

IN THE FLESH

Part two: Sex and the Church

In the second of a three-part series to promote discussion on questions about sex and God, **Carla Grosch-Miller** explores how Christian teaching has developed over the centuries

Christian tradition has always been intellectually lively and dynamic, forged in argument and wrestling with contemporary issues. The historian Peter Brown says that in the second and third centuries, “controversy was the saving of Christianity”, as it forced diverse and distant religious figures to keep talking with one another.

The development of Christian sexual ethics shows this dynamism over the centuries. Christianity did not begin with a sexual code. The New Testament provided a central focus for Christian moral life in the great commandment to love God and neighbour. Beyond that the New Testament valued marriage, procreation and celibacy, and condemned sexual immorality without fully defining it.

As the tradition began to take shape, it was influenced by Greco-Roman culture’s widespread revulsion toward the body and distrust of sexual desire. An anti-material dualism that saw the body as inferior to the soul was paired with the inferior status of women with the result that the female body was thought particularly evil. In the second century, Tertullian preached: “Women are the devil’s gateway.” Suspicion of the sexed body is reflected in Origen’s reported self-castration “for the kingdom of God” in the third century, and in Jerome’s saying, “Blessed is the man that dashes his genitals against a rock,” in the fourth.

The chief architect of western Christian sexual ethics for many centuries was Augustine, also writing in the fourth century. Augustine set forth the goodness of marriage and procreation, though he had a negative view of sexual desire as in itself tending towards evil. He concluded that sexual desire is rightly ordered only when exercised for the purpose of procreation.

As centuries passed, this negative view of sex took on more weight, with penitential manuals (used in the confessional) prohibiting many kinds of sexual activity, including certain positions for intercourse. The rise of courtly love in the

12th Century which suggested that sex was about more than procreation was countered in theology by a renewed emphasis on the relationship between sexual desire and original sin. Gratian’s great collection of canon law renewed Augustine’s conviction that all sexual activity was evil unless it could be justified by procreative purpose. In the same period, the First Lateran Council instituted priestly celibacy, dissolving the marriages of priests and making the parties do penance.

In the 13th Century, Aquinas affirmed that sex was justified only for procreation but he hinted that it could also be an aid to marital love. By the 15th Century this hint flowered into the argument that sex in marriage was good in and of itself. Denis the Carthusian wrote about the possible integration of spiritual love and sexual pleasure and Martin LeMaistre taught that sexual pleasure contributes to the wellbeing of the partners, their arguments making inroads against the Augustinian position.

New theories of sexuality shaped the controversies of the Reformation, with Protestantism rejecting priestly celibacy. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin affirmed marriage and human sexuality as part of God’s good order and believed that marriage (not celibacy as Augustine had argued) rightly ordered sexual desire. Calvin went further holding that the greatest good of marriage and sex is the mutual society formed between husband and wife. In this way Protestantism was freed from the idea that sex was only for procreation, an idea that continues to influence Catholic sexual ethics which prohibit the use of contraception.

The Catholic ethicist Margaret Farley summarises the development of Christian tradition as a struggle to transform an essentially negative view of sexuality into a positive one. It moved, she says, from having to justify sexual intercourse even in marriage as a means to procreate and to avoid fornication, to affirming its potential for expressing and strengthening love between the partners.

In the 20th and 21st Centuries,





Illustration: Chris Andrews

‘Christian tradition has always been forged in argument’

theological reflection on sex developed dramatically in both Protestant and Catholic communities. Protestant thinking has been deeply affected by historical and biblical scholarship, revealing the early roots of Christian sexual norms and questioning the direct applicability of some of them, and by developments in social and human sciences. Contraception and remarriage after divorce have become acceptable in many Protestant communities. For the most part, the ideal context for sexual intercourse is still seen to be heterosexual marriage, yet questions of premarital sex, cohabitation, homosexuality, masturbation, the disabling impact of shame and new reproductive technologies are stimulating new thinking. The doctrines of incarnation and the Trinity are fuelling a reimagining of the basis of Christian sexual ethics in the dignity of the person and the manifestation of

mutual, respectful and loving interrelationship.

Theological arguments about sex will abound as the tradition continues to develop. As I write this, the Vatican is reconsidering its pastoral approach to sexual ethics, and the United Reformed Church is discussing whether local churches should be permitted to conduct same-sex marriages. It behoves us to ask: What ideas in Christian tradition prove to be of enduring value, enabling the flourishing of love of God and neighbour? What Christian values underpin your personal sexual ethic? What would a positive Christian sexual ethic for the 21st Century look like?●



Carla Grosch-Miller is an ordained minister and theological educator

Next month: The link between sexuality and spirituality