

Sex and Theology

by Anthony Ross O.P.

The other day the members of a Youth Club asked if something could be done to prevent people who came to address them from talking about sex. They said, with considerable feeling, that nearly every speaker seemed to think that youth was interested in very little else; which is, of course, not true. It is not teenagers who are so much concerned with sex as their elders, who continue to produce and read a stream of books and articles. Reaction against secrecy has led to an over-anxious campaign to assert the importance of sex, which in turn is in danger of producing the reaction that sex does not matter much anyway. A good many people have become bored by sexual experience itself, and the last thing they want is to be further bored by reading about it.

A balance has to be struck somehow, and the four books listed below illustrate awareness of this in very different quarters. On the whole they illustrate the growing recognition that the fundamental question to be tackled has to do with the nature of human beings; what is being human? For the Christian this is a theological question, answered in terms of our creation by God in his own image and likeness. Our life, even on the simplest level and at any time or place, must be somehow like God's own life if it is to be truly human.

We are told something of what God's life is in the doctrine of the Trinity. Three Persons share all that they are with one another in a communion of understanding and love. There is a perfect giving and a perfect receiving, with nothing held back, nothing reserved. There is a joint creative activity on which we depend for every moment of our existence. It is the activity of power and knowledge and love perfectly united, the source of our existence and of the existence of everything else that is. Simply by being, all things reveal the presence of God their Creator and glorify Him, as we are so often reminded in the psalms.

Being made like God, we need a life also which is a communion, a shared experience of knowledge and love expressed in creative activity. The second chapter of Genesis conveys the pattern in some detail. Man enjoys the friendship of God in the freedom of paradise, in the garden which makes available to him every kind of experience from the smell, sight, and touch of simple things to the revelation of God's own presence. That life is incomplete, however, until Adam is given a partner with whom to share everything in a union so basic to human nature that it is as though each is incomplete until united

with the other. The picture of paradise is complete when Adam and Eve are together 'naked and not ashamed'; their acceptance is total, there is nothing to be afraid of from one another, and therefore nothing to hide.

That is the ideal, that total acceptance which would be our ordinary experience if we accepted one another in this life in a perfect expression of our likeness to God, recognising in one another the gift of His power, and wisdom, and love. That is no longer possible when Adam and Eve turn away from God in an effort to be absolutely independent. It is an essential condition of love that it should be free, as love is understood in human beings. In the story of Eden, Man shows his love of God and his understanding of his own condition by a free act of obedience; he shows his love of his fellow-being in a perfect partnership. Both relationships are destroyed by the act of absolute self-assertion signified in eating the forbidden fruit. In his act of disobedience Man uses his freedom to make an attempt to break out from the limits of his own nature as a creature; he then fails to accept the opportunities God gives him of admitting that he has been wrong, and accepting responsibility for the shame and fear shown by himself and the woman in the presence of God and in the presence of one another. Indeed he tries to blame the woman and God for what he has done.

The Old Testament is largely an account of Man's disintegration and of God's continuing love pursuing him. That disintegration is not illustrated simply in relation to sex. The account of creation makes it clear that sex is part of our God-given endowment, part of that unique nature which rejoiced in the beauty of the garden and in the voice of God. Man's tragedy is described as beginning with a question and a discussion, not with some turmoil in his senses or his feelings. It is in his thought that his troubles begin; the 'heart of man', in the Old Testament idiom, is what goes sick. He can only be well again if he receives the word of God and keeps it, meditating on it day and night.

The New Testament records the revelation of God's Word in flesh, the Incarnation as the means of the restoration of all things. It is the account above all of Christ's total acceptance of us, with all our sinfulness, in perfect obedience to the Father, an obedience which at one and the same time expresses the love of the Persons of the Trinity for one another and for us. To as many as receive Him, we are told, Christ gives the power to become the sons of God. We are brought into the life of God by faith and charity, and so become Christ's partners in the work of salvation.

This means that we have to learn to know ourselves as we are, to come naked before God as little children, to grow slowly and often painfully to the full likeness of Christ. We have to accept the tensions which are within ourselves in order to begin to understand them. They cannot be isolated from one another, as so often people have

tried to isolate particular kinds of sexual tension for example. We need to learn to see ourselves whole, to try to see the whole being-in-action, and not just part of it. This is what Father Van der Marck's essay is largely about. In the field of morals harm is done by isolating elements of human acts, in such a way that often there is a failure to see beyond the external aspects of our activity. Old and New Testaments alike remind us that this is not enough; what goes on inside a man is even more important. Motives must be taken into account, and the pressure of circumstances. Otherwise, as Mr. Wilson is concerned to make clear, there will never be that development or rational control which should be characteristic of our humanity. But, once again, we cannot isolate parts of ourselves, as though we would be only reason, only feeling, only sex, only will, only spirit, or only body.

All these elements in ourselves come from God and are redeemed by Christ; neither in the context of creation or of salvation can any of them be ignored, except with disastrous consequences. They are all necessarily profoundly involved in what is the normal road to both integration and holiness, the sacrament of marriage. In this sacrament a man and a woman set out to accept each other for life in a partnership more perfect than that of Eden. Eden is a picture of an easy and simple life; marriage is the continuation of the life of Christ, of that life in the Church which makes up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ by carrying the Cross until the end of time. Husband and wife accept one another as Christ accepts us, that is as sinners accepted with a love which has no limits to service and sacrifice, a love which in the end will offer life itself.

In Christian marriage, then, the ideal is the restoration of the perfect relationship between man and woman in union with Christ. Such a relationship is creative first in its effects on the partners themselves. By sharing all that they can bring to each other, body and soul, in mutual understanding and appreciation they build up each other's personality and are continually ministers of the grace of God. Their shared life is expressed in the home they make, itself a cell in the Mystical Body. Such a home, in which there is a growth in knowledge and love, and in the exercise of hospitality—inseparable from true charity—will contribute to the wider community in which it is set. Without parade of any sort it will be effectively apostolic.

The marriage relationship is creative in these two ways throughout its duration, and whether or not it is blessed with children. What happens in it will depend on the degree of self-knowledge which the partners attain, and on the depth of their concern for each other. Only a continual growth in humility and in mutual love will give the strength to face the problems which arise inevitably in married life, and to resolve them. Where there are problems of sexual control no amount of lecturing about chastity will help matters. As Mr Gosling writes: 'It is not wise to stress too much the point of control

to married people, in urging them to chastity, for it distracts them from the main means to it. It is better to follow the New Testament and the liturgy, and urge them to love one another, and grow in love of one another with the extra depth given to that love by revelation.'

In other words, real control is the achievement of love. If it is to be possible it must be as something springing organically from deeper attitudes than fear and an uneasy and superficial discipline imposed by fear. There is otherwise only an outward control covering serious inner tension and disturbance which will have grave effects sooner or later. That is why it seems to many, as to Mr Gosling, that what is needed at the present time is more positive presentation of the nature of sex and marriage, and less effort to coerce the individual consciences of married people to acceptance of a discipline which they often find unreasonable because apparently, at least in their own case, quite impossible. There are happy marriages, there is heroic sanctity in marriage, involving sometimes incredible generosity of sacrifice and of self-control. But it appears to many that in fact heroic sanctity is being required of married people under threat of sanctions which are not applied so freely anywhere else, and without the necessary training for such sanctity being given either at home, or at school, or in the pulpit and the confessional.

Normally marriage is creative of children, who express the parents' love of one another and give it a new dimension. In their common devotion to their children and the service which they give them they develop a new type of unselfishness, sacrificing some of their claims upon each other. Fewer people now deny the need for children to complete the whole pattern of marriage. There is also growing recognition among psychologists that it is a good thing to have more than one or two children, and to have them sufficiently near to one another in age to form a natural group. The whole family benefits from the more complex extension of relationships within it which this brings; but only in the degree in which the parents are able to cope with the situation. It is flying in the face of all the evidence to imagine that there is an unquestionable virtue in having a large family, or that the average person should have no great difficulty in exercising total abstinence as a means of family planning. It will help towards a better understanding of those problems generally if there are a few more books like Mr Gosling's, written by married people who have some theological grounding.

We need also more volumes like the symposium from Paris, in which an attempt is made by experts in various fields to bring together theology and psychology on practical issues. At present there is a crisis in vocations to the priesthood which is surely related to the discussion about marriage and control. If we were not living in a sinful world there would be no point in having a celibate priesthood. And there is something abnormal, and perhaps even

perverted about celibacy, if it is the expression of fear of sex or unwillingness to accept the burdens of married life. It is only meaningful and fruitful if, as Mr Gosling says. 'it is motivated by a love of God and man sufficient to produce chastity'. It has a part to play which is inseparable from the part played by marriage, for both contribute essentially to the Church's mission and life, and they are meant to support and sustain one another. A deeper understanding of human psychology can help towards a more solid grounding of the celibate life in a realistic appreciation of human nature. The Paris symposium has some interesting reports on the use of psychological tests in selection of novices by religious orders. Above all, like the other three volumes, it is evidence of a new quality of discussion which in its concern and openness is most welcome.

¹*Mariage et Celibat.* F-J. Braceland and others. IIIe Congres de l'Association catholique internationale d'etudes medico-psychologiques. Editions du Cerf. Paris. n.p.

Marriage and the Love of God. J. Gosling. Geoffrey Chapman, London and Dublin. 18s.

Love and Fertility. W. Van der Marck, O.P. Sheed & Ward. 10s. 6d.

Logic and Sexual Morality. John Wilson. Penguin Books. 4s.
