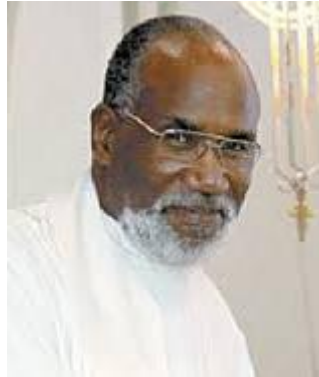


ETHOS and ETHICS OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

after VATICAN II

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Almost ten years ago, the then Leader of the Opposition, Basdeo Panday, made a public declaration that “Politics has a morality of its own”. It was used to justify the politician doing as he or she liked. At that time, I responded that “Politics has an ethos of its own, but its ethics must be governed by the same ethical principles which govern all our lives”. We may differ on what those principles are, but we cannot simply allow any human institution to fall outside of whatever principles we agree on.

Ethos refers to “the disposition, character, fundamental values particular to a person, people, culture or movement”. Ethos changes in response to new ideas or forces. Ethics refers to how we value the things and the actions within a particular ethos as good or bad, right or wrong. The post-World War II situation saw a continuation on the focus of the manuals which dominated seminary training from the 18th century on. This was largely an ethic of sex, concerned with determining the purpose of sexual acts and what was right or wrong, mostly what was sinful and to what extent. In the middle of the 20th century, a fundamental shift began to take place in the light of biology, anthropology and inter-religious experience.

James B. Nelson has been in the forefront of the Christian exploration of sexuality in recent times. In his 1992 work *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine*

Spirituality he wrote:

"(Sexuality) is our way of being in the world as gendered persons, having male or female biological structures and socially internalized self-understandings of those meanings to us. Sexuality means having feeling and attitudes about being "body-selves. It means having affectional orientations toward the opposite sex, the same sex, or quite possibly toward both. It means having the capacity for sensuousness. Above all, sexuality is the desire for intimacy and communion, both emotionally and physically. It is the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity to love. At its undistorted best, our sexuality is that basic eros of our humanness – urging, pulling, luring, driving us out of loneliness into communion, out of stagnation into creativity."(p.2)

It is in this context that we began to shift from the ethics of sex to the ethics of human sexuality. We are sexual persons from the first moment of our conception to the moment of our death. All that Nelson describes is true of us throughout our lives. Ethics must speak to that reality. The ethical imperative must invite us not only to avoid certain acts, but to seek to flourish as embodied, sexual human beings.

At the heart of the Church's response to this new understanding of our embodiment has been the shift in Fundamental Moral theology that came with the Second Vatican Council. John O'Malley in his comprehensive work "What Really Happened at Vatican II?" notes that the Pope's intention was "that the council should look forward; it should not be afraid to make changes in the church whenever appropriate; it should not feel constrained to stay within the old methods and forms, as if hermetically sealed off from modern thought; it should look to human unity, which suggested an approach that emphasized communalities rather than differences; it should encourage cooperation with others; it should see its task as pastoral."(p.96)

This pastoral task was particularly important to moral theology. O'Malley continued "Vatican II's Call to Holiness means that the moral life and spiritual life are not two separated realities. As an ethics of perfection, the call to holiness clearly enlarges morality beyond concern with particular actions or moments of decision(though surely

these are not unimportant) and casts the moral life as an ongoing endeavour to grow in love for God and neighbour, to become holy in an ever-deeper and more faithful obedience to God's will. Holiness is, then, the work of a lifetime." Over the last fifty years, we have shifted from a focus on the permissibility of acts (the manuals as training for the confessional) to the truth of the Acting Person - the philosophical foundations of John Paul II whose magnum opus of moral theology was entitled "Veritatis Splendor" - the splendour of truth. *Gaudium et Spes* notes that "the person is endowed with intelligence and made to know the truth. The person is irreducibly social. She comes into being through a union of persons, and fulfillment as a person only comes in relationships with others. (GS32). John Paul's acting person is still focussed on acts as central to self-definition and identity. His emphasis on truth as the goal of all our thought and action is a major contribution to Catholic ethical discourse. In VS para 53, he wrote, "While man exists in a particular culture, he cannot be exhaustively defined by that culture (ethos). Human nature is the measure of culture and the condition ensuring that man does not become the prisoner of any of his cultures, but asserts his personal dignity by living in accordance with the profound truth of his being." It is interesting to note that "co-operators of the truth" is the Episcopal motto of Benedict XVI. This commitment to truth, to the truth of the person, has to be to the truth, not simply of a person defined by his or her acts, but to the truth of the person who is becoming. In this context, the fundamental salvation question is not "*Am I saved?*" but rather, *Who am I becoming?* as one called to be a new creation in Christ.

It is in this fundamental theology context that we hear the call of Cardinal Hume in 1981 for a new theology of sex, of Cardinal Martini in 2002 for a reform of our sexual teaching. We presume that we have a message from God about sexuality, love and marriage. We are worried about the divorce rates and the status of the remarried. In fact, the fundamental problem is people not wanting to get married in the first place. We are failing miserably to communicate anything about relationship and sexuality that makes sense to the men and women of our age who know that they have to live their sexuality every day, in every moment of their existence. They know that marriage is but one phase and pattern in living out their sexuality. Most of them never become

obsessed with it, but they hear little from the Church which encourages them to explore it in affirming ways. The truth of human sexuality is about relationship embodied, learning about WHO you are and more in relation to your own embodied being, the embodied other and the Other of whom one gets a glimpse in one's experiences of bodily transcendence.

The most critical feature of modern life in this regard has been the opening up both of the reality and the discourse on sexuality and sexual experience in deeper ways. Our understanding and ethical evaluation of our sexuality begins today with our own experience. Rosemary Haughton provides a context for reflection in her theology of experience. "The spirit of true theology of experience is both enthusiastic and open, both appreciative and clear-sighted. But also it is very humble....It is not enough to draw true conclusions from experience, we must also experience IN LOVE, only then shall we find the right balance between the demands of the present prophet and the developing tradition. Neither is sufficient without the other, either in itself, or in ourselves as we wrestle with the theological task".

The theological and ethical task in the realm of human sexuality is today holistic and life-long. "Holistic" because we recognize that our sexuality is not simply part of us. It pervades all of our being. "Lifelong" because it is a task from the cradle to the grave. The child enjoying his mother's body or his own and the adolescent discovering the sheer wonder and terror of becoming an adult are on that lifelong journey. Today we talk about geriatric sexuality, not as a matter for dirty old men, but as the final chapter in the transition to transcendent communion.

Today, we recognize certain elements in our sexual being and journey

- ✚ embodiment
- ✚ emotions
- ✚ language and social communication
- ✚ procreation with its call to passion and tenderness as well as its openness to new being

✚ multiple motivations and aims – negative and positive

sexual experience can enhance self-esteem, express love and faithfulness, sustain relationship, drive out depression and anger, repay favours, provide recreation and play, reveal the self – all in a context of POWER and VULNERABILITY.

It is this contemporary named and public experience of our sexuality which provides a “new” source for ethical reflection, alongside scripture, tradition and the secular disciplines.

Andre Guindon, the Canadian theologian, writes powerfully of sexuality as language and sexual intercourse, including but always more than the genital, as communication. The sexually integrated Christian lives in a world in which “God seeks people who are accountable for themselves and for each other, people who speak an historically truthful sexual language. Such is the God of the Covenant revealed in the faith experience of those who seek Her.”

From this perspective, the fundamental moral question becomes not – “May I touch here or there, look at this or that, practice such a coital position, utilize this or that means of birth control?” Rather it seeks truth in asking, “What am I saying about myself in this or that fashion? Is it true to who we are in ourselves and for each other?” Even deeper, the question is – “who am I becoming as I live my sexuality in this particular way, as I use language and action to discern, reveal and promote my truest self?” Who are we becoming?

Such language is always complex, multi-faceted and multi-valent. One of the most pronounced insights about our sexuality today which poses real challenges to the Church as we invite people to live their embodiment is the realization that our sexuality and especially sexual acts can mean different things to different people and different things to the same person under different circumstances or even under the same circumstance. We have tended to limit sexuality to either usefulness (babies) or

pleasure. Liz Stuart, one of the foremost female theologians writing in this area, put it this way: “One of the reasons why the Churches have such difficulty in dealing with the issues of sexuality – they ignore the fact that sexual acts take on different meanings in different circumstances. The Christian compulsion seems to have been to establish one universal meaning for sex. The result has been a failure to recognize mutuality, justice and beauty in some sexual relationships which do not embrace the universal meaning, and a perhaps more unforgivable failure to recognize exploitation, violence and abuse in relationships that were supposed naturally to embody the universal meaning”(*Just Good Friends*. 1995. p.74).

Our sexuality in its being and expression is, therefore, multi-faceted and ambiguous. Anyone who goes deep enough experiences that ambiguity. It arises as you experience a powerful sexual energy in yourself, even as your body begins to show its wear and tear. It arises in the orgasmic moment when you want to give all and receive all only to know that you will never be all. That ambiguity was very well expressed in a song that was written after a men’s retreat about relationships that had been both painful and enlightening for many of them:

It’s so funny how I love you, yet I hate you.

It’s so funny how I need you, yet don’t care.

It’s so funny how I try to understand you

And yet somehow we quarrel all the year.

I know the wonder of each precious moment

Reveals the treasured mystery that is we.

I’ve come to see in all of this – for certain

Just what real love in all true life can be. Chorus

It all began in moments warm and tender.

We thought that that was how it’ll always be.

But then we knew the bitterness of being.

We saw that love must sail the roughest seas.

*I saw the anger hid behind those eyelids.
You must have seen the same behind my own.
We fought – over things that seemed so trivial,
The sound of love and music turned to groans.
I know we say that we just can't do better
And so we have to go our separate ways.
But life is more than kissing, laughing, squeezing;
We've got to take the nighttime with the days.*

*It's so funny how I hate you, but I love you.
It's so funny how I need you, I still care.
It's so funny but I'd like to understand you
And understanding may help love to dare.*

It's so funny, it's so funny, but I love you.

It is in this context of ambiguity that John Paul II sought to introduce what he himself called the Theology of the Body. In the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*(97), he wrote “it is an illusion to think we can build a true culture of human life if we do not accept and experience sexuality and love and the whole of life according to their true meaning and their close inter-connection”. John Paul in his weekly audience of January 9, 1980 put forward a dynamic understanding of sexual meaning when he said “That beatifying "beginning" of man's being and existing, as male and female, is connected with the revelation and discovery of the meaning of the body, which can be called "nuptial." We have already observed that the words which express the first joy of man's coming to existence as "male and female" (Gn 2:23) are followed by the verse which establishes their conjugal unity (cf. Gn 2:24). Then follows the verse which testifies to the nakedness of both, without mutual shame (Gn 2:25). This significant confrontation enables us to speak of the revelation and at the same time the discovery of the "nuptial" meaning of the body in the mystery of creation..... It becomes an experience of

mutual giving, as can already be seen in the ancient text. That nakedness of both progenitors, free from shame, seems also to bear witness to that—perhaps even specifically. Conjugal unity as male and female in mutual nakedness without mutual shame, bearing witness to and participating in the mystery of creation is a powerful vision. This has been idealized and idolized in the USA and the Caribbean. It has been met with some concern, especially as promulgated by Christopher West, as too idealistic and even misinterpreting of John Paul. Charles Curran suggests that it cannot serve as a theology of all bodies and does not apply to people who are single, widowed or challenged. For JP II, heterosexual marriage is the only context for the flourishing of human sexuality, the only meaning for all human beings. The impression given is that passion and sexual pleasure are totally suspect and always in need of control. There is a continuing reluctance to acknowledge the fundamental goodness of sexuality, even with the ever-present danger of concupiscence and lust. (Morvant old man)

Unexpectedly, it was Benedict XVI who provided a way forward when in *Deus Caritas Est* he called for an overcoming of the ambivalence towards erotic love “Eros and agape – ascending and descending love – can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized”.

The journey of exploration continues. John Paul opened up the way for a re-imagining of human sexuality. It would be a disservice to him to proclaim him as the last word. However, the Church remains uncomfortable with other attempts at such re-visioning. One recent attempt has been challenged by the Vatican, that of Margaret Farley in her book *Just Love*. She writes “a love is right and good insofar as it aims to affirm truthfully the concrete reality of the beloved”. She suggests seven specific norms for such affirmation:

1. Do no unjust harm
2. Free Consent
3. Mutuality
4. Equality(of power)

5. Commitment
6. Fruitfulness
7. Social Justice

The Vatican Congregation condemns her work because she holds positions in contradiction to official teaching on divorce and remarriage, homosexuality and masturbation. In fact, a huge concern of her book is gender-based violence and the sexual repression of women worldwide, issues which have actually received significant attention worldwide in recent papal teaching. The CDF says that Farley has betrayed objective moral standards in favor of mere "experience". In fact, Farley invokes experience not to replace objective moral standards, but to bring their application up-to-date and make them more persuasive. Just Love and an earlier work, [Personal Commitments](#), maintain (as does Catholic tradition) that any truly loving relationship will meet the test of justice, understood as respect for oneself and other persons, and as responsibility for the good of others, as well as one's own desires and interests. What is important here is an understanding that theology is not the same as official doctrinal teaching. Theology is a process of seeking and exploration in a dynamic and critical relation to other theological positions, including official teaching.

It is in this context of exploration that I wish to point out four areas of research which are impacting positively on Catholic theology of human sexuality today.

DESIRE. Much research is going on about desire as a spiritual reality, foundational to spiritual growth, i.e. our desire for God and how such desire is incarnate, cf. the language of the mystics. Tina Beattie complains that the Church sees sexual desire as a "torrid sado-masochistic fantasy of sex and violence, what I would call theopornography". We are particularly challenged by work in the area of women's desire and homosexual desire. Desire along the age spectrum also challenges us. One middle aged married man complained that the Church asks you to control desire when you are really struggling to maintain it.

TRINITY and EUCHARIST. Modern explorations of the doctrine of the Trinity, especially as the transcendent expression/experience of relationality and community, invites us to see in God a unity in plurality, not in singularity or absorption. Most of these modern studies are rooted in the Eastern Church, especially its understanding of the relationship within the Trinity as a *perichoresis* – a dance within and without. The very love of the Father for the Son which is the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts and we experience it in all loving relationships and share/dance that love with one another.

INTER-RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE and DIALOGUE – Hinduism and parts of the Islam tradition invite us to explore bodiliness as spirituality. All is grace mediated by suffering, sin and pleasure. Some of Christian tantra reads like the illustration of John Paul's nuptial meaning of the body. In addition some of these traditions have a longer experience of the integration of the sexual both in the individual and in the society. Professor Anantanand Rambachan wrote, "There is good evidence that Hindu culture was one of the earliest to recognize that human identity is not just heterosexual. Ancient texts refer to a third gender, different from the traditional male or female. Gender diversity is seen as part of the natural diversity of humanity, inherited at birth. Explorations in Caribbean literature and art, e.g. Earl Lovelace and Leroy Clarke, invite to identify the divine in our everyday, bodily experience as Caribbean people.

Many of the problems which we face with human sexuality are due both to the nature of sexuality which we are only now beginning to see fully and the dominant ethos which has for the most part been rooted in fear, negativity and, more recently, rebellion. The attempts to fashion a liberated ethos in the latter decades of the 20th century have failed. HIV/AIDS seemed for a moment to be driving us back into the closet and a more conservative ethos. That too is receding. The political freedoms of the 20th century cannot be put back into the bottle. How we come to authentic sexual being and freedom remains to be lived and determined. Sexual virtue as a habitus to be cultivated and lived is yet to be good news that we are able to pass on across the generations.

Living in truth is not only a general fundamental moral principle. It must be lived in the fullness of our human sexuality as well.

I believe that the Caribbean has gifts to offer to the universal Church if we would only throw off the bridle of colonial dependency which afflicts us in an imperial church structure. So too in the area of sexuality, we can affirm some Caribbean commitments which can help us develop an ethos in which we live our sexual virtue. These are:

LIFE: although we have imported abortion as a major issue, we are still basically a people who treasure life under all circumstances.

OPENNESS: our warmer climate enables us to live with a natural openness which we are in danger of losing in a world of airconditioning and burglar-proofing.

RHYTHM: - equilibrium – not as a method or technique, but as a way of encounter.

Local paintings e.g. by Holder and Hinkson, all display that rhythm even in the stillness of the canvass. That is we in everything, including our sexuality.

FAITHFULNESS - to self, the other, the community.