

INTRODUCTION:

It used to be said the Church has too much to say about sexual morality. Well, at a time when public concern over child abuse and domestic violence has been high; when criminal lawyers and perpetrators of violent crimes are both acknowledging the adverse influence of pornography; and when “sex” is marketed by a multi-dollar porn industry, it would be strange if the Church had little to say! And at a time when the Church itself has much to answer for, people have a right to hear from it.

If we really believe that sexuality is a wonderful gift, and that when such a gift is turned against people, leading them to where they will be less free, isn't that reason enough for all of us to speak up? And if chastity is about growing in personal freedom and wholesome relationships, why should we keep quiet about that? It is the *meaning of sexuality* that needs to be accepted, because ultimately the trivialisation, commercialisation and exploitation of sex are just sex removed from its meaning.

Perhaps today it is those who propose alternatives to the Church's teaching who seem to have the most to say. Certainly, there have been errors and inadequacies in the presentation of Church teaching. But there is also some pretty awful ignorance in some criticisms of it. In both cases, the underlying need is for a better way of expressing whatever it is that needs to be said.

In 2014, the International Theological Commission acknowledged the need for further reflection on teachings that meet resistance by the faithful, “in order to communicate more effectively the essential message”. In some cases, resistance “may indicate insufficient consultation of the faithful by the magisterium.” That is also the message of Pope Francis' letter on Promoting Theology. He emphasises the need for widespread consultation and interaction with the sciences, and with people of other traditions and other faiths and no faith. He wants theology to be “seriously challenged by reality.” Above all, he wants it to be at the service of the Church's mission.

So, is there a way of presenting Church teachings that is faithful and honest, but also more aware of people's experience and the sciences, more understanding of differences, and less hurtful? That is the question I want to explore in this article. I want to look beyond the usual language, which can be easily misunderstood, and superficial ways of thinking, to the deep-down aspirations of hearts that can be in the right place even when the thinking and the language are not.

PART I: DISTRACTIONS ALONG THE WAY

The need to explore other ways of expressing the Church's teaching was highlighted for me by an article, recently published, which I would have recognised as 1960's stuff even without the author's own acknowledgement that it was. She seems to base her own understanding of the Church's teaching largely on stupidities regarding modesty that were taught to her as a child, and “sex-hostile, misogynistic canon laws.”

The original authors of UN declarations regarding the right of nations to self-determination would be surprised to find that this has led to everyone's “right to self-determined sexuality.” St Augustine would certainly have been surprised to learn that his famous “love, and do what you will” implies that it “doesn't matter whether a partner is of the same or a different sex.” Her article is a helpful illustration of how agenda-driven ideologies can dispense with scholarship so as to arrive at pre-determined conclusions.

More recent efforts to liberate sexual morality from previous restraints are not original. During the 1960's through 1990's some activists described themselves as 'victims' of harsh laws aimed at preventing "man-boy love"; and children as 'victims' because harsh parents did not want their children to have that kind of loving care!! "Inter-generational sex" and "man-boy love" were euphemisms intended to make acceptable what society calls pederasty. Even though by the 1990's those movements had mostly lost their credibility, the underlying ideologies have a way of re-surfacing.

Shallow thinking leads to believing that truth is whatever the individual thinks it is, and morally right is whatever the individual freely chooses. But, objective truth matters because respect for reality matters. Scientists work hard to establish facts. Much can depend on it; e.g. safe travel into space. Solving crimes, the judicial system, and research in every field are all based on the premise that truth matters, even when it is hard to establish, and our understanding incomplete. Studies and exams are based on the premise that true and false are not the same.

Of course, the relativisation of truth is more likely to be attempted when the issues are complex and involve people, especially people we love. In an article published adjacent to the one already cited, a mother struggles to explain how her love encompasses her married daughters and a daughter who has a female partner. She comes to the conclusion that "perhaps love is all that really matters". Her instincts are entirely right: she knows her love for her children needs to be inclusive and therefore unconditional.

LOVING UNCONDITIONALLY

But the struggle she experiences also has meaning: questions of right and wrong don't just go away. Our secular culture puts her at a disadvantage by assuming that we are not accepting other people unless we also accept what they are doing. That culture misses the point: unconditional love is not based on what other persons are like, or what they do or have done. It is based simply on the fact that they are persons – unconditionally and immeasurably loved by God. We are called to the same kind of loving. We don't have to like what they are doing. We can even bless people without intending to bless what they are doing.

Whatever differences there might be between identifying as homosexual (L,G) and identifying as transgender (B,T,Q etc), they all have a right to our sincere acceptance of them as persons. It does not follow that we have to accept their ideologies. Nor have they a right to demand that of us. This can be difficult for some to understand: "how can you accept me as the person I am if you do not accept what I do?" The question underestimates what it means to be a person with the right to be loved *unconditionally*. Each person's identity, dignity and equality are securely based on that premise - not on what they believe or what they do.

It does not follow that we are entitled to do whatever we like, precisely because knowing how greatly we are loved – unconditionally – should deepen our love for God and desire to live as God wants.

"JUDGING"

Pope Francis' saying: "who am I to judge?" is now famous. But it is not original. The New Testament letter of James says "who are you to judge your neighbour?" This refers to judging others' state of conscience - they may be fully blameworthy, or less so, or not to blame at all; that judgement is for themselves and God. But the letter of James goes on to say it is not for us to "judge the law... There

is one Lawgiver and Judge..." In other words, where the difference between right and wrong has been determined by God, it is not ourselves who decide the difference.

Based on that, we do make judgements - regarding whether one's actions are right or wrong. How can we say that "rape is wrong," "fraud is wrong", etc if we cannot judge human behaviour? And if 'love' and 'consent' really are all that are needed for an honest relationship, on what basis would we say that incest, paedophilia and adultery are wrong if they are consented to? Failure to distinguish between "judging others" and "judging others' actions" is simplistic, and needs to be challenged.

So, too, it is appropriate to judge which sexual relationships constitute marriage and which do not. This has become slightly more complicated because of how the sciences and technology have affected the way we think: a heightened awareness of what we *can* do, based on modern know-how, tends to eclipse questions about what we *may* do, based on purposes built into nature. We need to ask *both* questions. For example, we *can* run industry on fossil fuels; does that mean we *may*?

The need for both questions was highlighted in a recent TV news item: a young woman explained that she intended to donate her eggs to help other women experience the joy of parenting, including unmarried women. Her love, compassion and generosity were beyond question. But if the question was asked whether one "may" do this, it didn't rate a mention. In our modern way of thinking, we tend to assume that if we can, we may - as with fossil fuels.

All this brings us back to the question about what other ways there might be to express the Church's teaching on sexual morality. It is not enough to say something is wrong; we need language that helps people see for themselves why something is wrong. Secular culture's way of substituting the word "inappropriate" for "wrong" is, to say the least, anaemic.

The language of authenticity needs to be part of this discussion. Some behaviours are true to human nature – authentic - and some are not; some are consistent with human dignity, and some not. The Church takes seriously all that goes to make up human nature: "May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness; may God preserve you whole and entire, spirit, soul and body..." (St Paul to the Thessalonians, 5:23).

DENYING REALITY

An ancient heresy held the human body, and material reality generally, in suspicion of being in some way bad, and consequently 'holiness' as being purely 'spiritual'. A modern variation of this imagines the person as purely interior, and entitled to be unrestrained by any form of material reality, including the human body. But ultimately, that is a denial of reality:

Human beings are not free-floating agents capable of re-shaping themselves in any way they choose; this happens only in on-line virtual worlds... Our experience of the world is increasingly mediated by screens that allow us to easily imagine ourselves in alternative realities or as alternative beings.... The real world, however, continues to be different: wills are embodied in physical bodies that structure and also limit the extent of individual agency." (Prof. Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and its Discontents*, 2022.)

Denials of reality are echoed in ideologies which try to sideline the body in order to affirm multi-variations of gender and sexual identity. Of course, the physiology of sexuality, and of male and female differences, is not the only lens through which to understand 'human nature.' But to treat that physiology as irrelevant is an insult to common sense. The purpose of sexual differentiation is just so obvious. This is what lies behind the Church's teaching that "homosexual acts are intrinsically

disordered" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n 2357). (It does not say homosexual persons are disordered. In the next paragraph it says homosexual persons "are to be accepted with respect...").

The sciences take bodily reality seriously:

"Human bodies are teleologically organised according to our distinct role in reproducing the species. The structure of our bodies is arranged to produce either large sex cells or small sex cells. These sex cells are called gametes. Large gametes are ova, and small gametes are sperm. A physiology arranged to produce ova is female, and a physiology arranged to produce sperm is male. This twofold distinction between large and small gametes is stable and universal, not only throughout the human species, but also among all plant and animal species that reproduce sexually.

There is no such thing as a third gamete or a spectrum of possible gametes. This invariable feature of our humanity ties us intimately to the rest of creation. When the gametes combine, they can create a new member of the species. The sex binary, then, is the necessary foundation for the continued transmission of human existence." (Abigail Favale, Ph.D., *The Genesis of Gender*, pp 123-4).

PART II WITNESSING TO AUTHENTICITY

I am suggesting that *witnessing* needs to be given a bigger role in the way we express the Church's moral teaching, including its teaching on sexual morality. I see this not as a substitute for "right" and "wrong," but as a way of clarifying the meaning of these, and making better allowance for nuance.

The journey towards living more authentically is our human calling. Becoming what God intended in creating human life is the way we honour our Creator. For each and all of us it is a work in progress. Because we are essentially relational, we become our true selves through our belonging with and for one another. Through the give and take of relating, we can build each other up.

It is the mission of all the baptised to promote, guide and support that journey. "Man [i.e. what it means to live authentically human lives] is the route the Church must take." (Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, n 53-55,).

The Church carries out that mission primarily by lives that witness to human authenticity:

It is often said that the present century thirsts for authenticity. Especially in regard to young people it is said that they have a horror of the artificial or false and that they are searching above all for truth and honesty... The witness of life has become more than ever an essential condition for real effectiveness... for the progress of the Gospel we proclaim." (Pope Paul VI, 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n 76).

Pope Francis is saying the same when he says evangelising is by means of "attraction." The effectiveness of attraction and of witness depends on the authenticity of lives. Different degrees of authenticity result in different degrees of attraction. Some sexual relationships witness to sexuality's meaning more clearly than others.

ACCEPTING REALITY

Authenticity has everything to do with accepting reality, and accepting reality includes accepting our incompleteness. There are forms of incompleteness that come to us before we are born or after,

including heart defects, spina bifida, Down syndrome, brain damage, dyslexia, autism, allergies, etc. It is a blessing that medical science is able to correct some of these, sometimes even while the child is still in the womb.

There are also conditions that are temporary, and call for careful discernment; it is one thing to affirm young people by assuring them that their struggles are normal; it is something else to 'normalise' something that is out of alignment with its fundamental purposes. Same-sex attraction can be a transitory experience before the young person has had much socialising experience. Similarly, dysphoria can also be a transitory experience. It is not surprising that some countries have declared unsafe transgender clinics that were prematurely assisting children to transition, resulting in irreversible damage and life-long regret.

But there are also disabilities and limitations that accompany us throughout our lives. We cannot expect to be complete in this incomplete form of existence. In this sense, it is normal to experience our incompleteness! The whole of creation, which we are part of, is a work in progress. Its perfection, and our completion, lie in a future beyond life's present form.

Degrees of completeness are reflected in how well our faculties and activities align with their fundamental purposes and meaning; e.g. what arms and legs are for. Sexuality's meaning is based on two purposes that are entwined and come together uniquely in marriage: they are sexuality's potential for deeply nurturing the love of two people – equal in dignity as persons - in a way that is also designed to generate new life as the fruit of their love. This new life then finds its nurture and security in the stable, committed and faithful love of those parents. Psychologists also speak of children's need to experience both maternal and paternal love.

If that is where sexuality fully finds its meaning, other kinds of relationship which lack one or more of the characteristics of marriage (e.g. partnerships that lack life-long commitment, homosexual relationships, etc) witness less to sexuality's meaning.

There are partnerships that are loving, faithful and enduring even though they lack other characteristics of marriage. There can be various reasons for not being able to enter the kind of relationship that constitutes marriage, and these reasons do not necessarily involve blame or moral fault. People in such relationships are owed the same respect that is due to every human being. At the same time, liaisons which do not align with the underlying purposes of biological sex cannot be put on a par with those that do. And so, their witness to sexuality's meaning is less.

The physiological dimensions of sexuality are key to the meaning of sexuality. They have their own way of expressing purpose and speaking meaning. But they do not tell the whole story. How we relate to one another also speaks. Being made in the image of God, we are made for communion, i.e. for the kind of self-giving and receiving of one another that is life-giving in a fuller sense. Even being in love is like coming alive. To be intimately known by someone and still "believed in" no matter how well we are known, is to experience the unexpected; it contains surprise; it shows that love is a gift. This experience enables us to accept ourselves despite things we don't like in ourselves. We are better able to face such things when we find ourselves loved despite them.

The special vocation of marriage enables couples to glimpse in a special way the wonder and beauty of love, and its relationship to the miracle of new life – not overlooking the sacrifices they make and the crosses they carry. They already know that because life and love are gifts, we cannot demand them, or totally possess them; we can only receive them, carry them to each other, and be caught up in something greater than ourselves. The Church's teaching on human sexuality only puts into words what deep down they already know.

CONCLUSION:

What does all this mean for how we talk about sexual morality? In summary:

- 1) Observation and the sciences tell us about the givens of human nature – the purposes built into it. All the givens of human nature are to be taken seriously. The letter of James, quoted above, prays that we will be “perfect in holiness,” “whole and entire, spirit, soul and body,” and “irreproachable” - “at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”.
- 2) Our faith assures us that we are on an unfinished journey, that our calling is to a completion beyond the limits of life in its present form. In the meantime, human nature does not reach that degree of completion in any of us.
- 3) Because different degrees of completeness and incompleteness are part of human life, our natural inclinations do not always align fully with the underlying purposes of our physiology. But deep-down aspirations witness to our calling to become ever more fully human and alive.
- 4) In our present state of incompleteness, there is no need to try to claim equality between those human behaviours that are consistent with the underlying purposes of human physiology and those that are not, (e.g. heterosexual activity and homosexual activity), because the equality of everyone is based on their God-given dignity as persons, not on equality between different characteristics, beliefs or behaviours. (A felt need to claim equality between these different activities is more likely in a society that has become used to putting other considerations above the dignity of personhood.).
- 5) Given every person’s right and duty to be faithful to their conscience, we need to accept that individuals can be acting in good faith, even when a relationship they have entered into corresponds less to the underlying meaning of sexuality. For this reason, it will be difficult for them to accept others’ judgement that their behaviour is “wrong.” So, unless we are to settle for impasse, we need a language that allows the conversation to continue beyond “I am right and you are wrong;”
- 6) An equivalent way of acknowledging the reality of wrong, and degrees of wrongness, but less ‘hurtful,’ is to say that not all situations correspond to the purposes built into nature to the same degree. To the extent that any shortfall results from free choice, this also means lesser degrees of authenticity, and lesser witnessing to God’s purposes.
- 7) It can be said that conception resulting from donated sperm or eggs from third parties and laboratory processes does not witness to conception being the fruit of a husband’s and wife’s love for each other. In that way it falls short of witnessing to the meaning of marriage and sexuality.
- 8) In a pluralistic society we expect to live with many who do not share our beliefs. In that context, our Christian mission is to witness as fully as possible to God’s purposes, including the meaning of human sexuality, attracting others to their fundamental calling.
- 9) The Church’s beliefs are not told only in statements. They are embodied in a culture that is formed by the combined experience of the Church’s scriptures, liturgies, devotions, hymns, literature, art, work for justice and peace, contribution to health care and to education,

personal sacrifices, faithful lives... Something within this culture connects with what our hearts most want, above all a reason for hope. It is where the desire to belong is mysteriously stronger than anything that offends. This is where our moral teachings have their home, and can 'speak' more humanly than abstract statements do.