

Response Article 1: The Perspective of a Roman Catholic Nun

In the Pursuit of Love¹

By Marianne Farina

Christian teachings about human sexuality emerge from fundamental beliefs about human nature and human development. A critical study of these teachings, or any part of these teachings, e.g. celibacy and marriage, should begin with an exploration of the Church’s understanding of the dignity of the human person and the Christian vocation to responsive love. Made in the likeness of God, we learn to “be God-like lovers by responding openly and completely to the transformation in Jesus Christ” (Genovesi 1996, 16). We possess a dignity that is more than a biological phenomena or a philosophical category. It is through knowledge (word) and love (action) of God, self, one another, and all creation that we manifest this truth. As Aquinas stated, “Charity signifies not only the love of God, but also a certain friendship, with him; which implies, besides love, a mutual return of love, together with a certain mutual communion...” (ST I-II, 65, 5).

Contemplation of God, the true goal of holiness/wholeness, is the perfect fulfillment of the dignity we possess. We draw closer to God, the source and fulfillment of human longings, by deepening our friendship with God and communion with others. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the infused virtue of charity helps us to live, as Christ did, creatively for others, discovering ways to bring a healing into the world so that all persons may grow in fullness of life, i.e., holiness/wholeness.² When the Church claims that human sexuality is a “wonderful gift and awesome responsibility,” it affirms the physical (embodied) and relational (generative) aspect of this call to integrity, the dynamic wholeness of responsive love (NCCB 1991, 2).

¹ Vincent Genovesi, *In the Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality*, (Collegeville, MN: Glazier Press, 1996). The title suggests, as the author states, that Christian life is an acknowledgement of an affirming response to God’s calling us to love...” I add that the love we pursue as sexual beings is to imitate the generative love of God, offered to us in the person of Christ, now and forever.

² In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (10:10). The Greek word used here is “*zoe*” which implies dynamic wholeness. Other words could have been chosen like *bios* (conduct of everyday living/possessions) or *psyche* (life or the soul as organizing principle)

However, the author of this paper proposes that the Church is inconsistent in its teachings. He claims that despite the Church's positive ideas about the spiritual benefit of married life and celibacy, the Church still needs to discover a better way to integrate a more holistic understanding of the way sexuality informs one's desire for God (17). The perceived lack of integration between human sexuality and the Christian vocation to love is a concern not only for critics but also for the community. Too often, we fail to pursue a more comprehensive understanding of God's call to responsive love, of moral goodness as freedom in Christ, and to the command "be compassionate as God is compassionate" (Matthew 5:48, NAB) through our reception of the transforming gift of the Holy Spirit. We can become inattentive to the unitive and generative dimensions of working toward a full realization of God's promise of "fullness of life." Looking at the Christian understanding of virtue in light of the Christian call to generative/responsive love might help us understand the way sexuality is integral to life of virtue as the human response to this call.

Christian Virtue: A Call to Holiness

Christian virtue theories describe the relation of moral goodness to a human being's ultimate end, beatitude, and ways this goal informs human thoughts, desires, and actions. A life of virtue, perfected by deepening our friendship with God, is a fuller realization of our human dignity, the transcendence to which we are called, and those "habits, capacities, interests, inclinations, precepts, injunctions, prohibitions" which sustain our journey to fullness of life (Kotva 1996, 17).

Charity, God's friendship with humans, as Servais Pinkcaers explains, "touches and organizes the virtues," the moral and intellectual virtues, without replacing "the proper action of each and every virtue" (2001, 87). Far from lessening human freedom, Aquinas' understanding of the stages of moral development addresses the way God calls us to a maturity of faith and human excellence:

The spiritual increase of charity may be considered in respect of a certain likeness to the growth of the human body. For although this latter growth may be divided into many parts, yet it has a certain fixed divisions according to those particular actions or pursuits to which man is brought by this same growth. Thus we speak of a man being an infant until he has the use of reason, after which we distinguish another state of man wherein he begins to speak and use reason, while there is a third state, that of puberty, when he begins to acquire the power of generation and so on until he arrives at perfection. (*ST II-II 24.9*).

Pinckaers' study of Aquinas' ethics offers a helpful summary for understanding the elements within each stage of our growth in virtue: *beginner*, *progressive*, and *perfect*. Each stage deepens union with God, just as the mystical tradition described the pathway to perfection: the *purgative*, *illuminative* and *unitive* way (Pinckaers 1995 361-369). The call to responsive love is also a call to greater intimacy with God, and virtue manifests this generative love to others in particular ways. In light of this understanding, how do we interpret the Church's teaching about temperance?

The virtue of temperance, as understood by Aquinas, is a capacity to embrace the unified and ordered whole of created existence, especially acknowledging the ways the body contributes to an inner order from which the serenity of spirit can flow. The "work" of this virtue is about choosing objects of sense that produce "pleasures and desires" capable of manifesting this human excellence. (*ST II-II 142, 3*).

The potential parts of temperance, and the special virtues associated with it, such as continence, humility, gentleness, mildness, modesty, and abstinence and chastity, help us to realize the beauty or glory of the human body. To possess temperance means that we choose the good, especially those of touch, i.e., food, drink, sexual contact (*ST II-II 141, 5*), according to the rule of reason and divine law. Aquinas' writings remind us that we need to be honest about our attractions to these goods and to be open to the transforming power of grace. The author states that chastity is a moral virtue of self-regulation in the sexual life. More correctly, as a species of temperance, chastity is possessing a capacity to experience the pleasures of sexual pleasure fittingly because "human sexuality is a divine gift, a fundamental component of the whole person—body, emotions, soul—whose deepest meaning is to lead the person to the gift of self in love" (USCCB 1991, 74-75).

Marriage, celibacy, or the single abstinent life³ are positive expressions of the Christian commitment to responsive love. Each manifestation requires informs our commitment to grow morally and spiritually. Human sexuality is an integral to this transformation. The author notes that communities, leaders, and scholars have not always promoted such a positive understanding of human sexuality. Yet, there are, and have been, consistent teachings about the gift of human sexuality, when open to grace makes us more fully "a responsible lover and life-giver" (Ferder 2007, 22).

Christian Living: A Generative Process

³ Some may choose abstinence for a period of time or choose to remain abstinent without a commitment to the vow of celibacy in a formal way i.e., as in joining a religious order.

As Christians, we embark on a life-long journey or conversion of heart. We seek the good in material and spiritual realities because they have a unique potential to shape us into loving, responsible, and generative persons. Real violence happens when human thoughts and actions, i.e., personal, social, or institutional, become obstacles to this transformation. The author states that “traditional emphasis of celibacy in the Roman Catholic tradition has led to the exclusion of sexuality in mysticism.” However, as noted above, to understand Christian living as responsive love realizes the sacramental nature of this call.

Christ is our model, not because he lived celibately but because of his example of love and service. Through grace of sacrament, the faithful participate in “Christ’s Priesthood, which flows from Christ Himself” (Aquinas ST, III, 63,3). Charity, the “bond of perfection,” unites all the diverse and unique, gifts, callings, and works of the faithful as they “move toward perfection . . . without delay and confusion, signifying the dignity and beauty of the Church in its unity of faith, charity and mutual service” (Aquinas, ST, III, 183.1,2). The Church teaches that there are various ways for believers to experience this “transformation in Christ” as they strive to fulfill their call to responsive love. Some will embrace their vocation to responsive love as married persons. Others will discover they have the gift of celibacy and accept their vocation in this manner. While others will find the single life is their vocation. In each of these ways, the call to responsive love is for greater communion with God, “whose very being is Gift and whose life as Trinity of Persons is an eternal communion of love” (Grabowski 2003, 168).

To embrace the Sacrament of Marriage means to be en-mission with God’s Love, celebrating both the procreative and unitive aspects of God’s generative and gracious love. In imitating God’s love, the couple nurtures a “solid and long-lasting” true friendship, moving beyond friendships of utility or pleasure (McKay 2008). Friendship here is a promise “to encourage and support,” through living realities of commitment, intimacy, and passion (Genovesi 1996, 244). John Paul II’s teachings on Theology of the Body, reflects ways this embodiment is a type of “language of the body” communicating “complete fidelity and self-donation” in this committed love (1980). This teaching, when presented more comprehensively in discussion about all the virtues, helps us realize that responsive love is more than the perfection of chastity. Married persons and their families called to responsive love strive to fulfill the mission of promoting, by their example and service, a “civilization of love” (John Paul II 1994, 15).

This is also true for celibates as they accept their call to responsive love. Celibacy is a type of loving that orients human relationships toward imitating God’s love and the goal of beatitude. Celibates love God and all others in God, exercising perfect charity, and in this way uniting human longing in all its dimensions – physical, spiritual, and psychological. Celibacy is not ministerial pragmatism about having “more time and space” for ministry. Celibacy is a commitment to deepen one’s knowledge of and love for

God. The celibate life is a choice for a holistic relatedness and the particular integration of one's life and service characterized by the "...the ultimate intention of total transformation in Christ" (Schneiders 2001, 144). It is a "dangerous lifestyle" when it does not manifest an incarnational view of human sexuality or when it fails to realize the call of responsive love as a call to union with God and of communion of love and service for others (O'Murchu 1999, 107).

The single life is a third manifestation of living the Christian call to responsive love. As the Church states, "there is no simple definition for the single life." Some are single by preference and others by circumstance (USCCB 1991, 51). However, single persons "can and do commit themselves in a variety of intimate relationships" (USCCB 1991, 52,54). The love of family and true friends empowers them to participate fully in the Church's life and apostolic mission by means of this important and particular manifestation of responsive love.

Carter Heyward claimed human sexuality was "the yearning, the hunger, the drive" for communion. It empowers us to "break down the walls that separate person from person, creature from creature, creature from creator; and to the making of reciprocal connections between and among us in which we find our common good—the common-wealth of God." (Heyward 2009). As Christians who freely accept God's invitation to bearers of responsive love, we learn the ways of progressing toward this union. However, there are dangers, but these exist not solely in the province of human sexuality, but in our misconceptions of the Christian call to holiness itself.

For if we do not embrace an incarnational and holistic understanding of human sexuality; or fail to meet the challenge to live this call with integrity; or stop listening and learning from others about their sexual experiences, concerns, or struggles, then we are most certainly in danger. Such weaknesses, pathologies, and injustices threaten the very promise written into our common human nature: "Of the fullness of life, we have all had a share, love following upon love (John 1: 16, NAB). Married life, celibacy or the single life within the Catholic Church is the pathway to this fullness, proclaiming to the world of God's love and concern for all creation.

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Editor's Note: Michael Stoeber requested the opportunity to respond to two Marianne Farina's points. We hope that this in-print discussion prompts further discussions on the Journal's website itself. Those who wish to respond are welcome to do so in the "Discussion" section available with each article at <http://www.irdialogue.org/journal>.

Comments from Michael Stoeber:

1. Professor Farina claims that my paper "proposes that the Church is inconsistent in its teachings" (29). However, I do not intend to propose "that the Church is inconsistent in its teachings" on sexuality, but rather that the Church's teachings on sexuality have developed historically.
2. Professor Farina also suggests that I contend "that despite the Church's positive ideas about the spiritual benefit of married life and celibacy, the Church still needs to discover a better way to integrate a more holistic understanding of the way sexuality informs one's desire for God" (29) Rather, I sought to express that the Church's "very positive regard of sexuality has not yet been effectively integrated into current Roman Catholic pastoral contexts" (20), in line with the reference I make to the thought of William Dinges.