

Constructing a Coherent Christian Sexual Ethic: Toward Discovering the Gift of Homosexuality

John P. Edwards
Theology and Religious Studies

Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
Matthew 9:13

In a sensitive and compassionately articulated essay, J. Giles Milhaven attempts to create a new opening in the Christian dialogue about homosexuality by directly addressing those homosexual persons who are both actively pursuing a homosexual lifestyle and actively committed and faithful to any Christian church that condemns intimate homosexual relationships.¹ In this address, Milhaven asks these individuals to reflect upon and respond to one question: “Why is sex important for you?”² Milhaven’s respect for and interest in gay and lesbian Christians is not due to their loyalty to the Church but rather to their loyalty to their sexuality and their sexual lives. He does not ask, What is it within the Catholic Church (or a Christian church) that you deem so worthwhile that you are willing to bear harsh condemnation in order to pursue it? Instead he asks, What do you see to be of such value in your sexual lives that you are willing to carry on with those lives “in the face of the mortal accusations made against [you] by the Church [you] respect and love”?³ In other words, Milhaven sees within the lives of these practicing and faithful Christians a tremendous value placed on sex and he hopes that these individuals, by articulating the importance of sex for themselves, will help Catholic theologians and the Church to more clearly conceptualize the value of sex in a Christian life. For

¹ J. Giles Milhaven, “How the Church Can Learn from Gay and Lesbian Experience,” found in *The Vatican and Homosexuality* (New York: Crossroads, 1988), ed. by Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey, 216-223.

² Ibid., 217.

³ Ibid., 218.

Milhaven, furthering the present dialogue about the compatibility of homosexuality and Christianity requires a renewed Christian understanding of the purpose, meaning and inherent value of sex.

The question Milhaven poses to gay and lesbian Christians directly addresses the source of the incoherence of the Church's longstanding sexual ethic, that is, on the whole, it has not treated sex as an important and fundamental good within a Christian lifestyle. Instead it has viewed sex as a neutral, and sometimes even unfortunate, necessity which must be tolerated and placed within the best possible contexts in order to be able to contribute something positive to persons' genuine Christian striving. In recent decades, many theologians and members of the Church's hierarchy have recognized and made a concerted effort to overcome the Church's historically negative view of sex by more fully integrating human sexuality into a holistic understanding of the person.⁴ However, as the beginning of this study will attempt to demonstrate below, the Church's characterization of homosexuality as a regrettable disorder and its pastoral advice to homosexual persons reveal that a basic incoherence persists within the Church's sexual ethic in spite of these recent efforts to understand human sexuality and sexual relationships in a more positive light. The Church therefore is still in need of a healthy, positive, and coherent understanding of how sex and sexuality, as an integral component of human personhood even in its less than selfless expressions, can enable persons to lead more loving and sacrificial Christian lives. The development of such an understanding requires further reflection upon the intimate relationship between sexuality and human flourishing. Such reflection is needed independent of a discussion about homosexuality; however, it is also necessary before any truly loving discussion about homosexuality can take place within the Church.

In recognizing this need, the present study seeks to articulate the basic value of sex in terms of its capacity to contribute to human flourishing. A clearer conceptualization of the role that sexuality and committed sexual relationships play in furthering or hindering human flourishing will provide the foundation for constructing the basic guiding principles of a coherent Christian sexual ethic. My method in developing this sexual ethic will proceed in four steps. First, I briefly examine the magisterium's teaching on homosexuality and homosexual activity in

⁴ In particular see John Paul II's *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), and *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), which integrate sexuality and sexual relationships into a holistic understanding of the human person and which develop an essentially positive role for sexuality within a Christian life.

order to clearly state the basic incoherence of the Church's sexual ethic. This examination will reveal the faulty understanding of human flourishing that this sexual ethic assumes. William McDonough's⁵ and Jean Porter's⁶ treatments of the influence of Stoic philosophy on the Church's understanding of sex will be helpful in clarifying the source of this limited understanding of human flourishing within the Church. Such a clarification will serve as preparation for the second step in my analysis which will attempt to construct a more sound understanding of human flourishing and the values necessary to promote and sustain it.⁷ Thirdly, this study will suggest the value that sex and sexual relationships have within this more fully developed understanding of human flourishing as well as the kind of sexual ethic that should follow from it. Finally, I will conclude by offering a basic criterion for evaluating the adequacy or truthfulness of any sexual ethic. The sexual ethic constructed through this process will ultimately claim that the primary purpose of sex and, therefore, of committed sexual relationships, is to enable individuals to more honestly and explicitly articulate the nature and the depth of their need and desire to be loved. In so far as sex and sexual relationships enable individuals to do this, they should be seen as promoting human flourishing and, therefore, as contributing toward a more loving Christian lifestyle. Within this sexual ethic, homosexual and heterosexual relationships have the same potential for playing a positive role in Christian living.

In opening his essay, Milhaven states, "The Church has at present no sexual ethic."⁸ That is, the Church has at present no coherent sexual ethic, lacking internal contradictions. The Church's teaching on homosexuality makes this basic contradiction more clearly visible. Homosexual persons, by seeking to be true to their own desire for love and intimacy, point to the edges of the Church's sexual ethic and urge the Church to look farther – beyond what it has deemed to be the limits of God's loving self-communication expressed within committed sexual relationships.

Andrew Sullivan, in relating his own process of coming to recognize and acknowledge his homosexuality, illustrates how

⁵ William McDonough, "Alasdair MacIntyre as Help for Rethinking Catholic Natural Law Estimates of Same-Sex Life Partnerships," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001), 197-200.

⁶ Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 191, 199.

⁷ This construction of a more sound understanding of human flourishing with rely heavily on Stephen Pope's study, "Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 (1997).

⁸ Milhaven, 216.

homosexual persons' needs for and experiences of intimate relationships expose the Church's sexual ethic as not only incoherent and unsatisfactory, but also as destructive for many.

What finally convinced me of the wrongness of the Church's teachings was not that they were intellectually so confused, but that in the circumstances of my own life – and of the lives I discovered around me – they seemed so destructive of the possibilities of human love and self-realization.⁹

Thus, it was not because the Church's teaching was illogical that Sullivan found it to be incoherent, but because, in his effort to apply that teaching to his own life, he experienced it as an obstacle to love and genuine self-discovery. Sullivan came to the unavoidable conclusion that the Gospels and the Jesus of love that they portray could not honestly be the source of the incapacitating and destructive anxiety, bitterness, and frustration that were so prevalent in his own life and the lives of persons around him as a result of their persistent efforts to take seriously and live faithfully the Church's recommendation to homosexual persons.¹⁰

Sullivan's recognition of the wrongness of Church teaching based on his personal grappling with it eventually led him to conceptualize intellectually the nature of the contradiction in the Church's understanding of homosexual persons and homosexual activity. The contradiction as Sullivan rightly describes it is essentially this: the Church's position upholds simultaneously "the blamelessness of homosexuality and the grave moral depravity of homosexual acts."¹¹ Here Sullivan is referring to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1986 pastoral letter on the care of homosexual persons (HP) which states that "Although the particular inclination of the homosexual person is not a sin, it is a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil."¹² Throughout the letter, the Congregation asserts the basic and undeniable human dignity of homosexual persons as persons while at the same time claiming that the homosexual's desires for intimacy are fundamentally disordered and directed toward an intrinsic moral evil, and as such, are incapable of producing love. In practice,

⁹ Andrew Sullivan, "Virtually Normal" found in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), ed. by Thomas J. Ferraro, 185.

¹⁰ Sullivan, 176, 185.

¹¹ Sullivan, 181.

¹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," (1986), 3. This document will be referred to as "HP". This 1986 letter reflects the present teaching of the Church on homosexuality.

however, this dual assertion became for Sullivan a “command to love oneself as a person of human dignity [and] yet hate the core longings that could make one emotionally whole[.]”¹³ Living out this command “demanded a sense of detachment or a sense of cynicism that seemed inimical to the Christian life.”¹⁴ It became apparent to Sullivan that in his own life it was not his homosexuality and his homosexual desire for intimacy that created a barrier to love, but rather his persistent effort to follow the Church’s teaching which led him to consistently deny “the core longings that could make [him] whole.” In other words, Sullivan found the Church’s pastoral advice for homosexual persons to be an impediment to love and a stumbling block rather than a support to gay Catholics. It should be noted here that the 1986 CDF letter on the care of homosexual persons, to which Sullivan refers, still represents the Church’s present understanding of and teaching on homosexuality despite the Church’s recent movement toward a more positive articulation of the role of sexuality and sexual relationships in human flourishing and Christian living. Thus, the advice that the Church offers to gays and lesbians, while recognizing them as persons, remains the same at present as expressed in this document.¹⁵

Taking a closer look at the Church’s recommendation to homosexuals pursuing a Christian lifestyle, we will discover the nature of Church’s misunderstanding of human flourishing that results in the incoherence of its sexual ethic experienced by Sullivan and other gay Christians. The Church advises gay Christians “to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross” because “[t]hat Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption.”¹⁶ Certainly the Church acts lovingly and responsibly in teaching that Christ’s life, death, and resurrection demonstrate for Christians that sacrificial self-giving is the path to fullness of life and redemption. But one might ask whether all sacrifices are “fruitful”, loving, and life-giving as Christ’s clearly was. Sullivan’s experience of incapacitating anxiety, frustration, and bitterness resulting from his effort to sacrifice his desires for love and intimacy (as

¹³ Sullivan, 181.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For a detailed summary of all the major statements on homosexuality since 1986 from the Vatican and from national bishops’ conferences see Stephen Pope’s article, “The magisterium’s arguments against ‘Same-sex Marriage’: an ethical analysis and critique,” in *Theological Studies* 65, 3 (Sept 2004), 534-9.

¹⁶ HP, 12.

well as the similar experiences of many gay Christians like him) suggest that not all sacrifices enable greater self-giving in persons. The experience of these gay Christians seem to suggest that true self-sacrifice, which imitates Christ and enables greater self-giving in oneself and others, is only possible after one has come to understand and freely accept the gift of self that one has been given. Persons cannot lovingly sacrifice that which they have not genuinely and graciously received and this reception first requires personal acknowledgement and acceptance. Before this acceptance is possible, persons must be enabled to freely and honestly explore themselves. In my view, this is a large part of what it means to be Christian – to pursue the questions at the core of your being honestly, faithfully, courageously and lovingly, all the while trusting that Christ is walking with you and that you are discovering Him in the process. Maybe one won't find definitive answers to every part of oneself in this life; perhaps in some ways one will never have much more than guiding questions, but being Christian happens in the pursuing. To deny the questions or to accept someone else's answers (even if that someone be the Church) prevents one from this pursuing and denies oneself the possibility of a truly Christian lifestyle. The Church's recommendation to gays and lesbians to sacrifice their basic needs for love and relationship by joining them to Christ's Cross requires a forced and unchosen sacrifice while at the same time prohibiting any engagement in the personal pursuit and exploration that is necessary for self-acceptance. In articulating this position, the Church reveals its fundamentally flawed understanding of human flourishing, which does not recognize that self-sacrifice can only contribute to human flourishing if it is a genuine and loving choice coming after self-acceptance. Self-acceptance and self-love are necessary before self-sacrifice can be a free and loving setting aside of oneself for another. If self-sacrifice is not linked to self-acceptance and self-love, it will amount to a rejection of self that is self-destructive as well as hurtful to those with whom one is inextricably enmeshed. An adequate account of human flourishing and Christian living must begin by enabling a discovery of the gift of self as well as a response of gratitude to that gift.

William McDonough and Jean Porter's descriptions of the influence of Stoicism on the scholastic view of human sexuality and emotionality as essentially objects of scorn and detachment provide a crucial insight into recognizing the source of the Church's flawed understanding of human flourishing. Porter points out the scholastic view of sex influenced by Stoicism saying,

[Scholastic] attitudes reflected a deep antipathy toward sexual pleasure, together with a sense that sexual activity is fundamentally incompatible with spirituality...This negative view of sex is pre-Christian in origin, and appears to be rooted in a Stoic view that the wise person will engage in sexual acts only for the sake of procreation.¹⁷

McDonough claims that the Church *Catechism*'s offer of 'disinterested friendship' to homosexual persons is really synonymous with the nature of Stoic friendship, which is "disembodied and lacking in affective content."¹⁸ In McDonough's treatment of Plutarch, one can see that the Stoics attempted to create a dichotomy between the intellectually or rationally 'natural' side of persons and the basic good of persons within their common experiences of daily living: "[The Stoics] have obfuscated and undermined any connection between the philosophically 'natural' and the good of persons in the real world."¹⁹ In practice, this Stoic conception of human nature treated the philosophically 'natural' side of persons, i.e., their intellectual pursuits for wisdom, as the superior and highest good, and treated the good of persons in the real world as irrelevant to and insignificant for human happiness.²⁰ Thus, human flourishing in this Stoic view would consist of spending the majority of one's energy in the intellectual pursuit of wisdom while detaching oneself as much as possible from all affective content of the common experiences of one's daily life. This lifestyle sounds very similar to the experience that Sullivan describes as he attempted to live out the sexual ethic implicit in the Catholic culture surrounding him and made explicit in HP.²¹

The Church's sexual ethic seems to have largely assumed this Stoic conception of human nature and human flourishing. This is evident not only in the Catholic culture's attitude toward homosexuality which treats this orientation as a regrettable and almost unspeakable condition, but also in the Church's teaching on the two ends of sex: procreation (life) and unification (love). In theory, these two ends are equal goods of sex and marriage, but in the Church's positions on birth control and

¹⁷ Porter, 191.

¹⁸ McDonough, 197.

¹⁹ Ibid., 199.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sullivan, 175.

homosexuality, it becomes clear that when the Church applies its teaching to specific issues, procreation is the superior good, so much so that in some cases if the procreative end is not present, no amount of unification and love can give even minimal value to sex.²² This emphasis on procreation as the primary end of sex reflects the extent of Stoic influence on Christian sexual ethics. An understanding of human flourishing that considers sex and sexuality to be primarily a means for procreation and that often treats sexual pleasure with suspicion attempts to maintain the false Stoic dichotomy between the intellectual and affective sides of the person. By artificially cutting persons in half and declaring some human needs and inclinations to be good and worthy of pursuit, while seeing others as necessary but highly suspicious and potentially destructive, this conception of human flourishing prevents genuine personal and moral development and undermines itself. Thus, constructing a coherent sexual ethic requires a new articulation of human flourishing that promotes the growth of persons by integrating and balancing all human needs and inclinations rather than dividing them and opposing them to one another.

In moving forward to develop a more adequate, substantive, and comprehensive account of human flourishing, we take with us two basic insights from our examination of the incoherence of the Church's sexual ethic: (1) discovering the gift of self and responding in gratitude with self-acceptance and self-love is the foundation for self-giving and loving self-sacrifice, (2) self-acceptance and self-love arise out of an honest and relatively integrated recognition of the whole person in all of one's intertwined and inseparable needs and desires, i.e., intellectual, spiritual, physical, emotional, and sexual. I say "relatively" here because integration is something that persons are always striving to attain more completely. However, a basic acceptance and love of oneself cannot deny or suppress any of these inherently overlapping areas of personal need and desire.

These insights together provide a starting point for clarifying what constitutes or contributes toward human flourishing in specific contexts of interpersonal relationships. To the extent that a particular relationship or action brings about a greater degree of integrated self-love within a

²² Vatican II showed signs of moving beyond this emphasis on procreation over unification in its upholding of the value of marriages between couples who are unable to have children. McDonough, 202, quoting from *Gaudium et spes*, 50. However, the Church's 2003 statement concerning unions between homosexual persons which cites the impossibility of procreation as the first biological/anthropological reason against same-sex unions suggests that this priority of procreation over love as the primary end of sex still persists in the Church's sexual ethic.

person it contributes toward that individual's flourishing. To the extent that a particular relationship or action is grounded in and arises out of an individual's integrated self-love it has the potential to promote the flourishing of others. Yet there is not a complete division between the promotion of one's own flourishing and the promotion of others' flourishing because individuals do not move toward an integrated self-love in isolation but rather through the generous and sacrificial love of others graciously acknowledged and received by the individual. An individual's reception of the love of the other promotes greater love of self which immediately enables greater love for the other and promotes the other's continued movement toward an integrated self-love. Thus, an integrated self-love is neither separate from love for the other, nor from the other's self-love. Instead, they are all expressions of the same love, which is one, but which grows by spreading through interpersonal relationships.

Stephen Pope articulates the revisionist natural law understanding of human flourishing as "interpersonal love and the virtues by which it is promoted and sustained."²³ McDonough's presentation of Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of human flourishing notes two similar dimensions, "an account of goodness and the virtues that support that goodness."²⁴ For MacIntyre, a human being flourishes when one becomes good, that is, when one has "learned to act without thought of any justification beyond the need of those given into [one's] care."²⁵ McDonough recognizes that this understanding of goodness can be expressed in terms of interpersonal love when he summarizes MacIntyre's "natural law ethic of care" by saying, "a good human being is one who has learned to give and receive a love that is disinterested in the sense of unconditional."²⁶ The integrated self-love made possible by the generous and sacrificial love of others and enabling generous and sacrificial love for others which I described above appears to be right on target with Pope's, MacIntyre's and McDonough's revisionist natural law articulations of human flourishing. Thus, integrated self-love and interpersonal love are the two interdependent and inseparable parts of the whole that constitutes human flourishing.

²³ Pope, 111.

²⁴ McDonough, 196.

²⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1999), 159.

²⁶ McDonough, 197. By defining 'disinterested' as 'unconditional', McDonough distinguishes his understanding of this term from the Stoic conception of 'disinterested' referred to above, which implies detachment and lack of affective content.

To give this understanding greater detail and to supply principles for applying this understanding within specific contexts, it will be helpful to describe some of the basic human virtues that promote and sustain both integrated self-love and interpersonal love. MacIntyre's description of these virtues is quite accurate and useful because his assessment is grounded in two sets of facts which are of "singular importance" to any credible understanding of the human condition.²⁷ They are "those [facts] concerning our vulnerabilities and afflictions and those concerning the extent of our dependence on particular others."²⁸ These facts constitute the most basic truth of our lives. At the core, all persons are vulnerable and dependent on others. Therefore, in order to flourish, we must acknowledge our vulnerabilities and recognize the needs that we cannot meet ourselves. Virtues that lead us toward this acknowledgement promote human flourishing. MacIntyre appropriately calls these "the virtues of acknowledged dependence" of which he emphasizes two in particular which he labels "elementary truthfulness" and "just generosity."²⁹

Elementary truthfulness involves a commitment to the process of learning which allows others to discover and express their needs and requires that one reveal his or her own needs.³⁰ This continuous revealing of one another's particular needs allows individuals to be continually aware of their own basic vulnerability and dependence as well as the basic dependence of others. Just generosity is a spirit of openness and willingness to respond to the demand that the needs of others place on one's ability to meet those needs.³¹ This practice of generosity is significantly dependent on the practice of truthfulness, since individuals can only adequately respond to needs which have been truthfully revealed. Just generosity can largely be understood as the putting into practice of the central Christian value of compassion and loving sacrifice. It fosters greater acknowledgement of dependence by making possible a response of gratitude and encouraging continued and deeper truthfulness in the other. To the extent that individuals practice these virtues of truthfulness and generosity within relationships, they will grow in interpersonal love and integrated self-love and thus move toward greater flourishing.

²⁷ MacIntyre, 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ MacIntyre, 119, 126-129, 150-152.

³⁰ Ibid., 150-152.

³¹ Ibid., 126-129.

Yet, although these virtues exercised within interpersonal relationships are basic and necessary for the promotion of human flourishing, nevertheless they must not be viewed as prerequisites for engaging in relationships. Rather, these virtues are learned and cultivated *within* relationships. As MacIntyre says, “Having been cared for, [we learn to] care for others.”³² Pope’s observation regarding the continuity of the spiritual development of persons even in spite of sin is helpful here. He asserts, “Human beings as they ought to be are not utterly discontinuous with human beings as they are created, even if this creation is corrupted by Original Sin.”³³ In other words, persons who are not basically truthful, generous and loving, even if they are hindering their own flourishing and the flourishing of people around them, are not separate from or opposed to the self-loving and other-loving persons that they ought to, and are striving to, become. Corruption and perfection are not two inherently opposed realities, but rather they characterize varying degrees of human flourishing and integrated self-love along the same continuum. Persons as they are and persons as they ought to be are continuous with one another because they are characterized by the same basic truth: they are vulnerable and dependent on others. The difference or distance between persons as they are and persons as the ought to be lies only in the depth of the individual’s awareness and acknowledgement of one’s vulnerabilities and dependence. In relationships, individuals reveal their own needs and allow them to be met by others. Thus, it is in relationships with others that individuals learn and cultivate truthfulness and generosity, which then promote their flourishing. Relationships with persons who allow themselves to be cared for and in turn care for others are the necessary context for acquiring the virtues that promote and sustain human flourishing.

Relationships and communities in which individuals’ physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs are acknowledged and shared openly teach and cultivate basic human virtues by enabling individuals to desire and become naturally inclined toward practicing truthfulness and generosity. In these relationships and communities, individuals encounter the genuine needs of others in a place where they are open and expressive of their own needs. Being faced with the needs of others while aware of one’s own vulnerability and dependence motivates or inclines persons to respond to the needs of others that are revealed to

³² Ibid., 72, 82.

³³ Pope, 109.

them. This natural inclination and basic motivation to respond to others' needs becomes a habit which in turn encourages others to acknowledge and express their needs. Thus, human flourishing, i.e., integrated self-love and interpersonal love, and the virtues of truthfulness and generosity which promote and sustain it, when practiced diligently, generate a cycle that is self-promoting and self-sustaining if it is well integrated into a network of individuals practicing the same virtues. Human flourishing is hindered when persons do not have, withdraw themselves from, or are cut off from such a community or network of truthful and generous relationships.

The account of human flourishing constructed here, drawing from an assessment of the contradictions present in the Church's sexual ethic and from the revisionist natural law perspectives of Pope, McDonough and MacIntyre, has essentially three components, which will form the foundation for our construction of a coherent sexual ethic. The first is an understanding of human goodness that has as its goal and fullest realization an integrated self-love that is both grounded in and grounding for unconditional interpersonal love. Secondly, this integrated self-love and interpersonal love grow out of a continually deepening acknowledgement of one's basic human dependence on others and this deepening acknowledgement is promoted and sustained through the cultivation and practice of the basic virtues of truthfulness and generosity. Finally, a basic level of human goodness seen as a potential and desire for integrated self-love and interpersonal love is intrinsically a part of human persons as they are created and thus there is a fundamental continuity between persons as they are at any given time and persons as they would hope to become. The process of growing and striving toward greater goodness and flourishing through the cultivation and practice of truthfulness and generosity is engaged in and fostered within relationships with individuals who have grown in their ability to give and receive love. A coherent sexual ethic must articulate an inherent value and purpose for sex within this more comprehensive and sound understanding of human flourishing. Formulating this articulation will entail transposing the understanding of human goodness and the virtues of truthfulness and generosity described above into the specific context of committed, intimate sexual relationships.

Pope presents the revisionist natural law understanding of sex as consistent with the understanding of human flourishing just articulated saying, "the most important meaning of sex for human beings is found

precisely in its contribution to interpersonal love.”³⁴ As the conception of human goodness and flourishing presented above makes clear, interpersonal love is directly and inseparably connected to integrated self-love. Hence, within the revisionist perspective, the most important meaning, value and purpose of sex can only be accurately understood in terms of its contribution to these two inherently intertwined loves.

Pope goes on to say that the revisionists “recognize procreation as a central good of sex, but also regard love, the unitive purpose, as a more important good.”³⁵ Thus, in this view, procreation, while still clearly an end of sex, is ultimately a secondary end, while the promotion of self-love and interpersonal love is primary. Placing human flourishing, that is, growth in love of self and love of others, ahead of the creation and preservation of physical, earthly life seems consistent with the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus. McDonough points out that even Catholic teaching on marriage in the twentieth century has undergone some shifts which suggest the centrality of the unitive end of sex. He quotes Giuseppe Baldanza saying, “[T]he 1930 encyclical *Casti connubii*...should be read for its definition of marriage as ‘the blending of life as a whole,’ a *totius vitae communio*...which ‘encompasses the affective and sexual life of the spouses.’”³⁶ John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* can also be understood as a significant and, as of yet, not fully appropriated assertion of the primacy of love within marital relationships. This shift in the understanding of marriage is a partial shift toward viewing the promotion of love and human flourishing as the most important good and end of sex.

It seems appropriate to think about this shift as a shift away from the influence of Stoicism and a shift toward a clearer understanding of the relationship between love and earthly life presented in Scripture. Porter’s assessment of the Church’s attitude of suspicion toward sexual pleasure, which is still prevalent in some areas of the Church’s sexual ethic even after the partial shifts of the twentieth century, suggests that this conceptualization is appropriate: “[The Church’s] negative evaluation of sexual desire seems to owe more to the Stoics than to Scripture.”³⁷ As noted above, the discrepancy between the Jesus of the Gospels and the Church’s attitude toward homosexuality was the cause of Andrew Sullivan’s initial recognition of “the wrongness of the Church’s

³⁴ Pope, 115.

³⁵ Ibid., 114.

³⁶ McDonough, 201. McDonough is quoting from Giuseppe Baldanza’s *La grazia del sacramento del matrimonio. Contributo per la riflessione teologica* (Rome, Italy: Centro Liturgico Vincenziano, 1993), 299.

³⁷ Porter, 199.

teachings.”³⁸ Thus, it appears that in an effort to construct a coherent Christian sexual ethic it would be helpful to reflect briefly on the Gospels’ portrayal of the values of love and historical, earthly life. I think it is fairly clear that the revisionists’ sexual ethic is much more consistent with the presentation of love in the Gospels than is the sexual ethic of the Stoics and the portions of the Church’s sexual ethic that are still influenced by it.

In his welcoming of the poor, sinners and other outcasts throughout the Gospels, Jesus clearly showed concern for their physical well being. His teaching of the crowds and his healing of the sick also clearly placed value on individuals’ daily lives. Jesus’ actions in each of these contexts are responses to the urgent needs of others. In these actions, Jesus expressed his compassion through the practice of generosity toward those in need. The Gospels often describe Jesus’ response to the needs of the poor, the crowds, the sick, etc., with the words ‘his heart was moved with pity’ followed by a depiction of Jesus’ actions in meeting the needs at hand.³⁹ The Gospel accounts suggest that Jesus sought to preserve and better persons’ earthly lives as an expression of his compassion for them as persons. Contemporary biblical scholarship widely recognizes that Jesus’ physical healings were often accompanied by a social healing which signified the recipient’s reinclusion into the community that had made him or her an outcast. Thus, one could argue that the primary end of Jesus’ words and deeds was to free persons from the isolation and alienation of being outcast through a loving and generous response to their most fundamental need for companionship and welcoming inclusion into the community. Jesus’ love takes expression in actions which meet the immediate and everyday physical needs of persons. But, these physical actions also meet persons’ more basic need for companionship and inclusion; they serve as the means for Jesus to give embodied expression to his love for others. The Stoic view of the affections and of physical, emotional needs as essentially necessary evils does not fit with the Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus’ love taking expression in physical acts of generosity which meet the everyday physical and emotional needs of persons. Further, the Stoic assertion of procreation as the sole end of sexual activity is not consistent with the Gospel portrayal of Jesus’ employment of physical actions to

³⁸ Sullivan, 185.

³⁹ Two examples out of the many instances of this use of “moved with pity” occur in Mark’s two feeding stories where Jesus once responds by teaching the crowd who “were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mk 6:34) and once feeds the crowds who “have nothing to eat” (Mk 8:1-2).

give embodied expression to his love, which invited persons into relationship with him and the larger community. To the extent that the Church's sexual ethic is still influenced by the Stoic view of persons' physical and emotional needs, and of sexual activity and sexual desire, it has not yet fully appropriated the centrality of love as the primary motivation behind Jesus' actions in the Gospels.

If, based on the revisionists' more holistic understanding of human flourishing and the approach to Gospel values suggested above, we accept the promotion of integrated self-love and interpersonal love as the central and primary good of sex and committed sexual relationships, then articulating the virtues of truthfulness and generosity within this specific context should help us understand the ways in which sex can contribute toward human flourishing. McDonough gives a detailed account of Enda McDonagh's two characteristics of authentic love, 'letting be' and 'enabling to be', because they correlate closely with MacIntyre's descriptions of elementary truthfulness and just generosity while presenting authentic love as the most appropriate framework for discussing sex and sexual relationships.⁴⁰ Both McDonough and McDonagh suggest that these two characteristics of authentic love provide a sounder assessment of the basic good of sex than the Stoic influenced procreative and unitive ends in the Church's ethic because the former are "mutually dependent and mutually enhancing," while the latter represent a "schematized division."⁴¹ Using the procreative and unitive ends as criteria for the appropriateness or good of sex causes difficulties in contexts in which the ends are separated such that one or the other is not present. The two characteristics of authentic love, letting be and enabling to be, allow the good of particular sexual experiences and sexual relationships to be understood in terms of the degree that these characteristics are present between the partners. Thus, sexual relationships can be seen as growing toward more authentic love rather than as simply meeting or failing to meet the requirements necessary for making sex a legitimate good.

When authentic love becomes the framework within which we understand sex and sexual relationships, the virtue of elementary truthfulness can be articulated as 'letting be' and the virtue of just generosity as 'enabling to be'. McDonagh describes these two

⁴⁰ McDonough, 203 quoting from Enda McDonagh's "Love" in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1988), 605, 608.

⁴¹ Ibid.

characteristics together in terms of the interconnectedness of integrated self-love and interpersonal love:

Letting be and enabling to be...require reciprocity for continuance and fulfillment. To continue to give oneself in true regard for the other requires the development of the self also, so that there is more to give. It is part of the rich paradox of divine creation and giving that human beings develop through giving, in the end through unconditional giving.⁴²

Letting be requires that one reveal one's own vulnerabilities and needs for love while allowing the other to do the same. One allows oneself as well as the other to be with their needs, vulnerabilities and desires just as they are. Enabling to be involves striving to respond to one's own needs and the needs of the other as generously as one is able. To the extent that sex and a sexual relationship is or enables an honest revealing of one's need to be loved which is responded to generously and with the same honesty, they promote a more fully integrated self-love and a more generous and unconditional giving to the other in each of the partners.

Sexual relationships must give persons "room to rest long enough in their desire to see what it might mean."⁴³ The ability to rest in one's desire allows for a recognition and exploration of the good present in that desire. In acknowledging a basic good within one's desire and exploring it within the context of a relationship with a committed, generous, and honest other, persons come to a deeper awareness of themselves as vulnerable and dependent. Ultimately, persons are led closer toward the recognition that all their varied needs, intellectual, emotional, sexual, and physical, are integrated into, clarify, and give expression to their one basic need to receive and give love. Thus, sex should bring both individuals to better understand and more freely express the nature and the depth of one's need for love. The more fully one acknowledges and accepts oneself as vulnerable and dependent in one's basic need for love, the more readily one is able to allow the other to rest and come to a deeper and more fully integrated love of his or herself. To the extent that sex accomplishes this deepening acceptance of one's own vulnerability and a strengthening of one's ability to receive love, it contributes to human flourishing. To the extent that sex denies or hides an individual's

⁴² McDonough, 203; McDonagh, 611.

⁴³ McDonough, 204.

recognition and expression of one's need for love, it hinders human flourishing.

Pope suggests several characteristics that should be present within sexual relationships that enable sex to be a means toward greater love of self and love of others. “[S]exual activity should be marked by generosity of spirit, personal responsibility, permanent and monogamous commitment, deep interpersonal love and fidelity, and attentiveness to relevant contextual factors.”⁴⁴ These characteristics are rearticulations of the ‘letting be’/truthfulness and ‘enabling to be’/generosity indicators of authentic love described above. Pope notes that monogamy and fidelity are preserved as appropriate characteristics of positive sexual relationships, but not for the reasons commonly stated by other sexual ethics. Monogamy and fidelity are not central because they “constitute the best context for procreation, the material support of women, or the stability and order of society, but because [they] provide the best structural support for the affective relations of the partners.”⁴⁵ Creating the best context for procreation, the support of women, and the stability of society, are likely still good reasons for upholding monogamous relationships; however, the primary reason for doing so is that monogamy and fidelity create the necessary “room to rest” that allows for the deepening of authentic love between the partners. It is because monogamous, faithful relationships are the best possible conditions for authentic love that they become the most appropriate contexts for raising a family and that they encourage generous participation in the surrounding communities.

Before completing this development of a coherent sexual ethic based on the promotion of human flourishing through the fostering of authentic love, we need to rearticulate the principle of continuity, stated above, in terms of love within committed sexual relationships. McDonough paraphrasing McDonagh states the basic principle negatively by saying, “[A]ll human love is imperfect and has its beginnings in an ambiguity that can open itself out or close itself down.”⁴⁶ Stated positively, all human love has the potential to move toward an authentic love which lets be and enables to be. The characteristics of positive, healthy sexual relationships described above by Pope (generosity, responsibility, monogamous commitment, and fidelity) should not necessarily be viewed as prerequisites for any and all

⁴⁴ Pope, 113.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ McDonough, 202.

engagement in sexual activity and sexual relationships or for any possibility of moving toward authentic love. Rather, generosity, truthfulness, fidelity, etc. are learned and perfected within relationships that are open to authentic love, that is, in relationships which are not engaged in for the purpose of exploiting the other. Yet, some degree of self-interest and even selfish desire that the other will meet one's own needs is often the opening out of which authentic self-love and interpersonal love develop. There is a fundamental continuity between loving the other for what he or she can do for me and loving the other such that one consciously strives to let and enable the other to be. The Church's teaching in *Casti connubii* and *Gaudium et spes* recognizes this continuity in its "understanding of marriage 'as a state of sanctification'"⁴⁷ – that is, a state in which persons become more whole and learn to love better. This teaching is consistent with McDonough's assertion that committed relationships are a place where persons grow in love and "a place into which God can come and 'take us up' into God's own life."⁴⁸ If we accept the continuity of human love that these assertions about sanctifying relationships assume, then it seems accurate to hold that it is out of a self-serving love which seeks to gain something from the other that an integrated self-love which enables the other to be develops. In other words, it is through loving poorly that one learns to love well. This development takes place within one's experience and exploration of committed relationships. Just as persons as they are at any given time are continuous with persons as they hope to become so too a self-interested and self-serving love is continuous with an authentic love, which gives both the self and the other room to rest.

This growth in authentic love that takes place in persons through committed sexual relationships becomes visible through the quality of the love present in the other relationships in a person's life. As partners move closer to authentic love through greater awareness of each's own vulnerability and greater ability to allow the other to be, their growing flourishing opens outward to include others in a widening circle of "shared flourishing".⁴⁹ This shared flourishing and opening outward becomes the fruit by which a couple can judge the health and authenticity of their relationship. The adequacy of this revisionist sexual ethic which understands the meaning, purpose, and value of sex and sexual relationships in terms of their ability to contribute to greater integrated

⁴⁷ McDonough, 200; McDonagh, 9, 78.

⁴⁸ McDonough, 206.

⁴⁹ McDonough, 205, 203.

self-love and interpersonal love must also be judged by the fruit it produces (or fails to produce) in the lives of those who seek out and live in committed sexual relationships. Greater generosity, truthfulness and compassion within the lives of these persons made visible in an ability to reach outward to enable a widening circle of others to acknowledge and rest in their desire, vulnerability, and dependence are the fruit of a coherent sexual ethic. Continued or increased “solitary eccentricity, frustrated bitterness, and incapacitating anxiety”⁵⁰ suggest the practice of an incoherent sexual ethic which strives for detachment from one’s emotional and sexual needs and desires.

By rejecting the Stoic division of human needs into the intellectual and rational on one side and the affective and physical on the other and by grounding itself in an understanding of human flourishing as authentic love and the virtues of generosity and truthfulness which promote and sustain it, this more coherent Christian sexual ethic allows committed heterosexual and homosexual relationships the same potential for promoting human flourishing and contributing to a loving, generous, and sacrificial Christian lifestyle. It gives homosexual persons the room to rest in their emotional and sexual desire long enough to know what it might mean for their lives and long enough to begin to believe that authentic love is possible and perhaps even what God desires for them and invites them to. This sexual ethic encourages homosexual and heterosexual Christians alike to explore honestly, faithfully, and courageously the desire to love and be loved at the core of their beings. The freedom to explore this desire allows persons to come to a greater understanding of the depths of their own vulnerability and dependence, thus enabling them to discover more fully Christ within themselves. In short, this ethic gives persons the room to acknowledge and accept the gift of themselves in all their inseparable needs, vulnerabilities, and desires and, as a result, it enables them to encourage others to do the same.

Based on Andrew Sullivan’s description of his experience as a gay Catholic, it seems that the room to rest is what is most needed in the lives of gay Christians struggling to discover the truth of their own lives while at the same time striving to take the Church’s teaching seriously. Milhaven’s question posed to gay and lesbian Christians (“Why is sex important for you?”) offers this room by acknowledging the validity and

⁵⁰ Sullivan, “Alone again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual,” *The New Republic* 211 (November 28, 1994), 55.

importance of sexual experience in the lives of homosexual persons and thereby pointing toward a deeper importance of sex and sexuality in the lives of all persons than is currently upheld by the Church. In failing to provide the room for gays and lesbians to rest in their desire long enough to know how it shapes who they are and what it means for their lives, our human Church falls short in its mission to lead all people to discover Christ more fully by failing to enable gays and lesbians to discover the gift of who they have been created to be in and through Christ.

I conclude by offering two questions of my own for the prayerful consideration of the Church and all Christians: Does the insistence on the basic dignity of homosexual persons, while simultaneously declaring all homosexual desires for intimacy to be directed toward an inherent moral evil articulate a law of mercy or a law of sacrifice? What kind of life does the Jesus who ate and associated freely with tax collectors and sinners desire for homosexual persons?⁵¹ It is my hope that by reflecting on these questions we Christians can help the Church gradually come to a discovery and a deeper understanding of the gift that gay and lesbian Christians have to offer the Christian assembly and the People of God.

Bibliography

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons," 2003.

_____. "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," 1986.

Keenan, James F., "The open debate: Moral theology and the lives of gay and lesbian persons," *Theological Studies* 64(1) (2003), 127-150.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*. Chicago: Open Court Press, 1999.

McDonagh, Enda. "Love." In *The New Dictionary of Theology*. Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1988.

⁵¹ Cf. Matthew 9:9-13; also see Mark 2:13-17, and Luke 5:27-32.

McDonough, William. "Alasdair MacIntyre as Help for Rethinking Catholic Natural Law Estimates of Same-Sex Life Partnerships." *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001), 191-213.

Milhaven, J. Giles. "How the Church Can Learn from Gay and Lesbian Experience." In *The Vatican and Homosexuality: Reactions to the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons"*, ed. Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey. New York: Crossroads, 1988, 216-223.

Porter, Jean. *Natural and Divine Law*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.

Pope, Stephen. "Scientific and Natural Law Analyses of Homosexuality: A Methodological Study." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 (1997), 89-126.

_____. "The Magisterium's arguments against "Same-sex Marriage": An Ethical Analysis and Critique." *Theological Studies* 65(3: September, 2004), 530-65.

Sullivan, Andrew. "Alone again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual." *The New Republic* 211(22: November 28, 1994), 47-51.

_____. "Virtually Normal" in *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America*, ed. Thomas J. Ferraro. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, 171-186.