SEX AND AMERICAN CATHOLICS

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The Roman Catholic Church in the United States, it can safely be said, is feeling a crisis of considerable proportions in the glare of massive and negative publicity. On the surface, the crisis is about sex. Beneath the surface, the crisis is about the Church’s teaching authority. How these two have become intertwined over the past several decades, and how together they threaten the integrity of the Catholic church, is my topic.

Over the span of my lifetime, official church teaching on sex has remained both severe and consistent. When I was a child, the church forbade masturbation, divorce, adultery, fornication – see pre-marital sexual relations – abortion, and artificial birth control. Male and female members of religious orders took a vow of chastity and ordained priests were obligated to celibacy. As I near the age of sixty, none of these positions has been substantially modified. This official Catholic sexual ethics is, moreover, counter-cultural within an American society that, over the same sixty-year period, became ever more profoundly individualistic and pervasively sexualized. To use biblical language, the church’s teachings on sexuality can be regarded, in important ways, as prophetic. It stands for a vision of the world defined by God over against practices that distort creation.

Demanding fidelity in marriage challenges an ethos in which easy divorce testifies to the erosions of a sense of covenant. Insisting that religious and clergy be celibate is a witness to the power of the resurrection against a culture whose lust for pleasure and acquisition proclaims that this mortal existence is the only life to be had. Restricting licit sexual activity to marriage declares that sexuality is meant to be covenantal and mutually responsible, against impulses that define sexuality simply in terms of pleasure or personal gratification. Most striking, the church’s unwavering stance against abortion stands in the classic prophetic tradition of the protection of the powerless against the powerful. The church’s sexual teaching can, in short, be regarded as a prophetic voice within American culture.

The teaching of any religion on any moral subject, however, must always involve more than words from a pulpit or statements in the press. Teaching is real and convincing only to the extent that it is actually embraced by believers, embodied in their practices, coherently and consistently expressed by the community of faith. The “reception” of Catholic sexual teaching by Catholics themselves – both clergy and lay – is an essential ingredient of that teaching. Only to the degree that moral teaching is expressed by the attitudes and actions of Catholics themselves can it challenge anyone. Only if a prophet’s message is clear, consistent, internally coherent, and corresponds to the prophet’s own manner of life can or should a prophet be heard.

It is precisely here that a profound change has occurred over the fifty-some years of my life, a change that has compromised and perhaps even discredited the prophetic voice of the church in matters of sexual morality.

Before taking up the argument, I should make two disclosures. First, I am myself a lifelong Roman Catholic. My five older siblings have a total of 24 children. I was a seminarian at thirteen, a Benedictine monk for nine years, a priest for three years, and a married layman for 28 years. Joy and I have seven children, ten grandchildren, and three
great-grandchildren. I am therefore not a detached analyst but rather speak as a participant in the changes I am about to describe. Second, as a participant-observer my report is more anecdotally based than statistically. There are certainly exceptions and counterrendencies to the ones I describe, but I think my overall perception is nevertheless accurate. Many young Catholics today, for example, are seeking a return to the ethos of the pre-conciliar church, but even that reaction is defined by the dramatic social changes I am about to describe.

THAT WAS THEN

From 1940 through the mid-1960’s, Catholic teaching on sexuality was remarkably consistent. More impressive, in the United States of America it was embodied by a clergy and laity who wore their rigorous sexual code as a badge of honor distinguishing Catholics from their less impressive Protestant rivals. The prohibition of artificial birth control, of divorce, of pre-marital sex, and of mixed marriages marked Catholics, they fondly thought, as the serious Christians in this country, in distinction to the Protestants who had capitulated to Freud and Kinsey and Americanism in general. Catholics acknowledged, to be sure, a difference between nominal and practicing Catholics. But when they said Catholics they meant only the practitioners.

Practicing Catholics not only obeyed the strict sexual teaching of the church. They extended that teaching through sets of attitudes and actions that comprehended the minutest aspects of everyday life. Humorous and bitter memoirs of Growing up Catholic recall how the prohibition of fornication, for example, led logically to a complete semiotics of modesty in dress that was spelled out by highly specific norms, from loose blouses to non-reflecting shoes. Modesty was so internalized that the possibility of becoming an occasion of someone else’s sexual arousal – called “impulse thoughts” – was taken as seriously as actually having such impulses oneself. The Legion of Decency’s ranking of films was more than a list tacked to the bulletin board. It provided a guide to moral discernment in the home. I vividly remember an argument between my mother and my teen-age sisters when I was about 8 years old about viewing “Joan of Arc.” My sisters argued that it was about a saint. My mother countered that it starred Ingrid Bergman, who had abandoned her husband; attending this film would countenance adultery and divorce.

Catholics of my age well remember the totalizing character of the Catholic ethos of the fifties. Devotion to Pius XII and to the Blessed Mother, fasting on Friday, keeping the eucharistic fast, avoiding blasphemy (any use of “Jesus” without bowing the head), masturbation, and impure thoughts were all pretty much at the same level of obligation, woven together in a single, unquestioning and unquestionable fabric of belief and practice, of fear and love, of resentment and pride.

Weekly confession on Saturday afternoons marked the practicing Catholic. Yes, it was terrifying to acknowledge every impure thought and act. In adolescence, who can keep count? But it all made sense, not least because the confessional line each Saturday afternoon included family and friends and neighbors. Catholics, we told each other, were unlike Protestants also in this respect: Protestants had – and needed – psychotherapy. But we had the confessional.

Catholic sexual mores during those years marked the church as an immigrant religion out of step with an America whose post-war affluence and freedom saw Hugh Hefner and Marilyn Monroe give way to more spectacular and more sinister entrepreneurs of sex.
But Americans also paid a certain respect to the Catholic insistence on remaining aloof from the sexual mainstream, a respect suggested by Hollywood’s cautious and usually positive portrayal of Catholic priests and nuns. Catholic sexual mores may have been alien but they were impressive. The priests portrayed by Bing Crosby and Spencer Tracy in the 1940’s were virile, musical, and unequivocally committed to the good of humanity. The depiction of nuns by Deborah Kerr (in “Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison”) and Audrey Hepburn (in “The Nun’s Story”) were notable for the seriousness with which they took religious vows and the desire of religious women to seek God’s will. Hollywood producers were neither Catholic nor particularly moral. By they knew that Catholics voted at the ticket office.

**THIS IS NOW**

One way of indicating the seismic shift in the practice and perception of Catholic sexual teaching is viewing more recent Hollywood portrayals of Catholics. When not simply silly (Whoopi Goldberg in “Sister Act” and “Sister Acts II”) or horrifying (Meg Tilley in “Agnes of God”) the depictions of Catholics tend toward the puerile (“Keeping the Faith,” “Dogma”). It’s not just films. In live and televised drama, characters are presented positively when they struggle against catholic teaching and are presented negatively when they straightforwardly act according to it.

Stand-up comics, a disproportionate number of whom seem to be, in the current phrase, “recovering Catholics,” treat traditional sexual teaching as self-evidently ludicrous. Religious women are, in comedic routines, systematically held up for ridicule. In a world of pervasive political correctness, practicing Catholics are among the very few remaining safe targets for easy mockery.

Attacking Catholic sexual mores, however, seems increasingly arbitrary and even irrelevant, since the formerly monolithic Catholic sexual ethos has all but disappeared. Most of the young people in a comedy club laughing at jokes about sexually neurotic nuns have never met an actual nun, much less had one for a teacher. American Catholics now divorce about as often as non-Catholics do. Catholics are not notably better at avoiding adultery and fornication than non-Catholics. Young Catholics sleep together before marriage with little sense of “living in sin.” Masturbation is of course practiced as often as it ever was, except that now few now confess it as a mortal sin. With clear conscience or not, married Catholics practice artificial birth control. Enough Catholic women have abortions to make post-abortion counseling and reconciliation a substantial ministry. Vocations to religious orders demanding chastity are scarce. As for a celibate priesthood, the lack of vocations has once again made the United States a missionary country.

If Catholic sexual teaching includes the willing reception, glad enactment, and unquestioning proclamation of that teaching by Catholics themselves, then that teaching is, in the year 2002, far less coherent, consistent, and clear than it was in 1950, simply because many Catholics today themselves either don’t believe it or don’t consistently practice it.

**A TIME OF TURNING**

How did American Catholicism reach its present state? I suggest that the shift is due both to factors external to Catholicism in American culture, and to factors internal to Catholicism, and that the link between the two – indeed perhaps the best explanation – is the way the external became internal, or the way in which American Catholics truly
became American at a moment when America itself was undergoing a cultural revolution.

It has become a cliché to “blame it on the 60’s, but the cultural change in the United States effected from the middle of that decade to the present is not trite. Doubtless, a more adequate analysis would show complexities and ambiguities before and after the transition, but would also show that the transition itself was real and profound.

At least six elements pertinent to my subject were part of the cultural upheaval in the United States during the 1960’s. The first was a sustained material prosperity unparalleled in human history. The same technological expertise brought forth both the microchip and a reliable birth-control pill, appeared to make possible a simultaneous war against foreign communism and domestic poverty, enabled – and then demanded – the full participation of both men and women in the economic sphere.

The second was the sexual revolution that swept first across college campuses and then into homes and elementary schools. Masters and Johnson brought the orgasm into polite company. Alex Comfort brought the Joy of Sex to the local bookstore, with drawings that a decade earlier would have required a brown wrapper. Post-pill and pre-Aids, sexual activity was preached and practiced as a matter of fun and freedom, with sex and procreation increasingly regarded as quite separate concerns.

The third element was the marriage of the sexual revolution to commerce in the media, above all in advertising. As movies and rock and roll tested the boundaries of sexual expression, each risky extension was domesticated with breathtaking speed by television. By the beginning of the 21st century, no form of sexual exploitation, including soft-core child pornography, has gone unexploited – by glossy-magazine advertisers. As for hard-core pornography, it has become the most lucrative branch of film-making, and parents must make a special request in motel rooms to keep such films from being offered to their children. Pornography and prostitution are available for sale on the Internet to every child. The distinction between sex selling and selling sex has virtually disappeared.

The fourth element was the impact of the political scandals of the 1960’s on the American consciousness, especially on the Boomer generation, whose outsized path through life has had such a disproportionate cultural effect. The late fifties and early sixties encouraged among the young a sense of political optimism. Involvement in the civil rights struggle, the Peace Corps, and the war against poverty could make a difference. But the assassination of the Kennedys and King, the secret war in Asia uncovered by the Pentagon papers, the Watergate cover-up, all these had two profound effects. One was the emergence of the hermeneutics of suspicion. America finally emerged from its cocoon of political naiveté, as more and more Americans saw that politics was about power and power was most often self-interested, and the politicians lied out of both habit and choice. The other was a shift in the sense of what was morally more important, from the private to the public. The Eisenhower generation had cultivated sexual propriety but winked at racial, class and gender inequities. The Boomers (before AIDS) saw nothing wrong with sexual promiscuity, so long as the right social issues were engaged. These are genuine shifts in moral consciousness.

The fifth element was the women’s movement, which drew upon and extended each of the other elements. An economic prosperity based on labor-saving technology freed women from biological determinism and domestic servitude. The pill liberated them
from the constant threat of pregnancy and child-rearing and enabled them to pursue careers. The sexual revolution saw women as well as men seeking sexual adventure apart from commitment. The media’s marriage of sex and commerce, in turn, revealed how commodification simultaneously glorified and degraded women’s bodies. It was women who concluded that if all politics is personal so everything personal is also political. Women above all seized on the hermeneutics of suspicion: the validation of their own voices required the demystification of patriarchal structures constructed for the benefit of men and the suppression of women. Women translated the equation of private and public morality into an advocacy of the legality of abortion, so that the killing of a fetus was interpreted in terms of “women’s rights over their own bodies.” In short, the women’s movement, the most controversial and threatening element in the cultural revolution, forced all Americans to recognize that sex is also always about gender, and that gender always involves social construction, and that social construction always involves somebody’s interest.

Finally, the 60’s saw the birth of the Gay and Lesbian Rights movement in the cities of America. That relatively small portion of humanity whose identity had always been defined by others in terms of deviance also discovered through solidarity its name and its right to speak for itself and to define itself. As a result, more and more Americans discovered that they or their children or their spouses were homosexual. And what should they think or do about that?

In moral terms, these six elements of cultural revolution are a mixed bag. America’s material prosperity brought obvious blessings but also shaped an entitled population. The pill gave women freedom but its long-term health effects remain uncertain. The sexual revolution, however inevitable, had disastrous consequences on a number of fronts. The sexualization of identity in the media has coarsened the American soul. The hermeneutics of suspicion has disabled many from civic participation. Yet it was past time for Americans to mature politically, past time for moral consciousness to embrace the social as well as the domestic sphere, past time for women and homosexuals to receive full recognition of their humanity and place in the world. However we might evaluate the morality of each element separately, the more important point is that they all occurred simultaneously over a very short period of time. And in combination, they profoundly altered American culture.

Now the pertinence of all this to my theme of sex and American Catholics is twofold. First, this cultural upheaval was happening at the very moment when American Catholics finally became fully American. Second it coincided with the greatest cultural upheaval within the Catholic church since the 16th century, generated and symbolized by the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965).

INCONSISTENCY AND CONFUSION

John F. Kennedy’s election as president signaled American Catholicism’s turn from an immigrant and second-class status to full participation in American culture. It may be difficult now to appreciate how, in the early sixties, the American church was prosperous, was growing together with the suburbs, was becoming American in its hierarchy, was increasingly assertive intellectually, and was attracting so many young men and women to religious vocations that huge new seminaries and convents were being built across the country to accommodate them all. Few noticed that American Catholics were also entering more fully into the cultural maelstrom that was the sixties.
As much as the Kennedy presidency, the council seemed to symbolize the coming of age of American Catholicism. The American Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray spearheaded the passage of the council’s decree of Religious Freedom. Imagine: the church of the inquisition recognizing the supremacy of the individual conscience before God! The Council appeared to be reforming the church in the direction of distinctively American values. It advocated strong lay leadership, consultation, and decentralized decision-making by national organizations of bishops.

The council notably did not address the sexual revolution. It said nothing about the role of women. It did not acknowledge homosexuals. It emphatically changed nothing in the rule of priestly celibacy. But it raised expectations, especially concerning the issue that was existentially most pressing for married Catholics, artificial birth control. Among these expectations was that the promised decision on this difficult issue would be reached on the basis of the values inculcated by the council itself. Change was possible, because the authority structure of the church was changing.

By the late 1960’s, while awaiting a decision that many thought could reasonably go only toward approval of birth control, American Catholics found themselves caught up in a cultural revolution with little moral guidance. The council had explicitly called for the church to engage modernity. But in moral matters, the council offered little to help Americans through an overwhelming flood of change.

Catholics did not suddenly become sexual adventurers. But they were – many of them – sexually confused in a way they had not been before. Some priests and nuns went through a delayed adolescence of sexual experimentation. Some lay Catholics – confused by the news that eating meat on Friday no longer assured a place in hell – understandably began to reassess other items on the code of forbidden behaviors. Catholics were not prepared to sort through issues that few people then were even in a position to assess accurately. In the 60’s, the most respected Catholic moral theologians had begun to shift from a language of rules and law, to a language of relationship and discernment, especially in sexual matters. They spoke of sex in marriage as serving relational values as well as procreation. At the same time, the most powerful new theological movement within the church, liberation theology, emphasized that Scripture is more concerned with social oppression through economic and political systems than with how people arrange themselves sexually.

These were not, however, the only voices Catholics heard. The Vatican Council, after all, was a disputed territory, especially for those who had fought its liberalizing tendencies. Among them were powerful bishops and moral theologians who vigorously opposed the new vision of morality, and continued to emphasize a rule-based sexual ethics.

In hindsight, it is scarcely surprising that American Catholics – now themselves more than ever American in their individualism and consumerism – began to choose teachers and tenets for themselves. Small wonder also that priests in the pulpit and in the confessional exhibited considerate variety of opinion on issues like birth control. It was at this moment that American Catholicism began to become, in effect, the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the country, precisely in its loss of a single vision and a single voice. Within the span of a decade, American Catholicism went from a clear and confident sense of sexual morality to a state of confusion and loss of self-confidence. Everything seemed to hinge on Paul VI’s clarification on the matter of birth control.
Married Catholics in particular had high expectations, for the media had already made widely known the process of consultation had pointed to the need to change the rules of contraception.

**INCHOHERENCE AND CORRUPTION**

At the beginning of the 21st century, American Catholics are not simply confused and conflicted concerning sexual morality. They are increasingly suspicious of, and hostile towards, a hierarchy that appears, in the harsh light of publicity, as no longer credible because of incoherence and even corruption.

The decisive moment was Pope Paul VI’s 1969 publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Not only did the papal letter reaffirm the prohibition of all forms of artificial birth control on the basis of patently poor logic. It was above all an act of papal authoritarianism in the face of a process of discernment that the Pope himself had initiated. Contrary to the Pope’s expectations, the encyclical’s equation of artificial birth control and abortion did not serve to strengthen the moral argument against birth control, but served instead to weaken the church’s prophetic stand against abortion. The subsequent strenuous efforts by John Paul II to shore up *Humane Vitae* through a “theology of the body” have only sharpened the perception that, lacking a convincing theological basis, the magisterium’s intractability on this point is really about keeping women in their place and maintaining the aura of papal authority.

The birth control issue finally initiated many American Catholics into the hermeneutics of suspicion, enabling them at last to see and name many other forms of inconsistency and corruption that they had formerly allowed to pass in the name of loyalty and obedience.

The church’s way of dealing with divorce and remarriage, for example, lacks any moral coherence. The prohibition of divorce is not really absolute. Everyone knows that some Catholics are allowed to divorce and remarry with the approval of the church, so long as they (or their ecclesiastical lawyer) can make a case for annulment even after years of cohabitation, and if they are rich or prominent enough to demand such special attention. The poor and the legally unrepresented, in contrast, can find themselves in disastrous or abusive marriages without hope of divorce and remarriage in the church. The moral incoherence is revealed particularly by the exception. If a first marriage was not really “in the church,” then it can be dissolved without consequence. People with serial non-sacramental marriages in the past are free to marry in the church and enjoy the benefits of full communion. Only if a sacramental marriage fails are faithful Catholics unable to seek another sanctified partnership.

Equally inconsistent and incoherent is the fiction of a totally celibate priesthood. I leave aside the anecdotal evidence that reminds us that theoretical celibacy is not always translated into actual chastity. What challenges logic is Rome’s insistence on a male celibate clergy in the face of the contrary evidence from Scripture and Tradition, in the face of the experience of Protestant and Orthodox communions, and while accepting into the Roman priesthood men who are married but who have converted from Anglicanism. The Roman church’s willingness to lose an ordained priesthood altogether – and with its the sacramental heart of Catholicism – rather than ordain married men or (horrors) women may appear noble to some, but to more and more American Catholics it appears as suicidal self-delusion. The willingness to ordain older men who are widowers to the priesthood, and married men to the diaconate, appear as desperate avoidance
mechanisms, an expression of fear and loathing toward normal sexual behavior and above all toward women’s bodies.

It is now no longer even permissible for theologians under the recently crafted Mandatum to speak in favor of women’s ordination, despite the fact that every theological argument advanced for an all-male clergy is laughable (at best) and blasphemous (at worst). No wonder the suspicion grows – and has been given explicit voice by at least one brave moral theologian – that the obsessive protection of this male privilege owes something to its capacity to provide cover for homosexual men using their priesthood (and perhaps their episcopacy) as an extremely effective closet. I mean nothing slanderous by making this statement. Indeed, I think an argument can be made for homosexual as well as heterosexual priests. My point rather is that if homosexuality among its clergy were to be honestly faced by the hierarchy, then other things would need honestly to be addressed as well.

The magisterium might then need to take account of the Archbishops who have had long-term affairs with female staff members, or short-term affairs with male friends, or Bishops who decide they want to get married and stay bishops, or African priests who carry out a campaign of rape against African nuns.

The magisterium might need to ask whether the cumulative effect of such behaviors might indicate something more than human weakness, might in fact point to a deeply distorted understanding of sexuality, might in fact indict an ecclesiastical practice that virtually guarantees a sexually immature clergy, or at the very least, one that encourages a caste mentality that is removed from and insensitive to the cares and concerns of those who are married and are raising children.

Publicly most scandalous to Catholic laity, and deeply injurious to their already diminished sense of confidence in the hierarchy’s moral guidance in matters of sexuality, is the decades-long practice of enabling and covering up crimes of child-abuse by pedophile priests who continued to be moved from one parish to another to perpetuate their infantile and predatory sexual practices at the expense of innocent children. The sheer numbers of priests involved and of their victims is shocking enough, but even more disgusting are the self-serving gestures of a hierarchy that has had to pay possibly hundreds of millions of dollars in lawsuits (presumably drawn from the collection plate) and has, to this day, only reluctantly supported laws to forestall such crimes against the helpless.

Finally, the all-male magisterium has not grasped that its profound, deliberate, and systemic sexism compromises the capacity of the church to speak prophetically. Everyone knows that most Catholic parishes in this country would have to close up tomorrow if it weren’t for women. I don’t mean this in the sense that women have always been more loyal and religious than men, attending Mass while their husbands waited outside smoking cigarettes. I mean this in the very specific sense that women are carrying out most of the work of ministry in many if not most parishes in this country. But the same abuse of power by which the male clergy exploited but never fully honored the ministerial labors of religious women in parishes, hospitals, and schools, is now being perpetuated in the exploitation of single and married women in local parishes. And this exploitation takes place even while such women are denied ordination with the argument that only males can really represent Christ!
Not all parishioners in the United States have yet awakened to this pattern of sexism. They worry over the fact that their parish now has one priest when it formerly had three. But they know they are better off than the parishes that can celebrate the Eucharist only when a priest visits. They are so pleased to see (and to be) women acolytes and lectors and Eucharistic ministers and catechists, that they do not yet appreciate how such accommodation simply continues with slight variations the traditional exploitation of women by male leadership.

But an increasing number of American Catholic women do see the pattern, and they are angry. They correctly see that the rejection of women lies at the heart of a great deal of the church’s twisted and confusing sexual practice. And while many of them fervently support the church’s opposition to abortion, even they find it increasingly difficult, in the shadow of this pattern, cogently to respond to the non-Catholic feminists’ charge that the church’s objection to abortion is only the most radical form of its desire for women above all to be controlled. And if Catholic women finally get angry enough to walk out, then the game is close to over.

My argument in this presentation has been that although the words have stayed the same, the actual content of Catholic sexual morality in America has not. The combination of cultural upheaval, inconsistent teaching and practice, and the corruption and abuse of authority, has led to the present situation. If my analysis is even partially correct, the improvement of this situation will demand both a more coherent and clearly expressed sexual morality, and a reform of the Catholic church’s authority structure. Unless the leaders of the church begin a serious examination of conscience with regard to their practice and a serious process of discernment with regard to their teaching, little better can be expected. And unless that process of discernment involves women and those who are married, then neither the teaching on sex and marriage nor the integrity and credibility of the clergy can hope for much improvement. At a time when a seriously disordered world most needs a prophetic word concerning humans as sexual creatures before God, the church’s ability to speak and embody that prophetic word will be hopelessly compromised.