further compromise. The enemies of the Church think the Church has tripped up and fallen, and is now at their power. But to yield now would only perpetuate, not

cure, the evil. The solution to being trapped is not to enter deeper into slavery. Ministers of the Church have been unfaithful to their calling; but they will not save themselves or the Church they represent by surrendering it.

This is also a trial of the loyalty of every member of the Church: not of loyalty to the Church but to Christ Who is her Head. If the Church proclaimed the truth of God by the power of the Holy Spirit yesterday, that truth has not become false today. Catholics do not believe that a priest can consecrate the Body and Blood of Christ or minister the forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of Penance because he has some magic power of his own. It is God who works through him, and if God worked only through perfect people he could not work at all. If any Catholic's faith depends upon belief in the perfection of character of any priest or bishop, then that faith is a house built on sand—or worse than sand, on the illusion of sand. When I read the proclamations, their triumphant tone hardly disguised, in the secular press that many Catholics may leave the Church over this scandal, the meaner part of my heart responds, “Good riddance! Let those lukewarm nominal Catholics leave! Let them leave the Church to those of us who truly love her, who are not shaken by the knowledge that no man is perfect!” But this sentiment is unworthy. Rather I should pray that the faith that is shaken may be shaken only to be established on a firm foundation, that those whose attachment to the Church came from her human character may be transformed to an appreciation of her divine character. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).

Finally it is a trial for the Church as a whole, to see if she can awaken from the drowsiness of modern culture. Like characters in some fairy tale under the spell of an enchanter, she has begun to accept an alien view of reality. Here is where it leads. We stand at the brink of the pit and stare into its vile depths. It is time to break the spell, even though it means that we must accept that as Christians we are aliens in a world gone mad. Our standards are not little different from those of the culture about us. They are based on a totally different view of reality. Bishops who allowed themselves to be lulled by the prevailing culture, who allowed it to be preached in their pulpits and taught in their seminaries, now must deal with perversion in the ranks of their clergy. The sickness was there all along; now it has broken out. The evil acts of a few priests are the symptom of a deeper evil that infects marriages, single life, youth—every aspect of the life of the Church—where the modern sexual ideology has taken hold. The problem is not “the Catholic view of human sexuality.” It is that those who were supposed to hold it have failed to teach it, failed to preach it, and failed to practice it. It has always been a hard standard, and it is all the harder now. But that is why we have the sacrament of Penance. That is why repentance has always been at the center of the Church's life: because in the sexuality, as in every other aspect of our lives, we fail to live the way that we know we should. To abandon the standard because we cannot live it is to lose faith in God's mercy. To fail to teach it because the world finds it abhorrent is to behave as if God were not God.

In the end, it all comes down to faith. A wise man once told me, when I complained to him of bad teaching by some in the Church: “If you believe what

Catholics believe about the Church, you know that God will take care of it in the end.” It is ultimately lack of faith that has brought us to this point, lack of faith in the transcendence of God over all creation, the ultimate guarantor of truth, the ultimate fulfillment of every need, the ultimate reason for every act, the ultimate answer to every question. “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:6-7).