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—Editorial

The life of the Trinity is a communion. Human life is inherently communal and human persons are called to share bodily in the life of God.

Outline of a Christian ethics of life, sex and marriage

By Germain Grisez

■ Those who dissented from Catholic teachings concerning life, sex, and marriage often criticized the natural law arguments which used to be offered in support of these teachings. These arguments did not seem to clarify anything.

Many Catholic philosophers who accept the Church's moral teachings as unchangeable truths also were dissatisfied with the oversimplified older arguments. Those arguments too easily used ideas such as "natural" and "perverted faculty," and too simply reduced everything to the single good of procreation.

A number of these philosophers, using diverse methods, have been at work for many years developing a more illuminating and cogent account of the traditional moral positions. In Europe, using phenomenological method, Gabriel Marcel, Dietrich von Hildebrand, and

Karol Wojtyla (before he became John Paul II) made significant contributions. In England and Ireland, using analytic method, G.E.M. Anscombe, Cahal Daly, and John Finnis contributed important new insights. In America—working from the moral theory of St. Thomas with some freedom—Vernon Bourke, Robert and Mary Joyce, William E. May, Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., and I have tried to further this work.

Many Catholic priests and teachers are unaware of what has been accomplished. Although those engaged in this work have used diverse methods, on the whole their results are entirely compatible. Fairly soon it will be possible to gather up what has been accomplished and present it as an up-to-date statement of the Christian vision of life, sex, and marriage.

What follows is only a very brief outline of such a work. This outline needs to be filled out with many explanations and examples, supplemented with relevant material from psychology and the social sciences, and (for theological purposes) refined by a careful examination of the testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition. Still, even this outline might help those who wish to give a better account of the Church's teaching on these matters. Its very brevity might make it useful for personal reflection and discussion.

God is Lord of life. The dignity of human life is clarified by the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection for which we hope. These show that perfected bodily life belongs to our divine vocation to eternal life. Like divine life itself, human bodily life does not exist in isolated individuals. In handing on life, man and woman truly are one principle, and children are of the very flesh of their parents.

God is Lord of life

Contraception and sterilization interrupt human life in the moment of its transmission; abortion destroys the incipient life of a new person. Hence to choose to impede or destroy human life by such acts is inconsistent with reverence for life and for the sanctity which belongs to it insofar as God is at work in creating and sustaining it.

Natural family planning can be selected merely as a technique to carry out a prior, contraceptive choice. If so, it has the same significance as any other method of contraception. However, those who judge that they should not undertake to have a child (or another child) for the time being do nothing

wrong if they responsibly act on this judgment by abstaining from sexual intercourse.

If married couples who are bound to abstain for such a reason know that at certain times their intercourse naturally would be unfruitful, then at such times their obligation to abstain ceases. They might have good reason to engage in marital intercourse; if so, they may. For just as the sterile may marry and the married may continue intercourse during pregnancy and after menopause, so married couples temporarily infertile may engage in intercourse to make concrete and experience the marital unity they enjoy.

The life of the Holy Trinity is a communion. Human life also is inherently communal, and human persons are called to share bodily in the life of God.

Masturbatory acts isolate individuals who do them in their own self-consciousness, and so such acts violate the communicative value of sexual behavior. Since they are chosen for sterile self-gratification, masturbatory acts are—and are experienced to be—without meaning. They lack both the value of cooperation in the service of life and the significant experience of bodily interpersonal communion.

In masturbatory sex, one not only engages in senseless self-gratification and misses the communicative significance of sex, one also reduces one's own body to the status of an object-tool of one's conscious self. This reduction alienates subject from body contrary to the personal reality of the bodily self. Thus the sacredness of the body and its communicative meaning, mentioned above, not only are missing from masturbatory sex but are violated by it.

Moreover, alienated from one's own body, one must try to organize one's life as a livable whole in one of two ways.

First, one can use the orgasmic experience as a central reality, join the sensate culture, and regard realities which lie beyond experience—such as moral goodness, God, heaven—as shadowy things or even unreal ideas.

Second, one can use the intelligible as a central reality, cling to the supernatural, but despise the bodily and historical as subpersonal, and so end by making what is beyond experience into myth.

Both of these approaches are radically inconsistent with Christian faith. The first is characteristic of modern and contemporary unbelieving materialism. The second is characteristic of anti-Incarnational gnosticism, which perennially tries to save faith by demythizing it into a transcendental metaphysics of one sort or another. (Clerics and religious who allow themselves masturbatory satisfaction are likely to be strongly tempted by such metaphysics.)

Most masturbatory acts involve phantasy, homosexual or heterosexual, of an object-person used for self-gratification. Perverse sexual behaviors—bestiality, sadomasochism, and homosexual acts—have other important aspects, but generally have a masturbatory aspect. Heterosexual relations also can have this significance. This is obvious in the case of casual, promiscuous relations, but it occurs all too often even within marriage itself.

Many who engage in extramarital sexual actions with a partner try to go beyond the masturbatory and to enjoy something of the experience of interpersonal, sexual communion. This is true not only of those who fornicate and engage in adultery but also of those who engage in homosexual relations.

But such sexual acts have no real

bearing upon any genuine human good to which the partners are committed in common. For instance, they might share an interest in intellectual or esthetic values, but their sexual behavior makes no real contribution to the realization of these goods. The one basic human good to which sexual behavior is necessarily related, bodily life itself, either is unavailable in such sexual relationships, or is purposely excluded from them, or (in the case of potentially fruitful heterosexual relations outside marriage) is not embodied in a commitment-bond which would be expressed and realized in the sexual intercourse.

Thus, the attempt to transcend the masturbatory in interpersonal sexual relations outside marriage is inherently doomed to frustration. One enjoys something of the appearance of the communicative good, but does not live its reality. The partners lack common responsibilities for shared relevant goods beyond their own subjective experience, and so they tend to fall back into a masturbatory attitude in their sexual behavior.

Marriage is a mutual commitment of a man and woman to join together in the service of human life. This mutual commitment makes a real, although not empirical, bond of unity. Marital acts open to new life can be appropriate in carrying out the commitment to its service; they also concretely realize and make available in shared experience the more than empirical bond of communion which exists. Because marital acts are open to new life, they are consistent with reverence for life and its sanctity.

Moreover, because the marital commitment and acts are essentially related to bodily reality beyond subjective experience, such acts can transcend the masturbatory. Because the partners undertake common responsibilities which go beyond their shared enjoy-

ment, their interpersonal communion takes on substance which draws them out of themselves. Because sexual inclination must sometimes be silenced in abstinence, the times it is expressed in freely chosen acts of intimacy speak with unambiguous communicative meaning.

Within marriage, sexual activity and enjoyment can take its place in a meaningful plan of life. Materialism is transcended because values beyond the sensate are in control. Dualism also is avoided, because sexual behavior and enjoyment are essential, contributing parts of an integrated, bodily-spiritual personal and interpersonal life.

The only alternative to marriage as a resolution of this problem of synthesis is a life of perfect celibacy or virginity in which genital acts and enjoyments are forgone so that *other* aspects of bodily reality can come into the service of *other* goods for the sake of *other* forms of self-transcending communion.

Those who enter into sexual relationships without commitment to a real common good necessarily pursue some definite and limited goal in their shared behavior. When they are satisfied that they have reached and enjoyed their goal or become tired of pursuing it in this way, the relationship terminates, even if it involved some level of unselfish affection and genuine friendship.

Those who make a true marital commitment orient themselves by a good which goes beyond any definite goal or particular objective. A new person cannot be the goal of a limited project, for each person as an image of God shared his dignity. The child as beloved good transcends even the grandest project—for example, landing on the moon, balancing the budget, ending the arms race.

Consequently, in undertaking the service of life, a married couple cannot foresee the goals they will pursue and the



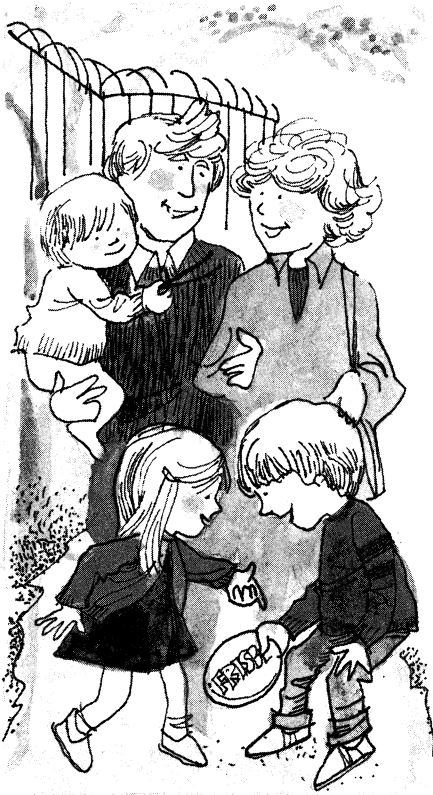
Dr. Germain Grisez, a layman, has been appointed to the newly created Rev. Harry J. Flynn Chair in Christian Ethics at Mount Saint Mary's College, Emmitsburg, Maryland. With Joseph M. Boyle, Jr., he recently published Life and Death with Liberty and Justice: A Contribution to the Euthanasia Debate (University of Notre Dame Press, 1979). He is now beginning work on a volume of principles of Catholic moral theology.

values they will enjoy together. The joys and sorrows, successes and failures, of their life together are hidden from their eyes. The actual meaning of their common life will come into view and unfold itself only as they faithfully live it out.

Rather than being a goal, this good of their marriage will be a gift received in return for their faithfulness. Hence, the married couple never can be in a position to judge that the good to which they committed themselves is unattainable and their commitment to each other no longer valid. For this reason, even according to the order of creation, marriage is morally indissoluble—that is, divorce is wrong.

In Christ, marriage keeps all that it naturally is, but is transformed and enhanced with sacramental meaning.

The communion of marital love now



includes, expresses, concretely realizes, and makes available in experience, the sharing of God's adopted children in the communion of Trinitarian love. Service to new human life now is cooperation with God by procreating children begotten not only in the flesh but also in the Spirit for eternal life. The flesh united in genital acts is sanctified in Christ by the resurrection life shared by the couple in the Eucharist. Self-denial and sacrifice required by marital faithfulness and parenthood fill up the sacrificial suffering and death of Jesus.

Thus, faithful Christian married life powerfully proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus, and so it is an excellent form of apostolate. By this apostolate, the truth and love and life

revealed by God in Jesus and received by the married couple in their sacramental life is offered and handed on to others.

The marriages of all Christian couples, taken together, are a single reality. This one reality of sacramental marriage, with its pairs of husbands and wives in communion, is a ministry and order of ecclesial life. This sacramental order realizes and expresses the nuptial union of Christ and his Church. This union, based on the Incarnation itself and guaranteed by God's fidelity, is not only morally but absolutely unbreakable. Hence, a consummated sacramental marriage is absolutely indissoluble: Divorce is *impossible*.

Answer suggested

Many Catholics find it difficult to understand why every sexual immorality is grave matter. For example, why should there be the stuff of grave sin in a mere phantasy, a single act of masturbation, or the petting of a teen-aged couple?

The preceding outline suggests an answer. Sexual phantasies and behaviors are not isolated. They are moments in a process by which the bodily person integrates or disintegrates himself or herself, pursues the appearance or enters the reality of bodily communion, serves human life or pursues arbitrary goals.

Sexual misbehavior by itself, without sufficient reflection and free choice, is not a mortal sin. Mortal sin arises in the heart. Here, self-determination to any sort of mutilated sexual act is a challenge to the divine bodiliness central to Christian life.

Bad sex also leads to crises of faith. Moreover, insofar as sex in Christ has a sacramental meaning, every single deliberate act of bad sex has the character of sacrilege. To violate a Christian's body is to violate the temple of the Spirit and the flesh of Christ himself. ■