

4. Sexual Pleasure as Grace and Gift

Contemporary Christians in our society are increasingly distinguished from earlier Christians not only by cresting doubts about procreationism, dealt with in Chapter Two, but also by their intuitions/convictions about the goodness of sex itself. Christian tradition has understood sex on a moral spectrum which has seldom extended further than evil incarnate on the right to morally suspect on the left. Roman Catholicism has taught for some centuries that in sexuality there is "no small matter," meaning that all sexual sins are serious sins. While we may and should deplore the negative assessment of sexuality in the tradition, there is one positive note: Christianity has understood sexuality as powerful. One of the problems within the cultural shift away from the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality which has been occurring in secular culture is that the power of sexuality is denied along with the demons long understood as animating sexuality. Sexuality is treated lightly, in terms of privacy, of recreational activity, as a body function with no more meaning or importance than other body functions.

But sexuality is powerful. There are complex connections between personal sexual identity and the expression and satisfaction of certain basic physiological and psychological needs and desires. Recognition of the power of sexuality in our lives and world is essential for understanding sexuality as a positive force, as a source of transforming grace.

Within the traditional negative focus on sexuality in Christianity there is a tendency to identify the source of evil in sex with sexual pleasure. Augustine and Aquinas agreed that had it not been for human sin, coitus would be governed by reason, not desire, and that humans would engage in coitus with the same deliberation and intent as they now sow seed in their fields.¹ Augustine taught that intercourse was, even in marriage, at least venially sinful because it was virtually impossible to have intercourse without pleasure.² Note that this conclusion, and the previous example of the sower, presume male perspectives on sex. Male perspective on sex is virtually exclusive in Christian sexual theology. Women are not sexual sowers, and pleasure in sex is by no means inevitable for women.³

Comedians today make great fun of the teaching socialized into too many of us that "if it feels good, it must be bad." That this is the stuff of humor reveals that we as a society are aware of our ambiguous attitudes about pleasure. We are uneasy about our tendency to assume that pain and discomfort signal virtue, and pleasure vice. We know we have been conditioned to associate pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, with hedonism. Given our socialization to sexual repression and the glorification of pain, hedonism, often taught as the sole alternative to repressive asceticism, appears almost irresistible. And yet rationally we know that egocentric hedonism is neither responsible nor mature, that it runs contrary to the interests of human community. So many Christians feel trapped between egocentric hedonism and masochistic understandings of goodness, and ambivalent about both of them.

Sexual Pleasure: Not Irresistible

Within the Christian sexual tradition there are two different explanations for the low esteem in which sexual pleasure is held. St. Augustine is often used to exemplify an understanding of sexual pleasure which was predominant in the early church. He saw sexual pleasure as dangerous because it is virtually irresistible. St. Jerome agreed, and one of his strongest arguments for virginity was that only those who have never experienced sexual pleasure can be free of its dangerous tentacles. Pleasure which is irresistible causes a loss of control over our activity, makes us irresponsible, and, therefore, causes us to neglect our moral duties. Sexual pleasure lures us into a focus on our own individual satisfaction, and therefore tempts us to be selfish, to ignore or abuse others. For many of the leaders of the Christian church in the first few centuries, the good Christian was one who avoided sex so far as

¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, Ch. 14, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 14, trans. G. Walsh and G. Monahan (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952), 395-404; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 198, 1,2.

² Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence*, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers I: 17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 270-271.

³ J. Ende et al., "The Sexual History in General Medical Practice," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 144 (1984): 3, 558-561. 1984; C. Ellison, "A Critique of the Clitoral Model of Female Sexuality," delivered to the American Psychological Association, 4 Sept. 1980, Montreal.

possible, and, when forced to fulfill marital obligations to one's spouse, performed those sexual duties with as little pleasure as possible.

The second explanation for the low status of sexual pleasure in the Christian tradition is often attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, who maintained that sexual pleasure is something that humans have in common with animals. It is part of our lower animal nature and not part of the higher rational nature which links us to the Almighty and which is characteristically human. For animals sexual pleasure is a good, said Thomas, but for humans it has a kind of intermediate status. It is not evil, for it is part of our God-given nature. But it is not a truly human good.⁴[gp1] For that reason sexual pleasure was not understood as a proper end or goal for human activity. Sexual pleasure is not wrong, but it should be oriented to more human (i.e., rational, higher) ends in order to be justified. Within sexuality, Thomas understood sexual pleasure as an indirect benefit of pursuing higher ends, such as procreation.

Though forms of both these arguments have influenced our society, the Augustinian understanding of sexual pleasure as an evil which robs humans of control of their actions and causes them to ignore the rights and needs of others has tended to prevail in American Christian culture. Our society has taught us that sexual pleasure is evil because it is irresistible. It overwhelms both human reason and the human will. Under the influence of sexual pleasure reason no longer functions to distinguish good from evil, and the will no longer chooses the good.

Because sexual pleasure has been so understood, sexuality became a taboo subject. Sex education came to be seen as encouraging "carnal thoughts," which themselves could be sexually pleasurable and thus lead to the overpowering of reason and will.⁵ Generations of young adults were taught that the simplest of sexual pleasures, such as holding hands in the theater, should be carefully regulated, if not avoided, lest lust come to dominate a relationship.

The understanding of sexual pleasure as irresistible not only mandated sexual avoidance, but also provided very convenient excuses for irresponsible behavior in sexual situations. Men and women have used and continue to use the irresistibility of sexual pleasure as the primary excuse for out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Both unmarried men and women continue to report to surveyors that female virtue theoretically demands sexual abstinence, and that virtuous women do not plan for immoral sex by procuring a diaphragm, or condom, or pill prescription. But sometimes on dates even virtuous women are overwhelmed by sexual desire, and their willpower crumbles. (Men are not expected under the prevailing double standard to be capable of resisting, or required to resist, sexual desire.) But women's lapse is understood as a much lesser moral lapse than planning for premarital sex would be, for at least her *intentions* were pure, even if her will wasn't strong. Of course, the cost of these pure intentions is a high risk of unwed pregnancy[gp2]. In the U.S. the percentage of children born to unwed mothers rose from 10% to 21% between 1970 and 1985.⁶

Another situation in which we encounter the argument for sexual pleasure as irresistible is male excuses for either forcing sex on women or excluding women from pleasure in sex. Women who ask male lovers to slow down, to extend both foreplay and intercourse, and to vary both positions and techniques so as to allow women to become aroused and reach orgasm frequently hear, "Can't do it, old girl. That's not the way the plumbing works. When the little man is ready, he's ready, and nothing I can do will stop him. You have to catch up as best you can." Thus any number of deficiencies in male technique, including premature ejaculation, get blamed on the demands of male biology.

The same excuse is frequently used by sexual harassers: "Sorry, I just couldn't control myself. You are so attractive I just had to touch you/take you out/have you." And of course, this argument is central to most rape defenses: the rapist was caught in the throes of male sexual desire which, once aroused, is uncontrollable. Responsibility should be placed on her who first aroused his desire. This is why 100-lb. women who were raped and assaulted by 200-lb.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Iau IIae 34, vol. 20, Blackfriars ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 65-77.

⁵ Since 1990 in Poland the power of the Catholic church within the Solidarity government has seen sex education abolished in the public schools on just these grounds. In addition, there is some degree of censorship being exercised within publishing, even academic publishing, which prevents dissemination of, and hinders the gathering of, information about such topics as incest, domestic battery, and marital rape on the grounds that to acknowledge such activities is to encourage them. While in Poland delivering a series of lectures in Polish universities, sexology conferences, and the Polish Academy of Science in October 1992, I not only heard representatives of the bishops defend this agenda, but met many doctors and professors whose books had been taken out of print or refused for publication by the church-controlled Ministry of Education on the grounds that their sexual topics were "inappropriate."

⁶ *The World's Women: Trends and Statistics 1970-1990* (New York: United Nations, 1991), 16.

men can be the real culprits: they wore shorts, or smiled, or bent over, or failed to lower the shade the list half inch, or accepted a date with him. Social attitudes are beginning to change around the use of this argument in rape—but very slowly.

This argument that sexual pleasure is irresistible simply is not true. Humans frequently resist sexual pleasure, men as well as women. Cohabiting couples who find themselves kissing will frequently make the decision to postpone lovemaking now, though they are together and already aroused, and to wait until later when there would be more time, and less chance of interruption. Longtime lovers scoff at the idea that sexual pleasure can't be resisted, because resisting immediate sexual pleasure is essential to being a good lover, especially for males. The inability to postpone immediate sexual gratification constitutes an impediment to concern for the pleasure of the partner. Lack of sexual control is characteristic of premature ejaculators, and correlates with low levels of sexual technique and often with low-intensity orgasm. It is control of sexual pleasure—knowing when and how to postpone sexual gratification, using techniques to build arousal in self and partner—which intensifies sexual pleasure for oneself and one's partner.

And yet we really don't want to say that what men need to do more of in sex is exercise greater control. Need for control is a prison we have built around men in our society. Men need to be liberated from the oppressive compulsion to be in control of themselves, others, and all situations. Yet men, and women, too, need to accept responsibility for controlling sexual desire. Are there different kinds of sexual control?

A few years ago a young couple preparing to marry after some years of living together met with my husband and me as part of our church's marriage preparation program. In the course of the discussion of things they would like to change in their relationship, the woman said very hesitantly that she'd like it if he'd lose control in sex more often. The man was flabbergasted, and exclaimed, "What do you mean? You've always told me what a good lover I am!" She tried to explain that he did everything right he touched her in all the right places, in all the right ways, he made sure she was ready before moving to the next step, he asked her for suggestions, and he always took her with him in orgasm. "But you're too perfect—like a machine! I feel like I'm dying and being born, flying and crashing, but I can't feel you doing any of that with me, because you're too in-control. I can't feel you enjoying it. To me, your trip looks like a head trip, not a whole body trip. And I end up feeling like a musical instrument used by you, the musician."

What this woman was saying of her lover some men say of themselves. They come to feel oppressed by the internalized voice that says they must remain in control, and feel themselves as if in a control booth watching the lovers from a distance. This oppressive control is a characteristic sexual danger which resides in the male role. How can the masculine sex role stereotype both defend male sexual desire as irresistible *and* demand that men remain in complete control of sex? The two are actually not so contradictory as they seem. In fact, the defense of male sexual desire as irresistible often emerges from a recognition that no human beings can be in complete control of their emotions and desires all the time, in all situations. The kind of rigid control of feelings, the lack of need for any other persons, which is demanded of men in general is recognized as not possible. The excuse that male sexual desire cannot be controlled is often an attempt by men, and even by sympathetic women, to cut some sexual slack for men in a role which allows little slack, to allow them to vent some of the pent-up pressure in a sexual outlet. For too many males the concept of uncontrollable male sexual desire is the only alternative to sex as a kind of performance, a test of expertise, without spontaneity or intimacy. Without this alternative sex is merely another area of stress and testing where one's masculinity is on the line.⁷

Sex should not be a source of anxiety for men, but neither should it be an avenue for venting men's frustrations by abusing women. Rather sex should be one way of *lessening* the anxiety men experience in other areas of life. If this is to happen, we need to ensure that in demanding that men accept responsibility for their sexual activity we do not invoke the traditional model of opposition between sexual desire and human will. For when we understand virtue—responsibility—as the triumph of the will over the sinful desires of the body, we embrace an understanding of self-control which is, in fact, repressive. Our very language betrays this model: we say, "Yes, we can control our sexual desire," as if our sexual desire were something apart from us. This model of self we inherited is not that of the embodied self; we have been taught in too many ways to see the desires of our bodies as enemies of our "real" selves.

This inherited model of sexual control is dangerous. It is the root of what makes women fear men as dangerous; it is responsible for a great deal of men's pain. The center of male socialization is repression—the repression of feelings, emotions, wishes, desires. But repression is not necessary to ensure "control" of sexual desire. Sexual desire is not a

⁷ See James B. Nelson's excellent treatment of this and other aspects of male sexuality throughout his *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988).

raging river in flood about to overpower us. It is not beyond reason. This is somewhat easier for women to accept than men, for as James Nelson points out, women do not have the experience of being unable to prevent an erection when on public display,⁸ or being unable to prevent ejaculation past a certain point of stimulation. Such experiences easily lead men to see sexual desire as neither controlled nor controllable, when in fact they remain in ultimate control of what they do with an erection, and of the circumstances which bring them to an ejaculatory point of no return.

Neither men nor women should see sexual desire, or any other bodily desire, as an enemy to be feared and controlled. We need to understand our sexual desires as one set of messages to ourselves about how we are. All of us need to learn to hear the messages circulating in our bodies, to interpret them correctly, and to cooperate with them. Repression—denial of the body messages—is dangerous, even fatal. Denial of some specific body messages—of chronic pain, of tiredness, of changes in our body's rhythms—is frequently responsible, especially in men, for unnecessary deaths due to late discovery of conditions such as cancer and hypertension, which are treatable when discovered early. We need to listen to our body messages so that we act to meet our needs—whether they are for rest, for physical closeness, for release of muscle tension, for interpersonal intimacy, or many others.⁹ Many of the impulses we call sexual desires are really about different bodily needs, but are interpreted as sexual because they are so often satisfied only sexually.

Sex can release muscle tension and allow us to relax, it can warm us by raising blood circulation, it can include the stroking of our skin which releases endorphins, it can provide stimulation and excitement to remedy boredom, and it can restore emotional intimacy which banishes loneliness. Many of these sexual desires could be satisfied nonsexually, by a hot tub, a 30-minute workout, a massage, a long conversation with a close friend, or cuddling with a young child. And not every desire needs to be satisfied every time we feel it. We walk down a street past a bakery, and our mouths water at the plate of éclairs. Next door, in the museum lobby we stop to look at a display of primitive erotica, and our mouths go dry. If we stay long enough to become involved in sexual fantasy, we may feel more signs of arousal. But we do not need to do battle with ourselves to prevent our arousal from compelling us to throw the next passerby to the ground and ravish him, any more than we need to blindfold ourselves in order to pass the éclair.

When the desire for an éclair, or for sex, becomes truly compulsive is when the sex or the éclair has come to represent something else for us, something more than what they are in themselves. For example, the eating disorders which are so common among young women in the U.S. seem to include not only identifications of food with the normal appetites of the self for self-esteem, body pleasure, and nurture, but also feelings of unworthiness and the need for redemption which demand the repression of the bodyself through the punishment of starvation and purging.¹⁰

That something else is some desire we have repressed and refused to recognize. Many persons, especially men, have internalized so much body repression that sex is virtually their only experience of being touched, stroked, held, or kissed. It is no wonder that so many women often accuse men of being sex addicts, or of interpreting any touch as sexual. If your sexual partner is virtually the only person allowed to touch you, and if all of your emotional needs must be met in sex, you will soon experience every touch as sexual, and come to need a great deal of sex. Such attitudes toward sex are not limited to men, of course, but since women are normally allowed to feel and display a much broader range of emotions than men, and are not expected to control anyone, even themselves, most women's problems with repression lie in different areas.

Sexual Pleasure as Premoral Good

⁸ Nelson, *Intimate Connection*, 34-35.

⁹ The socialization of males to repress body feeling is generally agreed to be one major source of men's shorter lives. The failure of men to disclose is linked to higher stress and anxiety rates, which relate to some of the most common mortal diseases of adults. Men do not get medical help as often or as soon as women, and serious conditions tend to be diagnosed at much later stages, often too late. Sidney Jourard, "Some Lethal Aspects of the Male Role," in Joseph H. Pleck and Jack Sawyer, eds., *Men and Masculinity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 21-29.

¹⁰ Sheila A. Redmond, "Christian 'Virtues' and Recovery from Child Sexual Abuse," in J. C. Brown and C. R. Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), 72.

One of the major tasks of Christian morality in the present age is to claim sexual pleasure as a good. We could argue that sexual pleasure is a good using traditional models of argumentation. For example, we could say that sexual pleasure is good because it is a deliberately created part of God's creation. Such an introduction to both sexual pleasure and sexuality *in toto* is common in the Christian churches, which then proceed to the many restrictive rules which must be followed in order to control this "good" portion of creation. It simply is not enough to say that sex is good because God created it. God is just as responsible for creating the AIDS virus, Hurricane Andrew, sub-Saharan African drought, and piranhas as God is for human sexuality. It simply is not self-evident that all parts of creation have the same capacity to represent and mediate God to us, which is what endows them with goodness.

However, we could further argue that discernment of human biology (in the female at least) proves that God intended that sexual activity be at least sometimes primarily for pleasure. As we saw in Chapter Three, physicalist approaches to natural law based in contemporary biology, rather than in medieval misunderstandings of science, would provide evidence for sexual pleasure as divine intention. If theologians of the ancient and medieval world had included women among them, or if biological and sexual knowledge of the times had included women's body knowledge, the use of natural law thought would have led either to a greater moral approval of sexual pleasure, or to the abandonment of natural law thinking long before the reformers.

But sexual pleasure can be argued as good for a much simpler, more commonsensical reason. It feels good. Like a hot tub for aching muscles, cool water on a hot day, a shot of morphine after waking up from surgery, and the taste of ice cream on the tongue, sexual pleasure makes us feel good. We like it. Pleasure itself is a good. It is a premoral good. To say that pleasure, or in this case sexual pleasure, is a premoral good does not mean that it leads to moral good, but that it is ordinarily a good, and should be understood as one aspect of the general social good. However, there are always some specific situations in which a premoral good may be outweighed by a conflicting premoral good within the process of moral discernment.¹¹

Of course, in any specific case the enjoyment of one good may require the sacrifice of another good. And so I often sacrifice the sexual pleasure I might have had by making love with my husband on a weekday morning in order that I get to my class on time, my husband gets to work on time, and the kids get to school on time. All of these are goods also. The fact that we sacrificed the sexual pleasure we might have had in order to secure other pleasures (the satisfaction of meeting responsibilities and trusts, the economic security of employment, etc.) does not make that sexual pleasure bad. Nor does the fact that sexual pleasure is here sacrificed make it less important or valuable. At other times, I decide that sharing sexual pleasure with my husband has been neglected, and is now more important than staying late to finish up a project, or even cooking dinner for the family. Both of these will then give way to sexual pleasure.

It sounds very simple—and simple-minded—to say that sexual pleasure is good because it feels good. It will be objected that some people derive their pleasure from killing or maiming, from abusing children or inspiring fear. Some even derive sexual pleasure from such activities. This is true. But while the stimulus for their pleasure is evil, this does not mean that the pleasure itself is evil. We *need* pleasure; we need *body* pleasure. It is no accident that persons who live with great and constant body pain so often become physically distorted, and sometimes even grotesque. This is true not only of human bodies, but of human spirits. Pain and suffering can distort our humanity. We need to limit as much as possible the pain to which we are prey, and to maximize our experience of body pleasure. While no one kind of body pleasure is necessary, we need to create so far as is possible a life and a lifestyle which satisfies human needs for pleasure. For some of us, that will be a lifestyle of rugged outdoor exercise, clean air, and the beauty of nature. For another it may be hot tubs, frequent sex, central heating, art museums, and professional massage. For yet another it may be cuddling sweet-smelling babies, frequent hugs and pats from friends, and cultivating clothes and bedclothes which pamper the skin. But one of the influences which determine our lifestyle should be the messages from our body about what is pleasurable.

We have inherited great moral fear about such "catering to our bodies." Look at the warnings about masturbation. In addition to the condemnations of masturbation as sinful because non-procreative, a misuse of the sexual faculties which should be oriented to producing new life, a major objection to masturbation is that it is very literally

¹¹ Timothy O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 155-157. Philip S. Keane in *Sexual Morality: A Catholic Perspective* defines premoral evil as the limitations that exist in all human action which must be taken into account when choosing between actions, and implicitly treats premoral goods as the corresponding goods that exist in all human actions. (*Sexual Morality: A Catholic Perspective* [New York: Paulist, 1977], 46-51.)

self-centered. It involves [so it is alleged] a turning to oneself for the satisfaction of one's desires, rather than a "healthy" turning outward to another person who is different and could broaden and complement one.¹²

Traditional condemnations of masturbation as serious sin have not been abandoned upon recognition that infants begin self-stimulation of the genitals soon after birth. Only the satisfaction of their drive for oral gratification precedes this drive for genital gratification. And many infants of one to two years successfully stimulate themselves to orgasm (without, of course, the semen the boys will not have for many years). This self-stimulation of the genitals does not end in infancy, but accelerates at puberty. By the age of 20 at least 92% of males report masturbating, and about two-thirds of females.¹³

The fact that the vast majority of humans masturbate, even the fact that infants long before "the age of reason" masturbate, does not constitute proof that masturbation is a moral good. However, it does tell against the claim that masturbation is invariably sinful, even if it does not point to its being a moral good. The more important evidence is that research shows that the practice of masturbation does not prevent men and women from seeking out sexual partners. In fact, among women, it has become clear that women who have masturbated are more likely to experience general sexual pleasure and, in particular, orgasm in partnered sex than are women who have not masturbated.¹⁴ Rather than finding that solitary sex is an obstacle to shared sex, research suggests that solitary sex is helpful to women in later partnered sex in a variety of ways. The practice of masturbation provides three specific kinds of beneficent knowledge: 1) physical knowledge of her body (its genitalia), 2) knowledge of the process of sexual arousal and fulfillment, and 3) knowledge of her own pattern of arousal.¹⁵

These three are distinct. Most women who have not masturbated cannot describe the female vulva. Many are so socialized not to think about "down there" that they cannot answer questions about the relative locations of the urethral opening, the vagina, and the anus. They are not aware of having two sets of labia, and are even ignorant of the location and function of the clitoris. Beginning with bathing and toilet training as toddlers, they have been taught not to explore their bodies, that eventually they will give themselves to a man who will explore their bodies and, if they are lucky, convey an appreciation of their bodies to them. Lack of knowledge of one's body makes ownership of and responsibility for that body immeasurably more difficult. For example, ignorance of one's genitalia handicaps a woman in seeking medical help for abnormal changes in her genitalia, as well as in taking responsibility for treatment of medical conditions involving genitalia and the reproductive tract. If women do not know the structure of their genitalia, they are very unlikely to have a language for speaking of its various parts. Without language there is no communication. Learning to leave responsibility for one's body to others—to sexual partners, doctors, and nurses, for example—makes it easier to abdicate to others responsibility for one's life and society.

Similarly, knowledge of the stages of sexual arousal and fulfillment is important. And such knowledge is not innate. Women, and occasionally even men, who have been either protected from sexual information, or socialized to fear and hate sex, can be extremely uncomfortable with the unfamiliar and intense sensations of sexual pleasure. Comfort with the sensations of sexual pleasure is essential for fully experiencing pleasure, especially orgasm.

But the most common problem with women who have not masturbated is that in entering partnered sex they have no idea of their own personal pattern of sexual arousal. They do not know what gives them sexual pleasure, or what causes discomfort. Because they are not familiar enough with their body to know what touch is arousing, they cannot convey that information to a partner. Furthermore, their ignorance of their own response pattern deprives them of a basic framework for anticipating what touch will best arouse and pleasure their partner.

It is important to note that these characteristics associated with a lack of masturbatory experience have moral significance. A lesser degree of ownership of one's body, a lessened sense of being in charge and responsible for one's body, and consequently for one's life, and inability to anticipate how to pleasure one's partner or communicate to one's partner how to pleasure oneself should not be encouraged, but rather recognized as moral deficits.

¹² See the excellent survey of both moral theologians and psychologists on this issue in Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 302-318.

¹³ William H. Masters, Virginia E. Johnson, and Robert C. Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 339.

¹⁴ Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny, *Human Sexuality*, 562-563.

¹⁵ For one of the most competent treatments of this issue within the context of treatment for sexual dysfunction, see Robert Crooks and Karla Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 5th ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Benjamin Cummings, 1993), 252-254.

Disgusting, many respond. Why should we teach women to pleasure themselves when the essence of Christianity is to live an other-centered life? Why isn't it sufficient to teach each of the partners to concentrate on loving the other as well as possible? Why tempt anyone toward selfishness or self-centeredness by inviting them to pursue personal pleasure? This way lies hedonism!

When presented with such questions, many groups balk. Undergraduate students immediately respond by dividing into two sides claiming to be "Christian" and "non-Christian." The "Christians" inevitably adopt the perspective that love of neighbor requires a certain blindness to the interests of the self, and that to focus on the self to any degree is to be overwhelmed by greed, lust, and other sins. The "non-Christians" believe that in order to defend the possibility that pleasure can be moral, that the good of one person can also simultaneously be the good of another person, that they must renounce Christianity.

But sex is perhaps one of the best life arenas for demonstrating that self and other are not naturally hostile. Their relationship is much more complex, much more influenced by the specific situation. In sex it becomes apparent that the interests of the self and the interests of the partner are largely linked. At a very basic level, if I do not know what pleasures me, I have fewer clues as to how to pleasure my partner. But also, within sexual activity it becomes clear that exercising my ability to arouse and please the partner excites me. It makes me feel successful, powerful, confident, and able to love well. Those feelings drive me to further pleasure the partner, and that pleasure drives the partner to share his pleasure with me by arousing and pleasuring me. It is very, very seldom that sex can be extremely satisfying for one partner and not satisfying for the other. Often the person reporting such solitary pleasure in shared sex has actually settled for much less than the optimum pleasure out of ignorance of what is possible. In rapes by strangers, for example, where one might imagine that the rapist experiences great pleasure despite the lack of pleasure in the victim, rapists most often report that their pleasure in the sex itself was not great, certainly not as pleasurable as their non-coercive sex. These rapists report that their deepest pleasure came not from the sex, but from their control of the victim, from her fear, or obedience, or pain. Supporting such reports is evidence that rape situations have a much higher than normal incidence of both erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation.¹⁶

Our society has much too much fear of hedonism and not enough understanding of it. Hedonism is a way of life in which one consistently chooses the pleasure immediately before one. All humans are born into hedonism. All human infants pursue pleasure single-mindedly. Freud called this the pleasure principle behind human behavior, and insisted that hedonism is natural for young children. But the pleasure principle does not continue to dominate our lives. Even as young children the pleasure principle comes to be challenged by our discovery of the reality principle: that is, we learn to connect behaviors with their consequences. Not only do we learn that when we reach out to grab the pretty flames we get burned, but we also learn that indulging our desire to knock all the dishes off the table will bring punishment[gp3], and restraining such desires will bring a reward. Humans thus learn, beginning in childhood, to use and develop their rationality in the process of limiting the pleasure principle to accord with the reality principle. This development of rationality is also the development of the ego, the adult self, which uses reason to replace, a little at a time, the superego as source of moral guidance. At the same time the ego struggles to bring to consciousness, piece by piece, parts of the powerful but unconscious id, so that unconscious desires and associations lose their power to determine behavior as they are exposed to rational consciousness and can be balanced against other desires and associations.¹⁷ This process lasts all throughout our lives. In theological terms, we call this same process the development of conscience.¹⁸

This means that from a psychological perspective humans are always to some extent hedonists. Even mature adults are, and should be, motivated by the desire to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Their maturity consists not in giving up pleasure motivation, but in their ability to discipline their pursuit of pleasure, and to include a maximal number of others with them in that pursuit. Many Christians object at this point that this may be Freudianism, but it is not Christianity. Christians are not supposed to be motivated either by pleasure or by pain avoidance. Christians are supposed to be motivated by concern for others. But are these two really separable?

¹⁶ E. Kanin, "Date Rapists: Differential Sexual Socialization and Relative Deprivation," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 14 (1985): 219-231.

¹⁷ This entire section is heavily dependent upon Ernest Wallwork, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), Chapter Six.

¹⁸ See O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, Chapter 8, "Conscience."

Freud insists that the mature adult who is able to love others and to sacrifice his or her own desires in the interests of loved ones has not rejected basic human hedonism in favor of love of neighbor, but has rather learned both to utilize reason in disciplining hedonism, and to take pleasure in the pleasure of others. That is, for the truly other-directed person love of neighbor is built upon, is an extension of, love of self. This is, of course, in accord with the specific form of the love command, to love your neighbor as yourself.¹⁹

From this perspective, persons who desire to be exemplary Christians, true lovers of their neighbors, should not strive to deny pleasure or inflict suffering on the self, but should rather strive to find ways to relate to and connect with the neighbor. For if we are connected to our neighbor, if we become accustomed to feeling, even in a very diminished form, their pain and their joy, then we will be willing to accept some sacrifice of our pleasure for the sake of increasing their pleasure. For in that exchange we are protected from absolute loss of pleasure by the fact that we feel their increase of pleasure with them. The parent who sacrifices a lung or a kidney to save the life of her child not only accepts the physical pain of the surgical process itself, but also the loss of bodily integrity and the higher risk of death entailed in possessing only one such organ. And yet the parent who loves the child may experience this sacrifice as minimal to nonexistent, because the joy of having the loved child alive and healthy is so overwhelming. Jesus' teaching about the reign of God takes up this same theme—that the sacrifices entailed in discipleship to the reign can be major sacrifices—the loss of one's family, even the loss of one's life—and yet the disciple will count them as nothing because the joy to be found in discipleship, in loving the neighbor as oneself, is so great.²⁰

All humans are always trying to maximize their pleasure and minimize the pain in their lives, but most humans shift from the absolute hedonism of infancy to a modified hedonism as we learn that to minimize some of the worst pains we have to postpone some of our pleasures. Most adults literally could not survive as absolute hedonists—it is no accident that absolute hedonism has historically been the province of the grossly wealthy and powerful, whose basic needs are provided by others, leaving them free to pursue immediate gratification. Such adults may have the freedom to live as children. But most of us, faced with the situation of the ant and the grasshopper, are forced to imitate the ant in practicing delayed gratification.

In philosophical terms, it should be clear that I am advocating a form of moral utilitarianism. "Utilitarianism is the doctrine that the rightness of actions is to be judged by their consequences." writes J. J. C. Smart.²¹ Within contemporary debates over utilitarianism, there are many different conflicts. One conflict within utilitarianism from its historical beginnings with Bentham concerns the split between hedonistic and ideal utilitarianism. Smart classes Bentham as a hedonistic act utilitarian, and G. E. Moore as an ideal rule utilitarian, with J. S. Mill somewhere in between hedonism and idealism in his utilitarianism.²² Most of the pop academic treatment of utilitarianism, not to mention the Christian pastoral treatment, has viewed all utilitarianism in terms of hedonistic act utilitarianism: as if all utilitarianism demands that each act be chosen only on the basis of its pleasurable to those affected. It is no wonder that Christians, and many others with a commitment to community and its common good, have rejected utilitarianism. On the other hand, an ideal utilitarian like Moore holds that pleasurable is not even a necessary condition of goodness, which is then open to the ascetic, body-denying repression of Christian history.

In the debate about the place of pleasure in a sexual ethic, I want to take a middle position which is much closer to those of both Aquinas and J. S. Mill than to either Bentham or Moore. That is, pleasure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for goodness. Pleasure is a term that covers a great number of distinctly different sensations. The pleasure that I felt in making love with my husband to celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary was distinctly different from my pleasure in discovering that my efforts in constructing and utilizing a compost bin for our garbage had actually produced usable humus. My pleasure in the humus is also drastically different from the "pleasure" I expect to feel when we finally wake and bury my uncle long stolen from his family by Alzheimer's disease. I agree with Mill and Aquinas that there are higher and lower pleasures, though I am not in agreement with either's method of classifying those. Higher pleasures, it seems to me, have benevolent consequences for others. I think this is a part of what Aquinas meant when he says that a pleasure is measured by its end, and that the ultimate end is God.²³

¹⁹ Wallwork, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics*, 184-190.

²⁰ Mk. 10:29-31, 8:34-37.

²¹ J. J. C. Smart, "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism," in Thomas K. Hearn, Jr., ed., *Studies in Utilitarianism* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), 251.

²² *Ibid.*, 252-253.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae 34.

But, it seems to me, sexual pleasures are not, according to this understanding, lower pleasures. A particular act of sexual pleasure that conveys to a wounded loved one respect, admiration, comfort—unconditional love—may free that person, and the relationship itself, to heroic acts of love for the wider community. On the other hand, it is possible that the individual who uses reason to examine his/her conscience and make his/her peace with God may feel a rational, moral pleasure which only serves to confirm the individual in a state of solitary self-justification.

It seems clear to me that we are learning that touching and cuddling babies—and all God's human children—makes them better able to both give and accept love, and thus makes them better able to participate in the reign of God that Jesus announced. I have argued that body pleasure is a good in that it communicates to us our own goodness. That sense of self-goodness is essential if we are to understand ourselves as beloved by God, and thus able to communicate God's love to others.

This goodness of body pleasure, of sexual pleasure among other kinds of body pleasure, does not mean that the absence of pleasure is necessarily evil. I do want to argue, however, that the deliberate deprivation of body pleasure requires justification. For example, as we attempt to structure a world in which the resources of the world are shared justly, we should be willing to live simply for the sake of justice. However, to the extent that simplicity entails a lessening of pleasure for persons, pleasure should be lessened only to the degree necessary for justice, and not from any understanding of the goodness of material deprivation itself. So with sexual pleasure. The willingness to postpone pleasure in sex when one knows a partner is tired is a good, but postponing sexual pleasure in general is not good.

What does this imply for celibacy? There is no major problem with temporary celibacy, as in the abstinence that most parents desire for their young teens. For it is clear even to many teens that the pleasure deprivation in celibacy is compensated for in the freedom from a great deal of pain: the pain of unwanted pregnancy or STDs, as well as the pains inflicted in sexual relationship by inability to respond to the needs of the other due to immaturity and unformed character.

Permanent celibacy, as any other form of pleasure deprivation, should be chosen only with the understanding that the individual accepts this deprivation as instrumental in procuring some greater pleasure, *and* has developed appropriate alternative avenues for satisfying the physical, emotional, and symbolic human desires normally satisfied by sex in this culture.

While the repression of body pleasure which has linked celibacy and spirituality is well grounded in the Christian tradition, the reaction against this religious inheritance in the West has increasingly given rise in the last few centuries to a justification for hedonism. The individualism of Western culture, and especially of American culture, makes hedonism a real threat. Freud's reality principle may limit the pleasure principle so that we moderate our drive to pleasure based on our recognition of threats of punishment or promises of reward, but life in our society does not necessarily bind us to persons and groups around us so that we are able to feel their pain and their joy. And when we do not feel their pain and their pleasure we will not be willing to sacrifice any of our own pleasure in order to alleviate their pain or increase their pleasure.

But what has gone wrong here is not the pursuit of pleasure, but the lack of human connection within society due to modern urban society's mobility and anonymity. This lack of connection—the lack of feeling another person as one's neighbor—is not remedied in any way by asceticism in general or by any specific form of self-denial. Understandings of love as selfless and opposed to the self-interest assumed to motivate sex are not the answer to social atomism. The lack of connection in society—the lack of community—has already diminished the self by diminishing its relations; practices of self-denial can *accelerate* that diminishment. We need to understand that selfishness is not the result of an enlarged self, but rather of a starved one, a self starved for connection, for mutuality, for community, for love.

Possibility of Abuse

To say that the most basic purpose of sex is pleasure upsets many who fear that the adoption of such a position would lead to a great deal of abuse. What is to prevent people from simply following through on every sexual impulse, without learning delayed gratification? People ask, Isn't this the problem with our society, the reason for the high rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, venereal disease, and even AIDS—that sex is understood as an appropriate avenue for pursuing pleasure, with no concern for moral restrictions?

A great deal of sexual activity today is both irresponsible and even exploitative. But many centuries of Christian denial that pleasure is the primary end of sex have not increased the level of responsibility in sexual behavior. For the churches to continue to frown on sexual pleasure in defiance of the experience and intuitions of the vast majority is to continue to undermine the authority of the churches on all issues, and specifically on issues of sexual responsibility. Especially among the young, the church's credibility on sex would be dramatically increased if the church began its sexual teaching by insisting that God deliberately made sex both good and pleasurable. To do this would validate a great deal of individual Christian experience, and encourage Christians to use their lives as experiential bases for further reflection on ethical responsibility in sex.

This is not to deny that there will be many who will seize upon the validation of sexual pleasure to justify various forms of sexual abuse. However, I think that the use of mutual sexual pleasure as the primary end of sex narrows the number and kind of abuses which can be justified much more than do present church teachings. Under present Church teachings on sex in marriage, for example, there is no need for consent, since the spouse's body belongs not to him/her, but to the other. Not only is there no need for pleasure, but even pain is not excluded.

Painful intercourse does not prevent conception. Nor does it prevent the satisfaction of the marital duty. There is nothing in traditional Christian teaching on marital sex which indicates the serious problem that sexual dysfunction can have on marital relationships. If mutual sexual pleasure were at the center of the church's teaching on sex and marriage, then we would not have the widespread blindness to, and therefore tolerance of, marital rape, domestic battery, and sexual dysfunction in marriage. All of these clearly prevent sexual pleasure from being mutual.

What abuses could we expect to see? Uncommitted, recreational sex, frequently under the influence of alcohol and other drugs. Exactly what we have among youth and the not-so-young in the U.S. now. But at least we of the churches would have an agreed-upon starting point for discussing sexual responsibility with young people. The present situation is preferable only for those persons who are interested in condemning rather than dialoguing with the young, and who are more concerned about the "purity" of the Church than the welfare of humans.

Sexual Pleasure as Safe and Beneficial

Sexual pleasure is as natural an end for sex as is procreation, and, unlike procreation, sexual pleasure does not necessarily threaten either the biosphere or the health and welfare of human communities and their individual members. Sexual pleasure itself contains no dangers, and masturbation is likewise safe. Indiscriminate and unprotected sexual sharing, on the other hand, can be both unhealthy and even deadly, due to the epidemic proportions of a variety of sexually transmitted diseases, of which AIDS is only the most deadly.

Sexual pleasure itself, with responsible initial precautions, is not only safe for self, but also for others and for the biosphere. It is also tremendously beneficial, both individually and socially. Many of us are so conditioned to hear "pleasure," especially "sexual pleasure," with negative emotions that we have not examined the many ways in which pleasure, in particular sexual pleasure, is beneficial for us, both as material organisms and as conscious, relational beings embedded in community. If our society, and especially our churches, are to successfully combat the identification of sexual pleasure with hedonism, it is important that we examine what we mean by sexual pleasure.

Sexual pleasure is a term which covers a great many experiences. It can include involuntary physical pleasures which, depending on circumstances, can be emotionally painful—like a young boy's erection when called to the blackboard, or orgasm in a rape victim. Sexual pleasure is always physical—all pleasure, like all feeling, is experienced in our physical body. But some pleasures are more physical than others in that they engage more of the body, more of the senses. To resolve a mental puzzle gives us pleasure that is physically experienced in the rush of energy felt at the moment of discovery. The pleasure which comes from remembering a recent night of lovemaking involves more of our physical body, for the physical process of arousal may even begin, with genital engorgement, myotonia [spasms of one or more muscles], and increases in pulse and respiration. Actual involvement in sexual activity can multiply the physical sensations as our senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and seeing are all stimulated, our imaginations become immersed in remembering and projecting sexual pleasure, and our bodies begin the physiological processes involved in arousal. For some persons, and perhaps for all persons at some times, some of these avenues of physical stimulation may be blocked.

Victims of sexual violence often experience very disturbing blockages of imagination and memory which prevent pleasure, sometimes despite all the physiological signs which normally accompany sexual pleasure. But not all blockages are so dramatic. There have been a number of popular surveys over the last decade that report large

numbers of women preferring to be kissed and held more than coitus or other activities culminating in orgasm/ejaculation. Many of these women do not see themselves as rejecting sex (the dominant male interpretation) so much as preferring one kind of sexual pleasure over another. If by this they mean that sometimes they would rather cuddle and kiss, and perhaps take a nap together, and other times they prefer the passion and satisfaction of orgasm, but that there are more of the first than the second, that is one thing. This would be a not uncommon pattern, for example, among the elderly, or among some physically handicapped persons, for whom coitus can be very physically demanding. But if these women are presenting kissing/cuddling as a separate activity from, and an alternative activity from, coitus or other sexual activity including orgasm/ejaculation, then something is wrong, for that is not the response of persons who are active partners in mutually satisfying sex.

The Power of Pleasure

There is no question that sex can be powerfully pleasurable. Indeed, virtually all of the power of sex is dependent upon the pleasure involved in sex. Human beings are moved by pleasure. Thomas Aquinas was right—as was Freud—that the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain are the prime motivators of human behavior.²⁴ We are attracted to sexual activity because we learn that it is pleasurable, and because what few sexual instincts humans have as compared to animals seem to be oriented to pleasure.

Sex is pleasurable in many different ways. Mere bodily touch is pleasurable. Another person's touch on our skin normally releases chemical compounds called endorphins, which function as pain-killing anesthetics. The effect of endorphins, of course, can be overridden by fear or severely painful stimuli associated with violent or threatening touch. But human touch is normally pleasurable. We actually seem to *need* the pleasure of touch. Infants denied physical touch do not thrive. They do not grow, do not eat or sleep well. They do not develop normally intellectually and emotionally.²⁵ Older humans seem to need human touch as well. Elderly persons who are touched affectionately often retain their health and their alertness much longer, and complain of pain less than those deprived of touch.²⁶ The therapeutic aspect of touch is one reason for the popularity of massage. Warm, firm handstrokes smoothing one's skin and loosening muscle tightness can be more than momentarily pleasurable. So pleasurable is massage that it sometimes requires restraint not to lean into the hands providing such pleasure and/or relief, and not to express those feelings audibly. Persons who have not been severely scarred either by lack of physical affection or by touch that violates their integrity can use memories of how pleasurable touch was affirming, supportive, and even healing to understand what we mean when we speak of the therapeutic potential of touch.

Touch can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Sometimes we interpret a person's touch as sexually arousing. Our sexual response in such cases is a response not only to the touch itself, but to our interpretation of the touch, for the same degree of pressure to the same point on our bodies by another person might not be interpreted as sexual. This ambiguity of touch, and the importance of individual interpretation, is common for touch directed at nongenital areas of our bodies. Genital touch is, in our society, the only touch which is virtually always both intended and interpreted as sexual outside the medical context. And yet even here interpretation is critically important, for genital touch from one person may be sexually arousing, while the same type of genital touch by another person may feel repulsive, threatening, or perhaps even boring, even though both genital touches are clearly interpreted by the person touched as sexual touches.

We experience body pleasure, including the type of body pleasure we call sexual pleasure, not only from other people's touch. Our own touch, combined with the power of our imaginations, can stimulate us to sexual arousal, even orgasm. This self-touching aimed at sexual arousal and pleasure, which is called masturbation, is practiced in humans from early infancy, as noted above.

²⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 19 IIae, 8:1, 5:1 and 2, 5:3, 5:4; Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Riviere (New York: Pocket, 1952), 365. For the most complete form of this argument, see Albert Ple, *Duty or Pleasure? A New Appraisal of Christian Ethics* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1980; New York: Paragon, 1987), Ch. 7-8.

²⁵ B. Myers, "Mother—Infant Bonding: Status of This Critical-Period Hypothesis," *Developmental Review* 4 (1984): 240-274; Robert Crooks and Karla Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 303; Jessie Potter, "The Touch Film."

²⁶ S. Rice and J. Kelly, "Love and Intimacy Needs of the Elderly," *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality* 5 (1987): 89-96.

While Christianity long taught masturbation as sinful, today many Christians are rethinking the grounds for that prohibition. For example, we no longer believe that masturbation entails "wasting" embryonic human persons, as Christians in some previous periods believed.²⁷ Nor do we understand the story of Onan in Genesis 38 to support such an understanding of wasting seed. Onan died not because he wasted his seed on the ground, but because, out of greed, he failed to fulfill Yahweh's will that he raise up a son to carry on his brother's name and lineage.

The most prominent reason for the prohibition on masturbation in the Christian tradition has been the understanding that the sexual faculties are oriented to procreation and must be used only in a manner open to that end. Approval of contraception by the vast majority of Christians in the twentieth century has caused the argument against masturbation to focus more on objections to sexual pleasure, and especially to solitary sexual pleasure. A basic problem in masturbation was that the end of the act was sexual pleasure, and sexual pleasure was understood as, at best, an acceptable consequence of sexual activity aimed at some truly human good such as procreation. The more dominant position understood sexual pleasure as itself evil.

Out of these objections to masturbation came charges that masturbation encouraged *ipsation*, an inward turning that cuts individuals off from others. That is, the pursuit of solitary sexual pleasure was understood to teach individuals to look to themselves for the satisfaction of their needs and drives, instead of orienting individuals toward other persons. If the gospel is understood to discourage narcissism and hedonism and, instead, to demand of Christians an outward orientation to others, masturbation will seem contrary to the gospel imperative.

As we have seen, there is a certain compelling logic to this argument until one turns to examine it more deeply. When we do, however, we learn that it fails to correspond to reality. Virtually all males masturbate as youths, yet virtually all shift to partnered sex by adulthood.²⁸ Very low levels of adolescent masturbation are more linked to low levels of sexual interest, and thus to low incidence of partnered sex, than to high levels of partnered sex.²⁹ While many fewer women masturbate as adolescents, those who do are more likely to be sexually successful within partnered sex because of greater self-knowledge.³⁰ The turn to solitary sex in adolescence actually seems to facilitate and not to impede learning to turn to others for the meeting of physical and sexual desires and needs.

Pleasure in the Sexual Response Cycle

This conclusion regarding the relation of masturbation to partnered sex gives us some insight into the overarching argument of this chapter: that sexual pleasure is a premoral good. So accustomed have we become to arguments that sexual pleasure is morally evil, or an animal pleasure unworthy of humans, that when we attempt to justify sex as a good in itself we overlook sexual pleasure as the primary reason for acknowledging the goodness of sex, and seek to justify sex with reference to some of the other, more indirect ends of sex. The most common of these, of course, was procreation, but it is now being displaced by many Christians in favor of other, more relational ends, especially intimacy and bonding. That these alternative ends are nonsexual makes them more easily accepted in a society trained to moral suspicions of sex.

This shift to justifying sex by pointing to the nonsexual goods of intimacy and/or bonding between the partners fails to examine sexual pleasure adequately, and therefore fails to see that both intimacy and bonding within sex are normally dependent upon mutual sexual pleasure. Because this attempt to bypass consideration of sexual pleasure turns to intimacy and bonding as ends of sex, the justification for sexual activity extends only to partnered sex. There is seldom any recognition that intimacy with one's own body is possible; there is even less recognition that a good is at stake.

In dealing with sexual pleasure as the first and foundational end of sexual activity, then, we need to keep in mind not only partnered sex, but also the solitary sexual activity of masturbation. Only when we recognize the sexual pleasure

²⁷ Aquinas, for example, followed Aristotle in believing that male semen contained whole and complete little men, who needed only nurture in the womb. These little men became defective—that is, female—under certain specific conditions, including the presence of southerly (moist) winds during pregnancy. (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, 92 al, and *In II sent.* 20, 2,1; *De veritate* 5, 9, ad 9; also see Albert the Great, *De animalibus* 1, 250.)

²⁸ Jeffrey S. Turner and Laura Robinson, *Contemporary Human Sexuality* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 425-426, 429.

²⁹ Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 480.

³⁰ Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 510-511.

in masturbation as a premoral good, and masturbation itself as acceptable moral behavior aimed at that good, will we be able to justify sexual activity in itself, and not for its ability to produce some other nonsexual good.

The physical process of sexual response is basically the same in all sexual activity, and that physical process is important, not incidental, for the moral and spiritual meaning of sexual activity. Within the cycle of sexual response, there are at least three types of physical pleasure possible; each is associated with one of the three different stages of the sexual response cycle: arousal,³¹ orgasm, and resolution. The first is the pleasure of arousal itself—of sexual touching and stroking and being touched and stroked, the pleasure of anticipating the next move in sexual exploration.

Sexual arousal anticipates other, more intense levels of sexual pleasure. It excites and provokes a hunger for sexual satisfaction. Arousal produces both vasocongestion, the engorgement with blood of tissues around the genitals, and myotonia, or muscle tension, throughout the body. Heart and respiration rates increase as well.

Sexual arousal can involve all our physical senses and our imagination as well. In fact, the role of the imagination is by far the most dominant one. It is with good reason that many have commented that the human imagination is the most powerful engine of arousal in the human body. Under some circumstances sexual arousal can take on additional emotional and spiritual dimensions, depending upon the level of symbolism to which the individual is tuned. For example, undressing can be mutually exciting for both partners, a source of physical sexual stimulation which also involves the imagination and the memory. But undressing can have additional meaning when the partners' mutual commitment allows each to interpret the other's undressing as an unmasking of not only the body, but of his/her whole life and consciousness. In such circumstances the act of undressing becomes an act of trust, a promise of intimacy, and a commitment to reveal the inner self as well.

The physical pleasure of orgasm is distinct from that of arousal. While pleasure builds during arousal, it peaks with orgasm. In orgasm there is no anticipation of the next moment of pleasure; rather there is a more or less total surrender to the sensations of the moment. Particularly for males, because of the close connection between ejaculation and orgasm, there is an identifiable point at which the male becomes conscious of imminent, unstoppable explosion: once semen is pumped into the urethra, there is no possibility of delaying ejaculation and thus orgasm. Female response is more varied in a number of ways. Females do not experience this degree of lack of control over their response—orgasm in females can be prevented at virtually any stage in the approach by ceasing stimulation. Furthermore, females lack the refractory period of males, the period of recovery after orgasm (ejaculation) which is necessary before the response cycle can be repeated. With the proper stimulation females have almost unlimited capacity for orgasm.

Yet while many females demonstrate a capacity for multiple orgasms in a very short period, many other females do not achieve orgasm at all, and some do not achieve even relatively low levels of arousal from sexual activity. Thus while we can speak of sex as powerfully pleasurable, we must remember that such terms refer to the capacity of sex to be pleasurable, and not to any universal bestowal of sexual pleasure on those involved in sex. Even apart from outright sexual violence, sex can be not only devoid of pleasure but actually painful, especially for women. This subject will be dealt with in greater depth later.

Orgasm is impossible to describe adequately. Descriptions of contractions in the vaginal walls, or spasms in the urethra, are not extremely helpful. Orgasm is often described in terms of cessation—cessation of thought, of communication, of control over one's limbs and voice, even of consciousness itself. It is sometimes described as a little death, a losing oneself. We speak of coming back into ourselves after orgasm, as if we have been gone from our bodies. It is certainly paradoxical that we both prize the extreme pleasure of orgasm, and yet describe it as the loss of all those things which ordinarily give us value and worth, those aspects which make us who we are.

Many people refuse to probe the question of how or why orgasm is perceived as pleasurable. They just enjoy the sensations, or at most share with their partner the images which the sensations bring to mind. And orgasm can function as a time out, an escape from ordinary time. But orgasm, like other stages in the sexual response cycle, can denote more than a positive, pleasurable physical experience. It can also function as an experience of divine reality.

³¹ For purposes of analyzing the different pleasures involved in the sexual response cycle, I have combined the Masters and Johnson model with that of Helen Singer Kaplan, collapsing sexual desire, excitement, and plateau into a single stage of arousal, and retaining the resolution stage of Masters and Johnson for their stated reasons. This modification retains the emphasis of both Kaplan and Masters and Johnson on the biphasic nature of human sexual response. Helen Singer Kaplan, *The New Sex Therapy* (New York: Brunner-Mazel, 1974), Chapter One.

Gallagher et al., authors of *Embodied in Love*, after being explicit that the meaning of sexual intercourse resides in the ecstatic experience of orgasm, go on to write: "Thus intercourse does not merely express or symbolize love, express or symbolize intimacy with God. It is love. It is trinitarian intimacy, our intimacy with the three divine persons."³² That is what many of the references to sex as experiences of heaven mean to convey. It is this spiritual or religious sense that persons try to capture in more secular language about the merger of two human hearts, or the ultimate experience of human freedom. Orgasm, like all sexual pleasure, envelops a variety of levels of meaning, and therefore a variety of levels of value.

One way orgasm is sometimes understood is as a foretaste of death, an experience of losing oneself, of losing control of everything.³³ There is a sense in which, for both men and women, achieving orgasm has both voluntary and involuntary aspects. Willing orgasm is not sufficient—the body needs sufficient stimulation. But orgasm also often demands a kind of conscious, deliberate letting go of control over oneself and one's reactions, a willingness to immerse oneself in the sensation. The pleasure which washes over us when we surrender to the experience and let go of control reinforces the lesson that it is OK, even good, to let go of control, to open oneself up to other people and experiences, to let down our protective barriers, our self-consciousness. When sex is not segregated from the rest of our lives, the pleasure of orgasm can reach far beyond the moment of intense pleasure itself, and change, a little at a time, the way we relate to our partner, and even to the larger society and world. It can encourage us to trust more, to be willing to risk more, to reach out to others more. When our sexual experience is segregated from the rest of our lives, the pleasure of orgasm may only produce desire to experience orgasm more often, as a kind of escape.

A third kind of physical pleasure in sex involves the resolution phase of the sexual response cycle. After orgasm we are physically relaxed, sometimes to the point of feeling boneless, like a puddle of melted wax. Tension and stress are reduced, if not temporarily eliminated. Beyond this immediate feeling of physical well-being and relaxation which occurs in resolution, there can be divergent experiences. For example, some couples may reach orgasm, separate, dress, and part. Sometimes a partner may reach orgasm, pull away, roll over and sleep, or take off for the shower, leaving the partner in bed.

Other couples find resolution a very important and pleasurable part of lovemaking, an extended time to hold each other close and drift off to sleep still entwined, or to cuddle and verbally share. Some couples discuss their feelings, profess their love, praise and thank each other, suggest variations for the next time, or draw on the tenderness and affection generated by physical intimacy to deal with some obstacle or problem in their relationship. That is, one of the pleasures which can be enjoyed during resolution is a strong sense of emotional as well as physical intimacy. The physical intimacy produced in arousal and orgasm can be prolonged and enjoyed during resolution, and can often aid in generating or restoring a sense of emotional intimacy as well. The contentment of the resolution phase, then, can be a contentment of both body and soul.

But the pleasure of intimacy in the resolution phase is usually dependent upon the couple having reached orgasm. Failure of either or both to reach orgasm after high levels of arousal is frustrating in both a physical and an emotional sense,³⁴ though in a long-term, frequently sexually satisfying relationship, an occasional failure on the part of one or both to reach orgasm may not seriously impair the sense of intimacy generated by sexual arousal and physical closeness.

The achievement of emotional intimacy originating in sexual intimacy is also dependent upon and perhaps proportional to the level of openness on the part of each partner to attachment to the other. Emotional intimacy is more likely to be generated if two persons are making love to express an already-acknowledged attraction and commitment to each other, but such attraction and commitment can be created in part through sharing the sexual response cycle, if both partners are at least open to the possibility. Openness to attachment to the other can be indicated in a variety of ways. In our society the most effective indication may well be the degree of willingness to be vulnerable to the other. This willingness to be vulnerable often takes the form of personal disclosure, which can

³² Charles A. Gallagher, George A. Maloney, Mary F. Rousseau, and Paul F. Wilczak, *Embodied in Love.—Sacramental Spirituality and Sexual Intimacy* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 12.

³³ Nelson, *Intimate Connection*, 70.

³⁴ Lack of orgasm may seriously slow down resolution. Without orgasm vasocongestion lingers, leaving heavy, swollen feelings in the genitals and pelvis which can be very uncomfortable. These effects may last longer than 30 minutes. Without the release of orgasm, the individual may feel emotionally cheated, resentful, or ashamed, as well as sexually dissatisfied.

either precede sexual intimacy or be provoked by it. Sometimes other forms of willingness to be vulnerable are more primary.

In many, but not by any means all, women (and more in the past than currently), the very willingness to share sex demonstrates this willingness to be vulnerable to the partner. For in sex, especially with men, most women feel very vulnerable. The very language we use to describe women in sex recognizes this vulnerability. Women in sex are commonly described as "open," "penetrated," "probed," "plowed," not to mention "under," "laid," "had," and "taken." The old rock song title "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" reflects many a woman's fear that she is being courted to be sexually used and emotionally abandoned.

In our society no girl grows to adulthood without knowing at some level that she is vulnerable, and that her vulnerability is inherently sexual. Research suggests that one in three or four girls is sexually molested as a child,³⁵ and one in four adult women will be the victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime.³⁶ One in seven women is raped by her spouse,³⁷ and 10-21% of women are beaten by their sexual partner.³⁸ While females are still often left in a great deal of ignorance about sexuality in general and specifically about the precise nature and degree of sexual risk, girls are warned from the time they are very young that they, much more than young boys, are vulnerable to sexual hurt in the dark, in strange places, when alone, or with strange males. In recent years young women are increasingly warned to choose partners/spouses carefully, in the knowledge that many seemingly normal male sexual partners abuse women.

Virtually any deliberate injury done to a woman will be committed not only by the other sex, but will also be directed at her sexually, neither of which is true for men. Many wives experience their first conjugal battery during pregnancy or immediately after childbirth.³⁹ The verbal abuse which precedes or accompanies such blows tends to be sexual—accusing her of infidelity or wantonness, or of not being sexually adequate.⁴⁰ In a society where women face such risk, virtually all women who agree to sex with men demonstrate in that agreement an acceptance of vulnerability.

While lesbian sex does not raise for women the physical threat of abuse that heterosexual sex does,⁴¹ the fact that women's sexual attitudes are formed under social conditions of mandatory heterosexism means that for many lesbians as well, willingness to participate in sex often expresses a great deal of personal vulnerability. This may be one reason why both heterosexual women and lesbians are much more likely to restrict sexual partners to those they love, or at least feel some concern for, than are either heterosexual or gay males.⁴²

Of course, not all women who demonstrate vulnerability through willingness to participate in sex do so out of a desire for either physical pleasure or intimacy. For some, agreement to sex is part of a death wish, an attempt to further punish or degrade herself. This is a common female response to a history of child sexual abuse, especially incest.⁴³ Other women may accept the risk of vulnerability in sex out of desperate need for material support (whether monogamously in marriage or through some form of prostitution). Some women have been taught to use

³⁵ Diana E. H. Russell, "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7 (1983): 133-146.

³⁶ Diana Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 57, 64.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Del Martin, *Battered Wives* (San Francisco: Glide, 1976), 11.

³⁹ Constance A. Bean, *Women Murdered by the Men They Love* (New York: Haworth, 1992), 141. Also see the Quebec Assembly of Bishops, Social Action Committee, "A Heritage of Violence: Pastoral Reflections on Conjugal Violence," Montreal, Quebec, 1989, 19, which states that pregnancy is often a trigger for violence in the home.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 58-61.

⁴¹ I do not mean to suggest that lesbian sex is free of violent abuse. Women are abusers as well as victims. The Texas study of Shupe et al., for example, revealed that 10% of women initiate instances of domestic abuse. Anson Shupe, William A. Stacey, and Lonnie Hazelwood, *Violent Men, Violent Couples: The Dynamics of Domestic Violence* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1987), Chapter 3.

⁴² B. Leigh, "Reasons for Having or Avoiding Sex: Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Relationship to Sexual Disorder," *Journal of Sex Research* 26 (1989): 199-208.

⁴³ S. Harter, P. Alexander, and R. Niemeyer, "Long-term Effects of Incestuous Child Abuse in College Women: Social Adjustment, Social Cognition, and Family Characteristics," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 56 (1988): 5-8; B. Gomez-Schwartz, J. Horowitz, and M. Sauzier, "Severity of Emotional Distress Among Sexually Abused Preschool, School-age, and Adolescent Children," *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 36 (1985): 503-508.

sex as a source of power, and may "surrender," and make themselves physically vulnerable to another in the expectation of thereby gaining some degree of power over the other. In these patterns there is physical vulnerability, but it is not accompanied by an emotional openness which leads to a mutual self-disclosure oriented to therapeutic intimacy. And, of course, there are also men who share with many women the identification of sex with love or intimacy, and therefore feel themselves vulnerable in sex. For many men who are unaccustomed to feeling vulnerable, their vulnerability in sexual love can feel very disturbing and uncomfortable.

Other Pleasures in Sex

There are other relational pleasures associated with sex as well. Sometimes sex is valued as a way to stave off the pain of loneliness. The lover who has been away on business often returns feeling lonely, deprived of the familiar someone to touch and talk to, to be with and listen to, and immediate sex becomes a reaffirmation of intimate connection. Sometimes loneliness can lead to temporary sexual involvements with relative strangers.

Sex can be both an attractor to initiate relationships, and a support for maintaining relationships which alleviate loneliness over the long term. I not only take pleasure in making love with my husband, but I take pleasure in sleeping next to him even when we have not just made love. The presence of his sleeping body provides a kind of special comfort and security that the body of my son, or my mother—or, I presume, anyone else—in the same bed would not, for I do not know their bodies in the same intimately sexual way, nor have their bodies been for me the source of such tremendous pleasure as has the body of my husband.⁴⁴ His body in many ways represents to me our history of intimacy, of companionship, and of sexual pleasure. When he is away I miss him, and feel closest to him in our bed.

Sometimes sex can be satisfying as a distraction, as in times of anxiety and waiting. Sometimes sex can stave off boredom. At other times sex can be an affirmation of life, as when a couple has just experienced a brush with death: a near-fatal accident, the death of a friend or relative, the serious illness of their child. Sometimes sex can be an affirmation of the ongoing life of a relationship, as after there has been some major battle in the relationship which had shaken the couple's faith in the future of the relationship. Then sex can celebrate the reconciliation and reaffirm the commitment to each other.

For some persons sex can also be a way of proving oneself, of proving to self and others one's sexual attractiveness, which is often understood as an important measure of self-worth. Some persons seem to have a strong and more or less constant need to prove their attractiveness, in the sense of measuring it by notches on the bedposts. For others, such a need may be very situational and brief, such as after a rejection by a spouse or lover, when one's ego has been especially battered.

In all of these situations the pleasure of physical sex is important, but it may not be the most powerful pleasure experienced.

Goodness in Sex: Rooted in Pleasure

Sexual pleasure is not morally neutral—it is too powerful to be neutral. Sexual pleasure feels good, from the pleasure of having the surface of our skin touched and stroked to the ecstatic loss of self-consciousness in orgasm. Sexual pleasure not only offers us the happiness of acute well-being and immediate freedom from suffering but, because sexual pleasure also offers possibilities of meeting a number of basic human needs, it can be truly joyful. Sexual pleasure is therefore, as we have said, a premoral good—meaning that it is, in the normal scheme of things, good, before we morally evaluate its role in any particular situation. This premoral goodness is what the author of Genesis meant in the creation story when God pronounced creation good. The author did not mean that everything in creation would always be associated with moral good, but only that creation as a whole was generally oriented in the direction of the good. Just as we say that a particular person is a good person, though we know that that person, like all persons, is not perfect and in some specific situations has sinned, so we say that sexual pleasure is good. This is not to deny that it is open to misuse, misinterpretation, and deliberate abuse.

Sexual pleasure is not only good, but it should be the primary ethical criterion for evaluating sexual activity. Many will object that any of the above-mentioned intentions and results of sex have equal or superior claim to be the

⁴⁴ J. Giles Milhaven, "Sleeping Like Spoons," *Commonweal* 116 (4/7/1989): 205-207.

ethical criteria for sexual activity. Why not intimacy, or bonding? Why leap over the purposes Christianity has recognized as purposes of sex to focus on one which is antithetical to the Christian tradition?

The reasons for choosing sexual pleasure as the primary ethical criterion for evaluating sexual activity have nothing to do with the fact that the Christian tradition has largely identified it with sin rather than virtue, but rather have to do with the nature of sexuality and its effects. First, except for procreation, all positive functions of sex depend upon sex being pleasurable. Second, pleasure is more easily and immediately recognized than intimacy and bonding, which develop over time and do not necessarily intrude themselves on human consciousness in the same immediate, forceful way that sexual pleasure does. Third, our society is beginning to recognize the many ways in which we have been trained to avoid pleasure, and how destructive and unhealthy such behavior is. Finally, if most of us in this society are honest, the primary purpose for which we turn to sex is pleasure, whether it is the pleasure of passion or the pleasure of emotional intimacy.

Our discomfort with sexual pleasure is one result of the failure of Christianity to affirm self-love, and the tendency to overstress the element of sacrifice in love of neighbor. Christianity has never really taken seriously the real wisdom in Jesus' injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself: that love of neighbor must begin with love of self. We cannot love the neighbor well unless we love ourselves well first, for we literally will not know what the needs of the self are and how they are satisfied.

Good sex refutes one of the dominant Christian treatments of love of neighbor, the one most closely connected theologically to Lutheranism,⁴⁵ but actually strong in all Christian churches: that love of neighbor is diametrically opposed to concern for self, and that the presence of concern for self inevitably undermines love of neighbor. In good sex, as in the basic message of Jesus about the reign of God, we learn that the overarching interests of individuals march together, and are not opposed to each other, but are mutually satisfied through just, loving union in community under God's reign. The Christian message should not be read as: sacrifice now out of love of neighbor, and reap rewards later in another life. Rather the basic message of both Christianity and sexual sharing should be interpreted as: discover that loving the neighbor, despite the sacrifices involved, can bring about a relationship which satisfies the deepest needs of one's self.⁴⁶ In sex, if one partner is consistently acting to pleasure the other person without openness to receiving pleasure him/herself, the pleasure of both persons in the relationship decreases. The active partner can over time become the controlling partner, which both partners can come to resent.⁴⁷ Mutuality, then, is a necessary goal in love, without which love can be distorted to oppress both the lover and the loved.

The Importance of Pleasure Being Mutual

Thus sexual activity must not only be pleasurable. Another requirement is that when sexual activity is partnered, sexual pleasure must not be exclusive, but rather mutual. It must extend to both participants. Sexual pleasure can be evil when it is exclusive—when it is derived either through the inflicting/accepting of pain, or through excluding a partner from pleasure either deliberately or accidentally.

Inclusiveness is a basic human value. We need to be included in community—in a specific human community which gives us identity, companions, and a system of values for approaching reality. Inclusiveness became a basic Christian value because both Jesus and the early church after his death reached out to those excluded from the larger society.

If there is a single most important characteristic which distinguished Jesus from the established groups of his own time, it was his inclusiveness. He did not exclude sinners from his company or his concern, as did the Pharisees, whose very name meant "separate ones."⁴⁸ Neither did he exclude the physically imperfect, as did the Essenes,⁴⁹ or

⁴⁵ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Phillip S. Watson (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 712-14. See also Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 68, 143-44.

⁴⁶ See my "Sacrifice, Parenting, and Mutual Love," in B. Andolsen et al., *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics* (Minneapolis: Winston-Seabury, 1985), 175-191.

⁴⁷ P. W. Blumstein and P. Schwartz, *American Couples* (New York: Morrow, 1983).

⁴⁸ Hugo Echegaray, *The Practice of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), 52.

⁴⁹ Echegaray, *Practice of Jesus*, 59-60.

the poor and needy, as did the wealthy Sadducees.⁵⁰ His vision of the reign of God was broader than the narrow nationalism of the zealots; it included much more than expelling the Romans and reforming the Temple elites.⁵¹ It included reforming the entire society from the bottom up, toward inclusive care. Jesus did not exclude, but rather championed women and children, who were defenseless property in his society.⁵² He did not despise the crippled and sick, shunned as possessed and unclean by public opinion, but he touched and healed them.⁵³ Even prostitutes and tax collectors, viewed as the most serious of sinners, were welcome at his table.⁵⁴ For Jesus, nothing was so grievous a sin against his Father's love as exclusion.

In the same way, the early church became inclusive because it recognized that God gave the gift of faith without regard for status or merit.⁵⁵ Because membership in the church so frequently cost individuals their families, friends, and the orienting structures of their former lives, the community became not just inclusive in terms of formal membership, but became a true family—the source of identity, of companions, and of a system of values for interpreting reality. Inclusiveness in the church family, the family for whom God was parent, meant exemption from oppressive use by other community members—by other children of God. One does not exploit brothers and sisters merely as means to one's own end, but respects them as ends in their own right.

According to New Testament sources, Jesus never directly addressed sexual behavior. But Jesus taught about the, reign of God which was breaking into the world through Jesus in parables, stories of everyday human activities, as well as through his own actions and activities. In the parables, Jesus made clear that the reign of God is both paradigmatically inclusive, and that it is a thing of joy and celebration. Perhaps the parable image best supported by example in Jesus' own life is table fellowship, for Jesus again and again acted out his parable of the king who sent his servants to invite strangers from the roads to his banquet.⁵⁶ Jesus was rebuked not only for keeping company with sinners—with those who should have been excluded—but also for the celebratory nature of his meals. Many scribes and Pharisees criticized his preference for celebratory banquets over the asceticism of John the Baptist, which was thought more appropriate for a holy man who claimed to be the messianic prophet.⁵⁷

At Jesus' most exclusive meal described in the New Testament,⁵⁸ the Last Supper, the patent reason for the meal was, of course, celebration of the historic Passover event. But the events of the meal reinforced both themes of inclusiveness and celebration. John's account, which substitutes Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet for the institution of Eucharist, sounds the inclusiveness theme most strongly. Power is not to be used to exclude or control, but to support and enable.⁵⁹ The other Gospels' accounts of the institution of Eucharist sound the note of celebration, for Eucharist provides a social ritual of both remembrance and empowerment. The community celebrates the ongoing life of Jesus in the community through the communal meal. As bread and wine sustain the body, making it grow strong and healthy, so the body and blood of Jesus—his life and death—sustain the life of the community of believers. Eucharist becomes a way of experiencing—participating in—the reign of God, which Jesus described as like finding a treasure in a field, like adding leaven to 50 pounds of flour, like the mustard seed growing into a mighty tree, or like crop yields of 30-, 60-, or 100-fold when sevenfold is the Galilean norm.⁶⁰ Experiencing the reign of God in communal celebration of Eucharist is (should be) an experience, then, of unexpected joy. It is like other images Jesus gave of the reign of God—of a fishing boat overloaded with fish, of 5000 fed with a few loaves and fishes, of water made into good wine for thirsty wedding guests, or the king's banquet to which beggars and travelers were invited.⁶¹

⁵⁰ Echegaray, *Practice of Jesus*, 43-46.

⁵¹ Echegaray, *Practice of Jesus*, 65-67.

⁵² Echegaray, *Practice of Jesus*, 84; the Gospel of Luke on women, especially Lk. 10:38-42.

⁵³ Mt. 8:1-3, 14-15.

⁵⁴ E.g., Lk. 19:1-9 (Zaccheus); Lk. 7:37-50; Mt. 9:10-13.

⁵⁵ See Chapter One's discussion of the decision in Acts to admit Gentiles to the church.

⁵⁶ Echegaray, *Practice of Jesus*, 82; but especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 118-123ff.

⁵⁷ Lk. 5:30-33.

⁵⁸ According to Matthew, the 12 disciples attended with Jesus; Mark merely says "the Twelve." Luke describes the attendees generally as the apostles, and John even more generally as the disciples. Mt. 26:20; Mk. 14:17; Lk. 22:14; Jn. 13:5.

⁵⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 147-151.

⁶⁰ Mt. 13:44; Mt. 13:33; Mk. 4:30-32; Mk. 4:3-9.

⁶¹ Lk. 5:3-11; Jn. 2:1-10; Mk. 14:13-21; Mt. 22:1-10.

We do not have sexual examples of the reign of God from the Gospels. But for many in our society, sexual examples would be more than merely acceptable ways of describing such experiences of God's reign on earth. For many persons, their primary experience of inclusive love, of openness to another, of being accepted and enhanced, of being empowered by love to reach out in love to others, is sexual. I can still remember the profound shock I felt at hearing, some twenty years ago, a respected theologian say that her major religious experiences all occurred in bed or on the delivery table. I cannot count the times since that I have heard similar statements from men and women. For many, the primary *experience* of divinity itself, as well as of God's intention for the reign of God, is sexual. There is in sex, as in Eucharist, the potential for participating in divinity.

Many will gasp and object to this comparison, and immediately point out many instances in which it seems sacrilegious to point to sex as experience of God: rape, promiscuity, commercial sex, pornography. But, of course, the same may be said for Eucharist. Some people decide to receive Eucharist to show off new clothes, or to make business contacts, or to protect their reputation in the community. Many receive Eucharist out of habit, without reflection. The Eucharist can be defiled to mock God and church, it can be exploited for political ends. In both sex and Eucharist, inherent power and goodness are at the mercy of human intentions and decisions, which can either minimize or distort them.

Costs of Ignoring Mutuality in Sexual Pleasure

Because of the capacity of sexual satisfaction to image the reign of God so well, to engage in sexual activity without commitment to one's partner's pleasure is to exclude the partner from this experience of God's reign. Repeated exclusion from sexual pleasure does not merely exclude the partner from sexual experience of God's reign. Repeated exclusion makes of this excluded partner a thing, a means to exclusive personal pleasure. Persons treated as sexual means must utilize a great deal of personal energy to resist this understanding of themselves as things/means. Persons treated as means will also have less energy to put into resisting such treatment because the experience from which they have been excluded is a major source of the intimate acceptance, enhancement, and empowerment which rekindle in us personal psychic energy. And these persons excluded from sexual pleasure are not alone in their deprivation. Those who exclude, either deliberately or unconsciously, their partners from sexual pleasure are also deprived. Their pleasure is both diminished and usually distorted, sometimes seriously.

The sexual pleasure of those who use others in sex is diminished by the inability of the user to feel, in addition to his/her own physical pleasure, any of the reflected pleasure of the other. For many lovers, the taking of pleasure in the pleasure of the other is so powerful that if one partner agrees to sex without taking pleasure in it, this is understood by the other as a betrayal, not a favor.⁶² Sex under such circumstances is interpreted as demeaning the lovers' experience of sex, and as a rejection of the bond which allows them to take pleasure in each other's pleasure. The "sacrifice" of pleasure by others for us is often not as meaningful to us as their willingness to share pleasure with us.

Failure to include the partner in pleasure can result from insensitivity to the partner as well as from the deliberate intention to deprive the partner of pleasure. Either source can initiate a tendency to understand sex as a material trade. If there is no openness to mutual intimacy with the lover, sexual relationship can only be understood at a material level, whether it is a casual affair or a long-term monogamous relationship. The assumption in such an understanding is that both partners look out for their own pleasure and interest, that their initial and ongoing consent to sex is based on individual perception of self-interest. If one lover cannot detect sexual pleasure in the partner, there must nevertheless be some benefit to the partner, or the partner would not continue to consent. That benefit might be relief of boredom, curiosity, loneliness, financial recompense, or many others. These become alternatives for sexual pleasure as motivator.

Persons who exclude partners from sexual pleasure are usually not willing to see themselves as users/abusers, but instead develop concepts of the "I am not my brother's keeper" variety which justify the absence of concern for the partner. Such concepts are predicated upon the equality of all, an equality which then relieves all of us from responsibility for and connection to others, who are to look after themselves.

The ideologies developed around such concepts exist in many other areas of life. It is this kind of ideology which allows persons in First World nations to morally justify paying debt-strapped Third World nations to accept First

⁶² This is why learning that a partner has faked orgasm often arouses such anger and hurt.

World toxic waste, and which prompts U.S. legislators to dismantle support programs for the poor. In all areas of human life these individualist, egalitarian ideologies serve to maintain dysfunctional structures which undermine the health of human communities and their shared environment. They ignore the social nature of human beings, and deny the fact that we are diminished by one another's pain and deprivation, just as we are enhanced by one another's growth and pleasure

At least equally dangerous is a second distortion of sexual pleasure connected with excluding partners from pleasure: the confusion of sex with dominance. When sex is confused with dominance, sexual pleasure becomes dependent upon the experience of controlling/being controlled. A young heterosexual couple may grow up socialized to understand sex in terms of dominance, and the female's failure to find pleasure, in sex may never be known to her lover because in a dominant/subordinate relationship she may not feel she has a right to complain or make suggestions. On the other hand, her own experience of sex as lacking in pleasure may influence her to teach her daughters passive roles in sex, which preclude their own sexual pleasure, and lead them to interpret sexual activity in terms of male dominance.

We live in a society which, as many have noted, confuses, even identifies, sex and dominance, pain and pleasure.⁶³ This confusion sets the stage for individuals of either sex to use sex as a method of controlling another, and thus using that other for one's own interest. Most of us have been so conditioned to identify sex as a form of male domination of women that we immediately think "men" when we hear "sexual control" or "using persons for one's own ends." In many ways such a response is both understandable and justified. Certainly the tendency to use physical domination to obtain sexual pleasure is virtually exclusively male. But women, too, have learned that sex is powerful and can be used to control others. Women today, like women throughout history, have bargained to exchange sexual access to their bodies for male concessions of various kinds. Oftentimes, the offer of sexual willingness was the only resource socially allowed to women with which they could secure even basic needs. In every other aspect of their lives, often including decisions around marriage, they were powerless. Greater, though still unequal, rights for women vis-à-vis men in our society have not replaced the tendency of some women to use men's pleasure in sex to manipulate men, any more than it has replaced the tendency of some men to obtain sexual pleasure by coercing women.

In some ways none of us has escaped the association of sex and dominance. It has become entwined in our most basic sexual attitudes. For example, what do we find sexy, or potentially arousing? Men and women alike have been socialized to believe that sexual pairing should be heterosexual, that males should be older, larger, and more powerful (socially and economically as well as physically) than females. Any indication of equal or greater female power—a higher female salary, or a comparable female educational level—is in itself an aphrodisiac which must be compensated for with overwhelming male mastery in other areas if the relationship is to have erotic potential in the eyes of either the partners or observers. Our society has not taught men to feel masculine with a female who is far taller, bigger, older, or richer than they, and few women respond romantically to shorter, smaller, younger, poorer, less powerful men than themselves.

Our society's sexual fascination with dominance is clear in a great many ways. Between one-sixth and one-third of all men and women regularly fantasize coerced or coercive sex not only during masturbation, but also during intercourse with their partners.⁶⁴ Studies of rape and rapists have revealed that many rapists are not motivated by sexual desire or arousal, but rather by desire to exert power over another, to visit personal anger on another, or to inflict pain on another.⁶⁵ There is a great deal of evidence that date rapists are the only rapists who may be sexually motivated.⁶⁶ L. L. Holmstrom and A. W. Burgess suggest that forcible rape always contains three components: power, anger, and sexuality, and conclude that sexuality is rarely the dominant theme.⁶⁷ In another study, A. N. Groth, Burgess, and Holmstrom observed that in each case they investigated either power or anger dominated. They

⁶³ Beverly W. Harrison and Carter Heyward, "Pain and Pleasure: Avoiding the Confusions of Christian Tradition in Feminist Theory," in Brown and Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, 148-173.

⁶⁴ David Sue, "Erotic Fantasies of College Students During Coitus," *Journal of Sex Research* 15 (1974): 299-305.

⁶⁵ Thus many researchers divide rape into four categories: sexual gratification rapes, anger rapes, power rapes, and sadistic rapes. Crooks and Baur, *Our Sexuality*, 717-719.

⁶⁶ A. N. Groth and B. Hobsen, "The Dynamics of Sexual Assault," in L. Schlesinger and E. Revitch, eds., *Sexual Dynamics of Anti-Social Behavior* (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1983), 163, 165, 167-168. Date rape is a form of acquaintance rape also called sexual gratification rape.

⁶⁷ L. L. Holmstrom and A. W. Burgess, "Sexual Behavior of Assailants During Reported Rapes," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 9 (1980): 427-439.

concluded that rape, rather than being primarily an expression of sexual desire, is, in fact, the use of sexuality to express issues of anger and power.⁶⁸ Rapists have been socialized to identify sexuality as about using others as objects and women as appropriate objects for their power and anger, and so they act out these non-sexual motives genitally.

One of the clearest clues that such rapes are pseudosexual and not truly sexually motivated, is the common complaint by rapists of lack of sexual pleasure in the act of rape itself.⁶⁹ The rate of premature ejaculation, erectile dysfunction, and even ejaculatory dysfunction among non-date rape rapists is far above the normal rate. Many such rapists are clear that the real turn-on came not from the sex, but from the control, the exercise of power, or from the fear or pain of the victim.⁷⁰

Most of us have been socialized to be turned on by domination up to a certain point, at which we become uncomfortable and then repulsed, and say, "This is violence, and unacceptable." But there are many examples of domination in sex which we accept as normal, or even necessary for sexual arousal. "Wimp" is a term of contempt used for nondominant males; women are not ridiculed or demeaned for being nondominant, but rather for demonstrating any behavior which could be construed as dominant. Dominant women are called "dykes," "butches," "ball busters," and are sometimes regarded as in need of being "put in their place." Because men are considered natural dominators, to them falls the role of initiating and controlling sex. Thus there comes to be a certain "rightness" to coercive sex which stops short of physical violence, and a resulting readiness on the part of observers and participants to approve coercive sex. Perhaps the best example of this readiness to approve coercion is the array of surveys of students, both college and high school, regarding judgments as to whether sexual coercion in specific situations should be understood as justified or as rape (unjustified).

In a study of students at Washington State University in 1985 and 1986, 5% of the women and 19% of the men did not believe forced sex on a date is rape.⁷¹ In a 1985 study at Cornell, 19% of women reported having intercourse against their will on a date because of "coercion, threats, force, or violence"—but only 2% of these saw themselves as having been raped.⁷² Giarrusso and associates report that 39% of male high school students said it is justifiable to force a girl to have sex if she is drunk or stoned.⁷³ Charlotte Muhlenhard and S. Andrews report that men consistently rate forcing a woman into sex as more justifiable if she asked him out, went to his apartment or to a party or "parking," if she wore sexy clothes, if she kissed him voluntarily, or if she drank alcohol.⁷⁴ Muhlenhard and Felts asked men to read a date scenario in which the female date at a party drank iced tea instead of alcohol, wore a pleated skirt, tie-neck blouse, and penny loafers, did not kiss the date, and said no three times and moved away in response to her date's sexual advances. The college men in the study were asked to evaluate, on a scale of 1 (no willingness) to 9 (completely willing), the female's interest in having sex with the date. The average score that the college men attributed to the female's willingness to have sex was a 4.5!⁷⁵

It is this readiness to approve coercive sex which makes it so difficult to convict date rapists or sexual harassers: heavy penalties for behavior that many men and even many women perceive as within the normal limits of male dominance seem unjust. Victims of such dominance are therefore required to force the dominator to use violence

⁶⁸ A. N. Groth, A. W. Burgess, and L. L. Holmstrom, "Rape: Power, Anger and Sexuality," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 134 (1977): 1235-1243.

⁶⁹ Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (New York: Pilgrim, 1983), 9; Film: "Rape: Face to Face."

⁷⁰ Fortune, *Sexual Violence*, 9.

⁷¹ G. Fischer, "College Student Attitudes Toward Forcible Date Rape: Cognitive Predictors I," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 15 (1986): 457-466.

⁷² A. Parrot, in a presentation at the meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, San Diego, CA, Sept. 1985.

⁷³ R. Giarrusso, "Adolescents' Cues and Signals: Sex and Assault," in P. Johnson, chair, *Acquaintance Rape and Adolescent Sexuality*, symposium papers published by the Western Psychological Association, San Diego, CA, 1979.

⁷⁴ C. Muhlenhard and S. Andrews, "Open Communication About Sex: Will It Reduce Risk Factors Related to Rape?" paper presented at Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy, Houston, 1985.

⁷⁵ C. Muhlenhard and A. Felts, "An Analysis of Causal Factors for Men's Attitudes About the Justifiability of Date Rape," unpublished research paper of 1987, reported in Nancy W. Denney and David Quadagno, *Human Sexuality*, 2d ed. (St. Louis: Mosby Year Book, 1992), 602.

against them if the victim's sexual refusal is to be believed.⁷⁶ Provoking victimizers to violence, of course, can be very dangerous. Nevertheless, for the majority in our society only evidence of clear physical violence moves dominance across the limit which divides the normal from the forbidden.

At the present time the eroticization of dominance is particularly problematic for those segments of our society attempting to move in the direction of mutuality in sex, both in sex roles and in sexual pleasure. The problem is that there is often some very real conflict between what persons intellectually desire in sex—that which is both just and socially beneficial—and what actually turns them on. Unfortunately, the idea of sexual mutuality, and the image of mutual pleasuring, are not nearly so powerfully erotic for most people as are the idea and image of domination. For this reason it is difficult to overstress the necessity for the feminist project described by Beverly Harrison and Carter Heyward as the eroticization of mutuality.⁷⁷

While this presents some problems for most of us, who are not comfortable admitting, much less strategizing to combat, our internalized eroticization of dominance, there is one segment of our population with an even more severe problem, and their problem constitutes a general social problem. For while most of us are sexually aroused by some degrees of sexual dominance, for some, especially those whose only experience of sexual arousal took place within extreme sexual domination, there may be no capacity for arousal without dominance. Furthermore, arousal may result not only from sexual domination, but from domination in general, and even from indiscriminate violence. In fact, there is a large-scale and ongoing debate about whether persons who rely on domination for arousal become desensitized to it and thus require greater and greater degrees of domination (violence) in order to become aroused.⁷⁸ This is not, of course, an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. The concept of “bloodlust” has a long history, as does the connection between war and rape. Instead of recoiling from violence in themselves and others, some persons are attracted to it, sexually aroused and energized by it[gp4].

Why does this happen? One of the most obvious reasons that such a distortion of sex could appear is that sex is inherently powerful. Not only does sexual activity itself have great power to motivate, energize, and move humans. Human beings are also powerfully affected by the social organization of gender, and by sexual relationships.⁷⁹ All power can be used for good or for ill—it is open to distortion. In human history there are two competing understandings of power, one of which is dominance, and the other of which is shared or mutual power. One of the central concepts of the reign of God that Jesus announced was power as servanthood rather than as domination. He taught his disciples that while pagans lorded it over each other, among his followers the leaders would be servants, enablers, persons who demonstrated the equality of all as children of God.⁸⁰

This was not a totally new message. The Hebrew Scriptures depict God both in terms of dominance, which led God to jealously protect divine power by punishing human attempts to exercise it,⁸¹ and in terms of power sharing, which we see in the first creation story, or in the reciprocal, but not equal, provisions of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. The movement from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament is away from understandings of God as basically dominant, toward understandings of God as more interested in intimate relationship with humans than in formal obedience. God remains powerful, and is still in the New Testament sometimes characterized in terms of domination. But increasingly God becomes interpreted, especially by Jesus, as desiring from humans love and confidence, and not fear and submission (though both elements are still found in the Jesus of the Gospels).

⁷⁶ For example, see the advice given in human sexuality texts which deal with rape prevention. Nancy W. Denney and David Quadagno in *Human Sexuality* write: “Men use a variety of strategies to obtain sex from unwilling women. Rapaport and Burkhart (1984) and Muhlenhard and Linton (1987) both found that the most common strategy was ignoring the woman's protests, rather than using violence. Unfortunately, a woman's verbal protests are usually not enough to constitute a rape in the eyes of the law, particularly if the rapist is an acquaintance. The court requires that the woman use a reasonable amount of resistance (i.e., fighting back rather than crying and pleading).” (Denney and Quadagno, *Human Sexuality*, 603.)

⁷⁷ Harrison and Heyward, “Pain and Pleasure,” in Brown and Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy*, 160-168.

⁷⁸ E. Donnerstein and L. Berkowitz, “Victim Reactions in Aggressive Erotic Films as a Factor in Violence Against Women,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 41 (1981): 710-724; E. Donnerstein and D. Linz, “Sexual Violence in the Media: A Warning,” *Psychology Today* (January 1984): 14-15; E. Donnerstein, D. Linz, and S. Penrod, *The Question of Pornography* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

⁷⁹ See the treatment of sexuality in James B. Nelson's *Embodiment. An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) for an extended treatment of power in sex.

⁸⁰ Lk. 9:46-48; Lk. 22:24-30.

⁸¹ As in Eden: Gen. 2:15-3:22, or at Babel: Gen. 11:1-9.

Recent Christian theology has not appreciatively altered its treatment of divine power. Most Christians today are still not conscious of the tension, or even conflict, within their theology when they confidently assert both that God is love, and that God sent Jesus to suffer and die so that the gates to heaven—that God had closed in anger at the sin of Adam and Eve—would be opened. Because we have not distinguished power from its familiar form (domination), and understand that love to be effective must be powerful, we fail to see the tension between love and domination.

It is clear in the New Testament that Jesus' disciples never did really understand or accept his teaching or examples of servant leadership. Despite the innate attractiveness of this concept of servant leadership, the world, and the churches as well, are still struggling to understand, accept, and embody this concept. It should not surprise us that sex is distorted by understandings of power as dominance, because every other aspect of human life is similarly distorted. The struggle to replace domination with a sharing of power is a long-term struggle. It is today a more crucial struggle than ever before, for human survival in this age demands that we renounce the practice of domination, which effectively requires that we cease worshiping domination in our image of God. We need not accept wholesale the complex theory of René Girard regarding the role of religion in primitive societies: as protecting societies by restraining human fascination with violence by means of the sacrifice of scapegoat victims.⁸² But analysis of our historical reality reveals that 1) the Christian tradition has presented God in terms of righteous domination and demands for violence, 2) humans have assigned superiority to the sex understood as dominant, and 3) humans have eroticized the exercise of domination. We will not remove the dangerous, even lethal eroticization of domination until we follow Girard's suggestion: admit our fascination for and worship of violence (the epitome of domination), and stop projecting it onto God. We cannot afford to worship domination any longer, even if, as in our own society, the exercise of domination is so much more subtle than in the past because it is domination not by individuals but by small groups who hide behind systems and institutions. We can no longer afford the damage to the environment which our attempts to master rather than cooperate with nature create. We can no longer afford military domination, either in terms of its cost to our debt-ridden economy increasingly mortgaged to Japan, Western Europe, and the petro-nations, or in terms of the potential ecological damage of military action, whether with nuclear or conventional weapons. Domination of all sorts, including sexual domination, which is often considered the primary historical model of domination, must be eliminated.

Symbolic Power of Sex

As we have seen, sex is not only powerful, but a great deal of the power in sex is symbolic. All real power rests in the capacity to convey, to represent, ultimate meaning. One way in which systems of domination survive is by manipulating symbols to obtain the reluctant consent, if not the real support, of members of the society.⁸³ Human societies vary a great deal in their treatment of sexuality, but in virtually all the power of sex is expressed and understood symbolically. Because sex has been historically understood as primarily for procreation, it has functioned symbolically to represent life. In symbolism, every concept also includes its negation. Thus sex has functioned to represent life as emerging out of, or victory over, death. It is important that we recall that for almost all of human history, and still today for many of the world's people, life has been and is a precarious, temporary toe-hold carved out of surrounding death. Relatively few lived to adulthood until recently. Life was short and hard, even for the survivors. And humans were constantly aware of the precariousness of life, for death from hunger, famine, war, accident, and epidemic threatened constantly. Life was a hand-to-mouth battle for survival, often in competition with others for scarce resources.

Life and death were more closely existentially linked in the past than for us in this society. Many women died trying to birth children, and many men died in hunting and war—both activities which inflict death to protect and preserve one's community. The basic biological strategy was to maximize the birth rate. The larger the number born, the better able the community was to survive the losses due to epidemics, accidents, war, and maternal mortality. The only situation in which this was perhaps not the best survival strategy was hunger from famine. But on the whole, this strategy of maximizing initial numbers so as to maximize survivors worked well. Sex for procreation was life-enhancing for human communities.

⁸² René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1977), Ch. 1-2.

⁸³ See my "Ending the Romanticization of Victims," in *Victimization: Examining Christian Complicity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

As we saw in Chapter Two, we have entered a stage of human development in which community survival must mean lower birth rates. We cannot afford any longer for sex, understood in terms of reproduction, to symbolize life in general. We must assign new primary symbolism to sex. Lovers will continue to turn to the emotional intensity of sexual union as an affirmation of their continued existence amidst experiences of death or disaster. But we must separate much more carefully two different aspects of life in sex: the generation of life and the sustaining of life.

Christianity in most of its forms has recognized both aspects of life through its sacramental system. The two sacraments most common among Christians are baptism, which is a ritual of birth, and communion (Eucharist), which is a ritual of life maintenance (feeding). In the Catholic church, which recognizes seven sacraments, only baptism is about birthing. Five of the sacraments—Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and confirmation—all involve the channeling of grace into nurturance of individual life (Eucharist, the anointing of the sick), or nurturance of relationships which bind the community together (reconciliation), or support of persons through the stages of development in human life (confirmation, marriage), in addition to connecting individuals and the church community to God.⁸⁴

We must shift from an emphasis on the generation of life to an emphasis on the sustaining of life. Sex has symbolized both; most societies have explicitly emphasized the generation, and subsumed the maintaining of life under generation, as Christianity has done. We must now differentiate the two meanings, and stress sex as symbolic of maintaining life.

How does sex sustain life? Through its ability to bond. There are many, many different ways that human beings bond. Humans bond through shared work, for example, as well as in shared play, or pain, or death. Sexual love is another. Sexual love is more limited than these other methods in that most humans in the history of the world have understood and preferred sex in pairs, not in groups. Therefore sexual love as direct human bond usually binds only pairs and not groups together. On the other hand, sexual love is able to bind humans together strongly, more strongly than other shared activities. Sexual love has the ability to bind humans into living together—into sharing the bulk of their lives, and not just pieces of their lives.

Within Christian history this unitive purpose of sex was never well developed. Most discussions of the unitive aspect began with the second of St. Augustine's three purposes of sex. Augustine maintained that the three purposes of marital sexuality were: procreation, a symbol of unity, and a remedy for concupiscence.⁸⁵ Augustine himself never developed the idea of marital sex as a symbol of unity other than to say that the sexual union of spouses symbolized the unity of God and the soul, or Christ and the church. Later twentieth-century theologians tried to build this concept of sex as a symbol of unity into something resembling interpersonal intimacy in the wake of Protestant shifts toward allowing artificial contraception, which was seen as displacing procreation as the primary purpose of marriage. Twentieth-century theologians were too liberal to be comfortable with stressing sex as a remedy for concupiscence, and so turned to sex as symbol of unity, as something which could be related to the interpersonal love relationships couples stressed as their own interest in sex. This is, of course, the direction we need to go, but Rosemary Ruether was certainly right: we need to acknowledge that Augustine himself never understood sex as an expression of a personal love relationship. For him and for a majority of the Christian tradition, sex was either sinfully masturbatory (intent on one's own sexual pleasure) or sinlessly and impersonally instrumental (using the other for pleasure or procreation).⁸⁶

In Augustine's culture it would have been very difficult to make a strong case for a heterosexual relationship based in interpersonal love, due to the low esteem in which women were held.⁸⁷ In the cities, as opposed to the countrysides, in the Roman Empire the prevailing sexual mores for men were neither exclusively heterosexual nor exclusively homosexual. Most men were both married and engaged in homosexual affairs, though minorities of men were exclusively gay or straight. The sexuality of women is virtually unknown, since the (male) writers of the period present women as sexual objects and mothers only. In the mid-fourth century, Christianity began to pressure for the

⁸⁴ See my "The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth," *Horizons* 14/2 (1987): 296-309. The seventh Catholic sacrament, Holy Orders, confers the authority to administer the other six.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1:19 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5; *On the Good of Marriage*, Ch. 3 in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 17.

⁸⁶ Rosemary R. Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 161-166.

⁸⁷ The following section is based on John Boswell's *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), Chapter 5.

regulation of homosexual practices. Gay marriages were outlawed in 342, though the law was often disregarded since there were no penalties attached. Late in the fourth century, there were a number of proposals to outlaw adult men taking the passive role in homosexual sodomy, since that role was understood as appropriate to young boys only, and in 390 the selling of men and boys (but not girls and women) into prostitution was outlawed upon pain of death. Some historians, including Boswell, suggest that Ambrose, bishop of Milan, imposed this law on the emperor as a penance for a massacre by the army in Thessalonica.⁸⁸

During this entire period, literature was filled with a debate over the superiority of homosexual love over heterosexual love. The argument for homosexual love was the classical one: that real love, the love that inspires community, courage, and all the civic virtues, is between men, and women are only for the necessary work of procreation. Thus Boswell quotes the defender of homosexual love in the debate Plutarch recounts in his *Moralia*: "True love has nothing to do with women's quarters, nor will I agree that you have ever felt love for women or girls, any more than flies feel love for milk."⁸⁹ The reason that it took so long for Christianity to wear down practices around homosexual sex for married men is that Christians such as Augustine agreed with the defenders of homosexual sex in their evaluation of women. They agreed that women were not capable of being real companions or partners of men. This is why Augustine argued (and Aquinas later agreed⁹⁰) that the Genesis reference to Eve as helpmate must have referred to her as a helpmate in the work of reproduction, for in any other work a man would be more helped by another man.⁹¹ In such a context interpersonal love relationships between men and women were beyond the capacity of imagination.

The single greatest challenge to humanity today is the creation of community, of a sense of relatedness, even interdependence between all groups and individuals. What recent humans had known of community is in the process of final disintegration in the developed world, and is fast crumbling elsewhere under the destructive impact of "modern culture." We are in the process of becoming more radically alone, despite our increasing density. We are learning that escaping from the confines of traditional societies does not make us autonomous only in the sense of free and independent, but also in the sense of being unconnected and lonely. Without being surrounded by extended family and lifetime neighbors who in traditional societies know one intimately and reflect back to one who one is, people increasingly find themselves faced with the need to create other intimate relationships to perform this function. Yet the pursuit of intimacy puts us in conflict with our society's reverence for autonomy.

At the same time that we as individuals suffer the lack of relationship, our larger society is disintegrating from the lack of community which results from large-scale pursuit of autonomy. There is no longer a sense of the whole of which each is a part. We have come to expect greed and corruption, opportunism and dishonesty from our leaders in politics, business, banking, criminal justice, education, government, and even the churches. We become accustomed to expecting that individuals make decisions based on a narrow range of self-interest, rather than on the needs of the entire community, or the needs of those least able to meet their own needs.

Sex is not enough, of course, to create human community. But sexual love is certainly one important part of the necessary process of deliberately setting about to create connections between humans. There are in all relationships, regardless of the degree of intimacy involved, both privileges and obligations, advantages and disadvantages, pleasant and unpleasant aspects. But the intense pleasure which sexual love promises—the ability of sexual love to satisfy many physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of human persons—and its ability to deliver such pleasure immediately are the strongest possible reinforcements for extending ourselves to others in relationship. Humans are willing to risk a great deal for that kind of pleasure, and also to put up with a great deal. Sex—as symbolic of commitment to a sexual relationship—must come to symbolize the ability of persons, whole embodied persons, to experience union. Full union is momentary, but the ability to find ecstatic union with another even briefly allows us to know and reflect on union, to recognize the ability of union to enhance and fulfill us, and thus to recognize the worth of risking disclosing and committing ourselves to another.

The survival of human life today seems to require that persons learn to live together cooperatively. If we cannot live together in twos sustained, at least in part, by shared sexual pleasure, then how can we hope to live together in nonsexual union? In the developed world we are beginning to move in this direction. In the American colonies the

⁸⁸ Boswell, *Christianity*, 124.

⁸⁹ Boswell, *Christianity*, 125, on Plutarch's *Moralia*.

⁹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, 92 1.

⁹¹ Augustine, *De Gratia Christi et de Peccato Originalia* II, 40 in *Patres Ecclesiae*, vol. 34, *Sancti Augustini* (Paris: Paul Mellier, 1842), 181.

average woman had between 12 and 13 pregnancies. In 1970 U.S. women averaged 2.6 births; in 1990 U.S. women averaged 1.8 births.⁹² In Kenya women averaged 8.1 births in 1990.⁹³ Sex in Kenya, or in the American colonies, was and is a much more powerful symbol of generation of life, because it much more often resulted in potential life and birth.

Birth rates are now dropping, even in developing lands, while levels of sexual activity seem to be rising.⁹⁴ Sex is increasingly for the purpose of sustaining relationship. In the U.S., sexual activity has clearly been increasing while the birth rate has dropped. The frequency and duration of sexual activity, both coital and noncoital, has been steadily rising at least since Kinsey's initial studies in the late 1940s, and it is strongly suspected that this increase began in the 1920s.⁹⁵

These are, for the most part, good trends—good for human life as a whole. The earth cannot support a larger population; birth rates must drop. But the increase in sexual activity can not only enhance individual life, but can also be useful for human life as a whole. To the extent that we consciously choose to define symbolic power in sex in ways that enhance community; stressing the goodness of human pleasure and the unitive, bonding function of sex, the human community benefits. We can and should choose to emphasize the unitive function of sex, and to ground that union in pleasure. But the unitive function of sex can only be one small part of our search for community. The danger in stressing the role of sexual love in the creation of community is that sexual love may be seized as a substitute for broader community. This is a primary characteristic of the developed world, especially of North America. The privatization of sex, and the many forces urging persons to retreat from the concerns of the public world and instead immerse themselves in the rewards of the private world of sex, marriage, family, friends, leisure, and recreation, are fairly far advanced.

So disintegrated is the sense of community in our society that there is a strong hunger for intimacy, despite a fear of intimacy as a threat to autonomy. Persons lack a sense of being intimately known by and cared for by others; they feel isolated and alienated from others. The historic ethnic communities which grounded our ancestors have given way to extreme mobility, to the breakdown of the extended family, and to the disintegration of ethnic neighborhoods. Sexual intimacy achieved in romantic love—which was never a significant part of traditional community—is now often promoted as the cure for the alienation people feel. It promises to cure loneliness, to allow us to know and be known. It offers us a someone who can reflect back to us who we are.

But sexual intimacy is no panacea for all the ills brought on by the contemporary collapse of community. The achievement of emotional intimacy through sexual relationship is not only complex, but very limited. Though some people will be able to achieve sexual intimacy with more than one person, and perhaps more than one person at a time, for most of us there is simply not enough time in a day or a week to earn a living, take care of domestic and childcare chores, participate in our larger community/culture, and achieve and maintain intimate sexual relationships with a number of different persons. Most of us find it a strain to maintain one truly intimate sexual relationship, and this one relationship cannot possibly carry the strain of providing for all our social needs, of removing the alienation we feel in all the other parts of our lives. If we are feeling alienated on the job from other workers, from the work itself, and from the environment; there is no real cure for that alienation except restructuring the job. No sexual

⁹² *The World's Women*, 67.

⁹³ *The World's Women*, 68.

⁹⁴ We do not have evidence of this trend in many parts of the world, because we do not have any statistical evidence on levels of sexual activity over time in these areas. But what evidence there is of trends supports an upward trend in level of sexual activity. Of course, not all of the increase in sexual activity is positive. For example, while some West African societies had traditional bans on marital intercourse between the last weeks of pregnancy and the time the child was weaned 2 to 3 years later, those bans have been eroded, especially for men. Today a combination of increased economic distress causing many women to become part-time or full-time commercial sex workers, and the exposure of many men to sexual customs and conventions, including periodic work-connected travel, from the industrialized world has produced a situation in which men observe the traditional bans with their wives but may increase the number of sex partners outside marriage. (I. O. Orubuloye, "Patterns of Sexual Behavior of High Risk Groups and Their Implications for STDs and HIV/AIDS Transmission in Nigeria," 20, delivered to the AIDS and Reproductive Health Network meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, April 22-25, 1993.)

⁹⁵ Blumstein and Schwartz, *American Couples*, 195-196; R. Doddridge et al., "Factors Related to Decline in Preferred Frequency of Sexual Intercourse Among Young Couples," *Psychological Reports* 60 (1987): 391-395; Morton Hunt, *Sexual Behavior in the 1970's* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1974), 186-206.

relationship can prevent our feeling alienated in that job, or that alienation from affecting how we feel about ourselves and others.

Nevertheless, we are bombarded on every side with a romanticization of sexual relationship in our culture, a romanticization which offers itself as the only alternative to total experiential alienation. That romanticization of sexual relationship functions to shift human energy away from reforming alienating structures into vain attempts to achieve an intimacy which supposedly will, of itself, banish the feelings of, if not the fact of, alienation. But unless we attack the real causes of alienation the romanticization of sexual intimacy is self-defeating, for the expectations of sexual intimacy become so high that no relationship can satisfy them. So some individuals abandon sexual relationships one after the other in order to search for the perfect partner with which to establish this intimacy. Thus arises the phenomenon of serial monogamy.

While neither sexual intimacy nor the bond it can create will replace the social needs of humans, such as justice and community, they do have a great deal to contribute to the task of creating human community. Sexual intimacy and bonding can contribute to the creation of community in two ways: 1) vision—sexual intimacy and bonding give us insight into what community is, how it meets human needs, and how satisfying it can be; and 2) energy—sexual intimacy and bonding can be a great source of energy for the task of social change toward community.

Vision. Any kind of intimacy with another enlarges our vision.⁹⁶ I have a very close friend of over 20 years who lives a thousand miles away. Missy is an architectural restorationist, and from her I have learned to appreciate cities—buildings, bridges, and monuments—in wholly new ways. Because of my interest in her and her life and work I have learned new perspectives on current political/economic issues around buildings. She has tremendously influenced my political stands and activism on historic preservation, urban development, and low-income housing—issues which, without her influence, would be viewed solely from the very different perspective of my work with Habitat for Humanity, which builds/rehabs buildings for low-income family ownership. Missy has expanded my vision of what needs to be done, of the breadth of appropriate community concerns in housing, and of what interests can march together. The intimacy of close friendship provides this kind of extension of vision.

To an even greater extent my vision has been enlarged by my intimate sexual bond with my husband of 25 years, Frank. Through him I have come to learn of rural immigrant life in the Midwest, of family lifestyles and traditions very different from my own demonstrative, sexually open, irreverent, and often insensitive family. Through my relationship with him as he went through law school and 18 years of practicing corporate law, I have been exposed to lawyers, bankers, politicians, businessmen, and to their debates over trends and issues affecting them. Because I love him, I have been interested in the activities of his life, and through that interest my vision of how government and the economy actually work has been tremendously enlarged. Not all the extensions of vision are pleasant or welcomed at the time, but the result of this process is that my vision of what needs to be changed if we are to move toward community becomes less naïve and more informed than before. Thus one important way that intimacy with one person draws us close to others as well is by enlarging our vision of what needs to be done to meet the needs of the entire community.

Energy. Sexual intimacy and bonding are also a source for the energy required for reconstructing community. All forms of intimacy bring us to care for the persons with whom we are intimate, and thus to care about what happens to them. The more intimate we become, the more their welfare becomes ours (not replacing, but only adding to our concern for our individual welfare). Their triumphs become ours, their sufferings ours as well. Thus, if their interests or welfare are unjustly threatened, if they are hurt or otherwise abused by others or other forces, we become angry and active on their behalf. We are often able to marshal energy against that which threatens them even before they are, because they are often distracted by questions as to why they are suffering: Did they bring this on themselves? Is God punishing them? Do they deserve this suffering or threat? Whereas we who are intimate with them more clearly recognize their innocence and therefore the injustice of the situation. (Of course there are times when our intimacy with them may lead us to a very different route: "You really did bring this on yourself, and can't blame God or anyone else. You have been irresponsible, drinking, missing work, overspending, not watching your diet and exercise, etc.")

We may know in a general way that manufacturing jobs have been moving out of the U.S. over the last 20 years as U.S. companies seek out the lowest wage rates in the world, and that where manufacturing jobs have been replaced, they have been replaced, for the most part, with much lower-paying, non-union, often minimum-wage service jobs. But for many of us this knowledge alone does not change our attitudes or move us to action. Our own economic

⁹⁶ Janice Raymond, "Female Friendship and Feminist Ethics," *Women's Consciousness*, 167-168.

situation and that of our family, friends and neighbors has not changed appreciatively, which suggests to us that the impact of this trend on "real" families is minimal. But the spouses of workers who lose their job to this pattern of capital flight are much more easily energized by concern.

Jim and Kay are friends we met at church. In 1980 Jim was a 48-year-old skilled foundry worker, a production supervisor, at a time when the heavy metal industry was closing down all over the U.S. In the previous 12 years, he had lost work three times as the foundries he worked in were closed or sold and reopened with non-union labor. In 1980 he was unemployed all year, but kept busy as a volunteer worker in the church where he was a permanent deacon. In 1981 he got a foundry job at an hour's commute, but two years later that plant, too, closed. After 26 months of unemployment (less than half with unemployment benefits), he was offered a job in a nuclear-processing plant. He and his wife of 25 years went round and round about whether any job could be worth the health risks of nuclear radiation on a 53-year-old man with hypertension, who smoked heavily. This job not only involved processing uranium, but in a processing plant notorious for violations of safety regulations. In the previous 15 years, this plant had "lost" 2500 pounds of radioactive material in the form of dust.

Left with no pension or health benefits when earlier employers went out of business, Jim was desperate. He felt the stigma of unemployment again, and he feared for retirement. He could not afford to work at most of the service jobs available to 53-year-old black men with high school educations, like McDonald's. So he has now worked at the processing plant since 1984, first in production, and then, when production was closed, as a supervisor in the toxic cleanup program scheduled to last at least another 10-15 years. Who knows if his increasing medical problems are the result of his job, or just aging?

About the same time Kay took a new job as director of a small nonprofit corporation founded by a few church-identified individuals to rehab and administer extremely low-income housing. When she began working with the black low-income clients and the white upper-middle-class board of directors, she felt pulled in two directions. The white professional board members assumed that unemployment indicated some kind of personal instability—alcoholism, drugs, laziness, mental illness—and were reluctant either to rent to or hire applicants whose work histories had gaps representing unemployment. Initially inclined not to annoy the "deep pockets" on which her salary depended, Kay took some time before she challenged their position and insisted that such an attitude served to further handicap persons already suffering from the loss of production and other blue-collar jobs. At the same time, as she saw again and again in the lives of the applicants the same employment patterns she had lived through with Jim, and as she encountered the prejudicial ignorance of board members, her intimate relationship with Jim became not only a window into a major social problem, but a source of tremendous energy for change.

Her passionate commitment to Jim energized her to refute the interpretation of the board, to further analyze the situation, and to finally plunge into local and regional programs for job creation and political action to control capital flight.

We cannot help but care about those with whom we are intimate, and caring about them gives us energy to challenge institutions, social trends, or individuals which threaten or oppress them. As the availability of other forms of intimacy declines under the same pressures which destroy traditional community, sexual intimacy becomes more and more important as a source of both vision and energy. But sexual intimacy by itself is no more able to create community than it is to replace community in fulfilling human needs. Sexual intimacy must be understood in ways that support the development of intimacy of varying degrees in friendships and families, with co-workers and neighbors. We cannot be intimate with everybody, but neither should intimacy be limited to one person, lest it lack the strength necessary to enlarge both our vision and our energy for the task of creating community.

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[gp1]Actually modern scientific research has provided evidence that many other animals do not experience pleasure when engaged in sex. They are driven purely by instinct. It is because humans are no longer dominated by biological mandates that pleasure developed as an incentive for human sexual engagement. In truth, then, the pleasure associated with sex is, after all, a truly human good.

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[gp2]And of sexually transmitted diseases!!

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[gp3]Even if the “punishment” is nothing more than non-verbal or verbal expressions of disappointment and disapproval by one’s parents.

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[gp4]If Gudorf is referring here to persons who engage in bondage and domination or sadomasochism (S/M) as their preferred form of sexual activity, a more positive understanding of the phenomenon can be found in Charles Moser and J.J. Madeson, *Bound to be Free: The SM Experience* (New York: Continuum) 1999.