
The most attractive and beautiful description of marriage and conjugal love that the Catholic Church has ever articulated is found in Vatican II: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The same Council gave us the person and his/her acts as the norm to be used in judging the very controversial problem of contraception, and by extension, the whole area of sexuality.

In the intervening years the growing number of broken marriages among Catholics, broken homes, single-parent families, sexually active adolescents, unwed mothers, etc., all indicate that something is seriously wrong. Sexuality seems to be spinning out of control with the profit-hungry mass media exploiting it, bombarding young and old with seductive sexual images, 'round the clock and 'round the world. In our consumer-oriented society sex is used to sell cars, tobacco, alcohol, travel tours ('sex packages'), clothing, and of course, to provide entertainment for our bored, satiated, affluent society that seems to have lost its ethical moorings.

In this wasteland where true love and intimacy and the dignity of the human person are almost ignored, the authors, a loving, balanced Catholic husband and wife team, give us a rich, insightful account of sexuality. She, a developmental psychologist, he a pastoral theologian and religious historian, speak from the inner world of their own marriage.

Sexuality is seen as a gift of God to all of us, a source of pleasure and joy, enriching, deepening, but demanding and challenging. The positive is stressed showing the rewards that lie in wait for those who learn to master this awesome power. All are encouraged to integrate their sexuality with their whole person, to be at ease with it, to respect it in themselves and in all with whom they come in contact.

When the authors come to grips with the pressing sexual problems of our age, they open up the understanding of the person as the norm, spelling out sexuality in terms of the development of the person as relational and social. For them, sex is good but not the absolute good.

Treating of adolescent masturbation, the authors present as balanced a position as the young can hope to find, with compassion and understanding: ". . . it is not your finest hour. But know that it is not terrible; it does not remove you from God's loving presence" (pp. 128-29). At the same time they warn against the danger of the adolescent delaying at this stage of self-centered pleasure-seeking wherein one might go so far as to live in a fantasy world "as self-abusive as that of the alcoholic. The pleasure is private but the damage is social . . . missed expectations, false demands, and
failed commitments: these become the bitter fruit of a behavior that had seemed private and insignificant” (p. 138).

Counsellors and teachers will profit much from pondering the many insights given by the Whiteheads. Biases of the average reader will be exposed and challenged. Most will feel much better about their sexuality after reading this book. The struggle to control and integrate one’s sexuality will be seen to be worth the effort, enriching one’s personality and capacity for true love.

Not all will agree with the authors’ solution to the problem of homosexuality but this is not surprising considering the controversy that surrounds the issue. Many will also part company with them when they suggest that “bothered wives” may profit from a temporary, loving, caring lesbian relationship to heal the wounds of their violent heterosexual relationship. Such a solution ignores completely the experience of many such victim wives who have been renewed and healed in the spiritually enriching atmosphere of a religious women’s center without resorting to what could be a most disturbing experiment in homosexuality. The authors seem to have lapsed into situational ethics and to have subordinated the spiritual to the sexual.

This lapse of the authors exemplifies the danger of using personal fulfillment as a moral norm in our contemporary world. To be reliable, a moral norm must show respect not only for the knowledge available in the natural and social sciences but also in all of Christian tradition and the contemporary experience of the faithful, together with the insight that comes only through prayer and the anguished searching of a restless heart. These are the components and safeguards of a genuine process of ethical discernment concerning true personal fulfillment.

With these few but important reservations the book can be recommended for study groups. The reflective exercises at the end of each chapter and the detailed index will facilitate such use.

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