

# Quaestio Disputata— Sex and Catholicism

Hugo Meynell

*TIME: the present.*

*SCENE: A coffee-shop on the way to Piraeus. Two ladies, Clodia and Augustina, both in their early forties, sitting at adjacent tables. Clodia gets up and tentatively addresses Augustina; she sits down at Augustina's table once she has introduced herself.*

*Clodia:* Excuse me—I seem to know you, though I can't for the life of me remember from where and when.

*Augustina:* My dear Clodia, how lovely to see you again! Let's see—it's over twenty years. Don't you remember, we used to sit together whispering at the back of O.B.'s class on informal logic.

*Clodia:* Oh yes, Augustina! Have you got a few minutes? I have, and would very much like to find out how life has been treating you. Don't look pained so directly—surely the last twenty years haven't been that bad for you!

*Augustina:* Well, I doubt whether it has been as bad as the siege of Leningrad or the Warsaw ghetto. But if you sincerely ask me whether I have been in general happy during the time since we last met, and you expect an honest answer, that answer must be no... By the way, why was our esteemed lecturer called O.B.?

*Clodia:* That I *can* remember. O.B. was short for Old Bedsocks. According to the more charitable, the reference was to the mustiness of his discourse. Those who sat in the front row said the mustiness also pertained to his person.

*Augustina:* Well, never mind about O.B. What I remember most about the two of us at the time was how proud we were to be Catholics, in those days of obvious moral chaos in the world at large, and exuberant theological absurdity (as it seemed to us) among the non-Catholics, in the early sixties.

*Clodia:* One remark of yours from that time has always haunted me. I remember you saying—after a party where we made ourselves rather conspicuous by not doing what nearly everyone else was doing—that, short of extreme good luck, a Catholic has to choose between goodness and happiness in this life. I thought at the time that I wanted you to expand on this, but I never seemed to catch you at quite the right moment.

*Augustina:* I would certainly still stick to that. ‘Good luck’ is either—sorry to call a spade a spade—to have little or no sexual desire, or to marry young and happen to collar a person who more or less suits one in that and other respects.

*Clodia:* So you would call it a matter of ‘extreme good luck’ just to be able to rub along reasonably well with the person one marries?

*Augustina:* Yes; why cry for the moon?

*Clodia:* I was sorry to hear you say, with so little hesitation or qualification, that your life had been unhappy. Do I infer, from that and your earlier remark, that you are still, to use or abuse the old phrase, ‘a good Catholic’?

*Augustina:* What’s a ‘good Catholic’? I try to keep the rules as I understand them. What I cannot pretend, and will not try to pretend any more, is that keeping them has not made me extremely unhappy, far unhappier than I would probably otherwise have been.

*Clodia:* I’m afraid I must admit to having seized the other horn of your dilemma—oh dear, O.B. seems to come creeping back in spite of everything. I am reasonably happy, give or take a few inevitable ‘downs’, because I have broken and am breaking the rules. I would like to tell you a bit about this, and for us to compare where we have got to.

*Augustina:* Let me guess. You married soon after you left the university; it didn’t go well; you broke up after five, ten years; and you are now living with a much nicer man, whom you married in a registry office.

*Clodia:* A bit more complicated than that, I’m afraid. Let me guess in my turn—you made the first three of those moves, but not the fourth.

*Augustina:* Exactly so. But oh, how I wanted to make it! The man I married—if only we’d just had an affair and left it at that, but our holy mother the Church saw to that—he used to beat me up a couple of times a week, and ... I cannot speak of it. Much later, I met my fairy-tale man, straight from the women’s magazines—I had been through quite a long period, several years in fact, of revulsion from all men, when celibacy seemed so easy, and I thought that every man was either a bully or a wimp, apart from some, like my husband, who achieved the remarkable feat of being both together. And there was just what I wanted—a gentle, concerned and loving man, really longing to make me happy. Good Catholic as I was, I sent him packing. I could not have conceived how it hurt. That’s enough of me for a bit—you owe me something about you.

*Clodia:* I have made your first three moves. I fell for Rodney’s athletic glamour; he was Captain of Boats, you may remember, but that was the only thing he was, or ever seemed likely to be. He was an alcoholic spendthrift and a bore when sober and couldn’t hold down a job. It was quite a relief when he bedded down with the neighbour’s teenage daughter. Then, well, three years during which I felt more and more frustrated, and at the end was practically climbing up the wall. It seemed

quite a new and rather shocking idea to dear old Father Murphy, behind the grill at St Dominic's, that women could feel like that. Then ... well ... my failure to make the fourth move was of a rather different kind from yours ...

*Augustina:* Look, don't be embarrassed to go on. Didn't we once tell one another quite frankly, that neither of us was the kind of woman who had, so to say, to wait for a man to show them that they had desires? Both of us, honestly, knew what we wanted from our early teens. But up to the sixties, we were taught as good Catholics to glory in the mortification of our flesh. We trampled on our desires, what in the modern cant would be called our needs, for the greater glory of God. Didn't Maritain talk about the 'masked Manicheism' of the Church up to the Second Vatican Council? It never seemed all that masked to me. Anyway, whether this was good theology or bad theology, that was the way it came over.

*Clodia:* Good or bad theology, it seemed to me, and it seems to me, part of the package deal. I chucked the whole thing over, and until very recently have been very happy with my decision. I will not bore you with my sexual adventures, which might amuse the wrong kind of male readership. But after a year or two, I thought to myself, I'm *good* at this, I *enjoy* it (on the whole; you can like apples and admit that sometimes you bite into a rotten one), and surely I have a marketable commodity. The upshot is—I am sorry to shock you, Augustina, but here it is—I'm the proprietress of a massage-parlour. That's not simply a euphemism by the way; massage does go on there.

*Augustina:* Well, that *does* shock me. How *can* the sensitive and decent person that I remember you to be put up with, not to put too fine a point upon it, trafficking in commercial sex? I am sorry to be so blunt, but that appears to be the order of the day.

*Clodia:* Fair enough; I owe you an answer. It doesn't do to sentimentalize extra-marital sex. It can be a brutal business. It can be—and especially for the male (is it sexist to say that?)—a mere matter of physical tension and release. Oh, I know the usual slogans: 'Prostitutes are scheming, cynical, mercenary and unloving.' As O.B. used to say, the road to hell is paved with shifted quantifiers—beware the surreptitious move from 'some' to 'all'. And, let me tell you, the large-hearted whore of romance exists too, and indeed is, as the ornithologists say, well distributed. Need I remind you that intra-marital sex can be a brutal business too? How sure can we be that the proportion of exploitative and manipulative sex is less between husbands and wives than elsewhere? Don't think that my heart doesn't bleed for you, Augustina, if I remind you, or rather both of us, that there are married women who often, how shall I put it, 'perform the act'—I won't say 'make love'—who are a great deal worse off than you.

*Augustina:* But—sorry to harp on this point, which must be painful to you—the fact that some intra-marital sex, which keeps all the rules insisted on by the Church, is bad, does not entail that any extra-marital sex is good.

*Clodia:* This was exactly where I finally decided I had to make a break with the Church. I was not going to confess as bad what all my instincts told me was good. You should see what I and the girls on my staff manage to do to bring some sort of delight into cramped, warped, shrivelled and desiccated lives. The fact is that many people, in my experience (as far as it goes) more males than females, have a horror of their own bodies. Augustine, as I remember, says that one should hate one's body, and I meet countless people who, it is to be feared, have taken him at his word. You know what they say—the ideal pre-Vatican II Catholic had a body-image which was such a festering mess of purulent itching scabs that he longed to commit suicide, but the Church wouldn't let him do that either.

*Augustina:* I think everyone would agree now that some corrective was needed there. Meister Eckhart says one should love one's body.

*Clodia:* Well, he got into trouble, didn't he? Fair enough, I shouldn't exaggerate in my bitterness; but I do want to stress that sex can be a redemption, almost, if one is in something like the state of mind I've described. The other day I had a crippled boy with me, who had just such a horror of his own body. I hope this won't sound blasphemous—after all, as Jung might have pointed out, it wasn't me he was really talking about, but rather a projection of himself—but he told me that I had redeemed him. Oh, on that occasion we didn't get up to anything, or I don't think so, that even the crustiest old Monsignor could object to, but we talked about him and me, and I rubbed his back and shoulders, and I told him what I thought was true—and this I believe was the crucial thing—that he was rather beautiful. I was appalled by the intensity of his gratitude; he said that I had given him by far the happiest half hour of his life. I tell you, too, I think he was closer to the vision of God than at other time. Some things of that kind, though, are very explicitly sexual; everything in me revolts against the view that it is those which make the difference between charity and wickedness.

*Augustina:* Do you think that you and your girls really do such clients good in the long run?

*Clodia:* Well, of course, you can always play the game of saying that any sort of action you happen to dislike leads to unpleasantness or harms the character, in the very long run. I see no evidence of it; on the contrary, I get letters from old clients which give me the impression that we sometimes rescue them permanently from a real psychological pit in their lives. Anyway, Augustina, you should know, is there much evidence that sexual abstinence benefits the character?

*Augustina:* By God, that's cruel ...

*Clodia:* I'm sorry, my dear, that was inexcusable of me, I didn't mean ...

*Augustina:* If only I *did* find that I was a 'better person', by my own lights, for all this frustration, it would be a bit more endurable. But the denial, not just of my 'animal appetites' as you might say, but of all the sweet intimacies and kindnesses and generousities which go along with the expression of them, has made me in obvious senses a *worse* person; more bitter, more crabby, more uncharitable, less able and willing to put up with other people's failings, than I would otherwise be. Why should the sexual peccadilloes of others be so easily forgiven by the Church, I feel, while I lie roasting on the gridiron? Do you think God has anything for those who take literally what the Church has said are the rules? At least in the old days, when you heard lots of sermons about hell and how easy it was to get there, you knew where you were.

*Clodia:* Dear Augustina, I can't bear to see you crying. And, I ought just to mention it, the gentleman and lady at the next table looked a little put out when you raised your voice and banged your fist on the table.

*Augustina:* Well, you know what T.S. Eliot said, human beings cannot bear very much reality. But don't worry, I'll be good now. Here's an example of what I mean; I cannot forgive the reaction to the Church's teaching of red-blooded Catholic males, when their marriage breaks up, or goes sour on them, or indeed when they just feel a bit bored or restless. The Church doesn't stop these people indulging their sexual appetites. It just lets them off making a decent commitment to a woman—women usually (here at least the novelettes are right) want more than something that 'loves and rides away' (to use a romantic expression), or 'screws and bolts' (in more up to date lingo. I like that expression, don't you? I came across it in a piece by Katharine Whitehorn a few years ago.)

*Clodia:* 'Usually' is right, I think. Perhaps regretfully, I don't think I'm that kind of woman myself.

*Augustina:* I probably belong to the majority, but, really, I am hardly in a position to know—as I might be, if I were fairly contentedly or discontentedly living with a husband, or—if I was carrying on like you, Clodia dear.

*Clodia:* I'm not sure I like the flavour of 'carrying on'—

*Augustina:* Oh, sorry, I really did mean it in a quite neutral sense; 'following a way of life like yours' doesn't sound much better. I don't mean, honestly, to be crabby. But speaking of crabbiness, I do feel a little sorry for the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Didn't he really have something to grouch about? He had kept the rules, with Lord knows how much difficulty; and there was the younger one, snivelling his way back to Daddy after spending a considerable fortune enjoying himself, and then getting 'positively reinforced', as the psychologists would say, for the whole beastly performance.

*Clodia:* Is your view of the matter that the Church is too forgiving, then? Do you want those who break the rules to be punished for it?

*Augustina:* I vaguely remember Aquinas saying somewhere in the *Summa*—and greatly shocking many moderns in doing so—that part of the bliss of the saved is derived from contemplating the torments of the damned. Well, I regret to say I think there's a good side to that. I wouldn't mind, perhaps, seeing Hitler feasting in the Kingdom of God along with Gandhi and Mother Teresa, provided I could be sure that he had gone through a good deal first—not so much racks and pincers and terrible licking flames, as really coming to understand, having brought home to him, the misery he caused in all its ramifications, and feeling compunction about it. I believe some spiritualist authors conceive of this as being something one has to go through in the afterlife.<sup>1</sup>

*Clodia:* What would you really like for yourself? For what it's worth, I feel at the moment that I want very much to take you in my arms and comfort you, but that would presumably cause even more commotion than your performance a few minutes ago, and we really would be asked to leave. What's your conception of heaven?

*Augustina:* Thanks for the offer of the hug; I'll take a rain-cheque on it. Do you think Cardinal Mausinger<sup>2</sup> would allow me that much self-indulgence? What I think about heaven only goes to illustrate what I said earlier about the deterioration of my character. I want to see a 'come-uppance' for people who have 'got away with it' in the present life, not so much in hell as in purgatory. I do have something of the temperament of a staff-nurse putting the student nurses through it—if *I* have gone through this unpleasantness, why shouldn't *they*? I don't exactly want the self-indulgent or the lucky—those who have kicked over the traces, or who have had the inestimable good luck of a fulfilling and relatively harmonious marriage—to be tortured, even a little. And I don't—at least I don't *think* I do—exactly want the feminine equivalent of the Islamic paradise, whatever that would be. But—but—oh dear, I don't know exactly *what* I want. I suppose, something like the tears wiped away from my eyes;<sup>3</sup> some kind of recognition that all this crushing and mangling of my nature in obedience to the rules of the Church has not just been a waste of time. No, no, I take the point you made earlier, I'm not in the front line of deserving—not in the same league as one of Ivan Karamazov's tortured children, or a victim of the holocaust. This isn't a scream of indignation, just a little whimpering plea to universal justice. Anyway, you've had enough, more than enough, of my black bile. But I am intrigued and puzzled, Clodia, by the question of what *you* think the Church's attitude on sexual matters ought to be.

*Clodia:* As to detail, I wouldn't presume to say. But I do have some suggestions about principle. The whole thing would be easier to bear if one felt the Church took the measure of sexuality, rather than just

putting it down and calling it bad names. So many priests that I used to meet—isn't this one of the worst penalties of celibacy?—had on the one hand an idealised picture of monogamous marriage, and on the other hand assumed that all sexual activity outside its bounds was mere animal coupling, or at best uncaring and exploitative. So many positions in life seem more tolerable if one constructs a sufficiently distorted view of the alternatives! If only some *positive* interest in *good* sexual relations—as opposed to sexual relations which merely kept all the rules—was shown by the Church; what I mean by 'good sexual relations' are those where one takes comfort and delight in the comfort and delight of one's partner. In *that* context, and against that background, the Church's prohibitions and negations would not be quite so utterly dispiriting.

*Augustina:* I think it's fair to say that such an emphasis is compatible with the Catholic tradition, for all that it has been neglected up till recently. I would expect Häring's treatment of the subject, say, to be an improvement on Prümmer's. And can't one conceivably have good sex, in all the ways you describe, *within* the bounds of strictly monogamous marriage? As to the cases you mentioned earlier, of people whom you and your girls had helped, wouldn't counselling without sex perhaps have done most of them at least nearly the same amount of good?

*Clodia:* In my perhaps unduly cynical view, 'conceivably' is the operative word. Galileo's laws apply strictly only in a vacuum; the only trouble is you never quite have a vacuum for them to apply strictly in. What I'm interested in is—does the Church have anything but sexual crucifixion to offer those human beings who don't have the remarkable luck of a good marriage; who are driven by a tyrannous libido, say, into marrying early and disastrously, or who have the wrong sexual orientation? As to the rules, I find much to ponder in the view expressed by the Protestant theologian Roger White—have you come across his work?—that people ought to have the same attitude to sexual morality as to other sorts of morality. I think he meant by this that one ought to apply to it the golden rule—that you should act towards others as you would wish them to act towards you. If that were the determining criterion of sexual behaviour, I wonder how many of the present rules would survive, at least in a form permitting no exception?

*Augustina:* I was thinking about a young Catholic male the other day, with whom I had a good deal of fellow-feeling. He was aged only twenty-two, his marriage had broken down, and he felt that his life was over.

*Clodia:* How, I ask you, could a conscientious Catholic advise him? 'Yes, you will certainly be extremely frustrated and miserable for the rest of your life; but you will just have to put up with it, on pain of eternal damnation.' 'Have all the affairs you like, but go frequently to the confessional.' We've discovered that bolt-hole already. 'Get an annulment.' But suppose he doesn't fulfil the conditions for one, and



can't conscientiously pretend to (some have had a very flexible conscience about this)? 'Priests have to put up with celibacy; why can't the laity?' And there, perhaps, we have the essence of the matter.

*Augustina:* I have often thought that there was an unconsciously punitive element in the official Catholic attitude to sex. It is as though the celibate hierarchy were punishing the laity for enjoyment of a kind that they themselves are forbidden. Perhaps this is an uncharitable view.

*Clodia:* It appears to me rather obviously correct. Thus saith the Lord: Woe to the shepherds of Israel!<sup>4</sup>

*Augustina:* I don't suppose the official line about someone like you would be all that punitive; they might say that such a warm-hearted person should be forgiven her sins.

*Clodia:* I do pray for forgiveness of my sins—for all the times that I have been unkind, selfish, mercenary, and neglectful of others' feelings. And—let me tell you—for all the times I let Rodney get away with treating me like dirt. Or didn't tell off a client for bullying one of my girls or trying to cheat her. But I *won't* ask forgiveness for trying to increase happiness and relieve suffering as best I can.

*Augustina:* Don't shout, Clodia, please. Who's causing a disturbance now? But we've already scared away that couple from the next table so I suppose it doesn't matter much any more. As to Rodney and your clients, isn't Aristotle good, on justice as a mean between excessive self-assertion and undue self-effacement? Don't the feminists have a point in applying the moral to the supposed 'virtues' typical of women?

*Clodia:* Yes, indeed! Isn't excessive self-effacement the great female vice, and don't the male-dominated hierarchy just love to commend us for it!<sup>5</sup> Oh dear, we haven't much more time. My plea for myself amounts just to this. The world is full of sexual misery. The priest and the Levite, following well-established tradition, usually pass by on the other side. I try to help a bit.

*Augustina:* But could the Church possibly do such a U-turn as would be necessary to meet your criticisms?

*Clodia:* Oh, she can manage U-turns all right when things get awkward near to where the real power lies. What about the heliocentric cosmology, usury, evolution? What do I hear about biblical studies? Are not Catholic scholars now openly affirming a degree of scepticism about the historicity of the Gospels that got their predecessors excommunicated a few decades ago? (I seem to remember reading that in a paper by an obscure theologian—Menial or some such name.) What concerns me is not that the Church changes her teaching on issues like these, but that she so seldom admits officially that she has done so. One might have thought that the Church, with her august office and grave responsibilities, would set an example in candour, rather than behaving in that regard in a manner considerably below common human standards.



*Augustina:* You shouldn't really talk of 'the Church' in that context, you know ...

*Clodia:* No, of course I shouldn't. I should have referred to the 'magisterium' or 'the teaching office', or (perhaps this is a naughty thought) 'those who wear the trousers in the Church'. Oh dear, I must be back on duty in a moment or two. Where have we got to?

*Augustina:* We seem to be back with the dilemma which we were conscious of facing in the early sixties. Now, as then, one has to choose, short of most improbable good fortune, between being a conscientious Catholic, and having a fulfilled and happy sex-life. The unequal degree of sacrifice involved in sexual abstinence has been noted in effect by Kinsey and others. For some, the choice may be easy; for others, it brings a constant dull pain; for others still, it results in virtually perpetual torment. Can one really say and mean, at that rate, that 'grace perfects nature' for such people?

*Clodia:* I do think that the old Church which we were brought up with had the merit of clearly setting out the dilemma. One might compare what contemporary Russians are apt to say about Stalin—'At least you knew where you were with him.' The 'Catholicism with a human face'<sup>6</sup> hoped for by so many as a result of Vatican II has turned out to be an illusion; and sexual morality is the outstanding illustration of this. 'Only if you outrage your sexual nature will you get to heaven; if you fail to outrage it, you will be eternally damned.' —at least that's *clear*. What other merit it has, though, if one believes in a God who is something other than a cosmic sadist, is not evident to me. But now I must rush. Good-bye, my dear, and please keep in touch.

*Augustina:* Good bye.

*(They kiss)*

- 1 She may have in mind Robert Crookall, *The Supreme Adventure* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1974), 42–7.
- 2 The reference here is obscure. There is no Cardinal of that name.
- 3 Cf. Revelation 21:4.
- 4 Ezekiel 34: 1–2; cf. Jeremiah 23: 1–2.
- 5 Clodia has been looking at E. Schüssler-Fiorenza and M Collins (eds.), *Women — Invisible in Church and Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985).
- 6 It is possible that there is an oblique allusion here to the 'Communism with a human face' referred to in the context of the Hungarian and Czech uprisings of 1956 and 1968.