

SEXUALITY: FESTIVAL OF THE SPIRIT

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Among the several indictments Rainer Maria Rilke levels against Christians in his essay, “The Young Workman’s Letter,” is this: “Why have they made our sex homeless, instead of making it the place for the festival of our competency?”⁽¹⁾

Rilke’s own answer to this, made clear by the rest of his essay, is that the failure of Christians to affirm, in a positive, creative and even festive way, not only their own sexuality but the whole created world of nature, is due in a radical sense to Christ himself. Rilke appears to find in Christ a world-denying tendency. For Rilke, Christ’s words, “I have overcome the world,” signify not a triumphant lordship over a beloved creation, nor a victory over the dark powers of sin and death (scripturally signified by the word “world”), but a powerful denial and rejection of creation itself, a denunciation and denigration of the material world of flesh, of flora, fauna and minerals. Rilke no doubt would agree with Swinburne’s accusation of Christ:

Thou hast conquered. O pale Galilean!
The world has grown gray with thy breath.

Certainly Rilke is wrong in imputing to Christ any tendency to disdain the world of nature and of the flesh. No such conclusion can be drawn if one recognizes and affirms the truth of Christ’s own incarnation into flesh, into the natural world.

The early Church, to be sure, had to struggle to preserve the integrity of Christ’s real enfleshment against the attacks of the Gnostics and Docetists who, being unable to accept that God himself could affirm his own creation in so tangible a way, devised multiple theories to explain it away as a fantasy or impossibility: for example, Christ’s body was no true human body but a mirage, a mere appearance of flesh; after all, what God would stoop to such contamination as to assume real flesh? To explain the lowliness of nature and its power to contaminate, the Gnostics devised theories to absolve God himself of the responsibility of creating so undignified and unseemly a world: some lesser divine principle must have created it; and a pantheon of such divinities or “emanations” was devised to preserve a proper distance between the true God and this world of evil flesh and evil matter.

Against all of this world-hatred, the Church stood fast by insisting, without compromise, that Christ was indeed true God and true man. God and flesh had truly come together in Christ. Uncreated spirit and created matter had joined in the Incarnation, neither destroying nor diminishing the other. Against those who found this divine dalliance with creation a scandal and a stumbling-block, all the Church might do is admit that her God, despite the scandal he might cause, seemed to be incorrigibly in love with his creation. The Church might point to the biblical account of creation in Genesis where “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31) Officially, at least, the Gnostics and Docetists and their kind were defeated by the Church’s insistence in her creed that in Christ God is truly incarnate—in the flesh—and that this is supremely good. Officially, at least, Rilke and similar critics have no grounds whatsoever for imputing to Christianity a spirit of world-denial, of hatred of the flesh or of material creation. Officially, no Christian can deny the goodness of flesh and its inherent sexuality and still properly be called a Christian. Officially, the Christian recognizes that his sexuality, rooted in his being a creature of flesh, is also one of the links that binds him in a radical way to God himself.

We read in the first account of creation in Genesis:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness....” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed

them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.” (Genesis 1:26-28)

Our sexuality in its dimension of maleness and femaleness is here related to the image of God in us. To be a sexual being is, in some mysterious way, to be like God himself.

In the second account of Creation in Genesis, the material creation itself—the dust of the ground (‘adhamah)—is infused with the very breath and life of God himself and becomes man—‘adham, Adam: “Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7) This is a powerful affirmation of matter, and in it—in this divinized dust which is man (‘adham)—one can see a foreshadowing of the incarnation of Christ, the second Adam.

From the beginning, God himself has never spurned flesh or matter but intimately bound it to himself, making it like himself. The God we know is no abstract gnostic essence standing aloof from a dirty world, but a God who passionately loves his creation and who is not afraid to get a little earth on his hands, or to sweat and bleed and die if need be.

In none of this can there be any valid grounds for Rilke’s indictment of Christ as a denier and despiser of the world and of flesh. Christ cannot be held responsible for the “homelessness” or the alienation of our sexuality. Nor, officially, can the Church be held responsible, for she has consistently affirmed otherwise.

Rilke, however, is not unjustified in placing the blame on Christians. If we remember that to be a Christian is to be ever in the process of becoming more of a Christian (and, consequently, less of a fallen and unredeemed being), the failure of Christians to affirm their flesh and their sexuality becomes, if not commendable, at least understandable. A Christian is in the process of making concrete the reality of his Baptism into Christ; he is seeking, by his own efforts aided by grace, to become the fully human being God has eternally destined him to be.

The Christian is a creature always in tension between the ground (‘adhamah) from which he is drawn and the humanity (‘adham) which he is called to become, impelled by the breath of God working within his earthiness, like yeast in a dough. This divinely-willed tension may be a burden, but it is a burden one may set aside only at a terrible price—the price of one’s very humanity. To flee from this tension is to flee from the vocation to be fully and truly human. The goal for man and woman is never to abandon one’s flesh (as if one could become pure spirit) or to revert to mere flesh without the divine breath (which is death). The goal is to become precisely what God has intended us to be: creatures of earth and flesh who are filled with and moved by the breath and spirit of God himself; creatures who, in their fulfillment or state of redemption, present to the world luminous images of the nature and image of God himself.

To become fully human is the goal of our life. To be fully human is what it means to be fully redeemed by Christ. And to be fully human and alive cannot possibly include a sexuality that is, in Rilke’s word, homeless. For those men and women whom Christ’s saving act has effectively brought to the fullness of life, sexuality—being the dimension in us where God and earthiness meet—must surely be, as Rilke proposes, a “place for the festival of our competency.”

So, while Rilke is wrong in imputing to Christ a denial of the world and its earthiness, he is not wrong in accusing Christians of a failure to affirm their earthiness and the sexuality which is the mysterious bond between earth and heaven, between dust and divinity. Christians generally have failed to find their sexuality a dimension in which and by which they may grow as Christians and as truly human beings. Thus they have never felt their sexuality as an occasion and opportunity for festival and celebration. Christians have accepted (somewhat begrudgingly, one often feels) that sexuality can be sacramentalized in marriage; but they have not generally been able to find sexuality itself

sacramental, essentially holy, a means of encounter with God himself, or a dimension in which God shares himself with them.

Sexuality can be homeless for a Christian who has failed to integrate his sexuality into his life as a Christian. If to be redeemed by Christ is to be fully human, if to be truly holy is to be truly whole with an integrated human nature, any fragmentation of our sexuality is a sign that we need healing, that we need to be made whole and holy. And so any genuinely Christian spirituality must help us to affirm our human sexuality.

Undoubtedly, much of the confusion of Christians over their sexuality and its place in their life as Christians is due either to education in a faulty spirituality or to no education in spirituality at all. While the Church officially teaches all that is necessary to affirm our sexuality and our earthiness, not all of the Church's teachers have always set this teaching forth in a clear and positive way. In some cases their own psychological problems with sexuality may have obscured their clear teaching. Whatever the cause—ignorance, psychological hangups, poor teacher training, reticence—many Christians have never been educated to discover that their sexuality has an integral role to play in their development as Christians. What is equally unfortunate is that many Christians have never been educated to realize that they must develop as Christians, that they must actively seek to grow, to deepen their inner lives and to allow God more and more to have his way with them, molding their earthy clay into bright living images of himself.

Such education for Christian development is exactly the role of Christian spirituality. While many Christians have never been led toward a positive education in spirituality, those who have been led, by accident or design, to explore the world of Christian spirituality have often found there a mentality that either is or appears to be world-denying and which rarely, if ever, has anything positive to say affirming human sexuality.

The dangers of gnosticism are ever-present, particularly for those who seek a deeper spiritual life. Not every school of Christian spirituality has managed to avoid these gnostic pitfalls. But even in those schools which have avoided gnostic world-hatred and have preserved a real Christian affirmation of the created world of earth and flesh, there still remains for the average Christian the problem of being properly directed so as not to be misled by the language and terminology of these schools.

For example, any Christian who comes unprepared upon the classical western terminology of the purgative way is hardly to be blamed if he interprets this as involving a rejection and denial of all that is not pure spirit. If he is a careful reader and if he reads the right books, he may come to discover that the purgative way is not a rejection of the created world of matter or flesh. If he has a wise director to guide him, he is more fortunate still. (But how many Christians, even if interested in the spiritual life, will ever find adequate direction? To whom will they go?) One of the primary tasks of Christian spirituality, then, is to educate Christians in the role of sexuality in their development as full human beings, as Christians in whom the saving act of Christ has become fully effective. Unless the role of sexuality in full Christian development is recognized and affirmed, sexuality will continue to be, for many Christians, a homeless and alienated thing.

William F. Kraft, in his *Sexual Dimensions of the Celibate Life*, tells us that “healthy spirituality can never be sexless because spirituality is always in some way embodied and therefore sexual.”⁽²⁾ (One is reminded here of St. Irenaeus' words: “The things you do in the flesh are spiritual.”) Unless spirituality and sexuality are clearly seen as intimate partners in the process of our Christian growth, Christians are going to remain fragmented: unhealed, unwhole—and unholy—creatures. According to Kraft:

... people who bifurcate sexuality and spirituality identify themselves and others simply as sexual or spiritual beings, and therefore are unwhole people.⁽³⁾

This failure to integrate spirituality and sexuality is correctly diagnosed by Kraft as an identity problem. For the celibate the problem may become: “I have taken a vow of celibacy. What do I do now with my sexuality?” For the average Christian the question may be: “I want to save my soul. What do I do with my body?” In both cases there is an identity crisis based upon the assumption that being embodied is somehow a drawback to being a Christian. In both cases the false mentality is encouraged by the failure of Christian teachers to affirm, in terms clear and plain for modern ears, that there is no radical dichotomy between one’s body and one’s spirit, between earthiness and Christianity, between sexuality and spirituality. True, the relationship of these elements may sometimes be wounded, may be misaligned, may be improperly understood—but radically estranged and contradictory? No; for the scriptural account of human creation cannot permit such a reading. And, what is more, as the ancient fathers taught, whatever is not taken on by Christ in his enfleshment is not redeemed; but Christ, as true man, took upon himself our full human sexuality. To believe less than this or other than this is to deny the doctrine of the incarnation.

Thus the identity crisis arising out of a seeming dichotomy between sexuality and spirituality can have no valid basis in faith. Both the scriptures and the teaching of the Church affirm that our human sexuality in itself is a positive good. What is true is that this sexuality has been sinned against. But it is not in sexuality that sin originates; there is nothing sinful about our flesh, our earthiness. Sin and corruption come from the spirit of a man, from the heart:

Sin never comes from below, from the flesh, but from above, from the spirit. The first fall occurred in the world of angels, pure spirits.⁽⁴⁾

If our sexuality, then, is homeless or alienated or even corrupted, the blame lies not in sexuality itself, but in its being alienated from the spirit by the spirit, in its exile from the heart (as the ancient spiritual fathers understood the term). The cause lies in our own wounded—and therefore wounding—spirit that strikes out at sexuality and subverts it.

The contemporary search for solutions to the problem of our homeless and wounded sexuality often leads to the therapist’s couch or the encounter group; and because man is a unity of body/soul/spirit, therapeutic work done at any one human level inevitably affects the whole man or woman. (Nietzsche seemed to perceive this when he wrote: “The degree and kind of a man’s sexuality reach up to the ultimate pinnacle of his spirit.”) One cannot deal with sexuality without affecting—knowingly or unknowingly—the spirit of a man or woman. Nor is this intimate bond between sex and spirit without ultimate significance, as Nicholas Berdyaev stresses:

In man’s sexuality we perceive the metaphysical roots of his being. Sex is the meeting point of two worlds in the human being. In this point of sex is hidden the secret of being.⁽⁵⁾

Whether a therapist recognizes it or not, when he deals with sexuality (or with any aspect of human being for that matter he is dealing with ultimate secrets and mysteries. And so, while purely psychological means to heal are not to be slighted or ignored, it becomes clear how essential a role spirituality—with its recognition of the true scope of the problem—has to play.

One of the dangers in psychology, especially in the more traditional schools based upon biological models, is that the unique character of human sexuality, particularly its relation to man’s inner spirit may not be considered; and the human person will find his or her sexuality to be considered as little different from that of a laboratory rat. Norman Pittenger makes this point well:

To speak about man's sexual nature as if it were simply identical with that of a dog or cat or horse would be to fail in perception about the genuine difference that is made as a new level or dimension of (best of all) type of integration appears in the cosmic process.⁽⁶⁾

This customary emphasis on the purely biological and reproductive aspect of sexuality has, to some extent, been encouraged by the Church's own emphasis on this aspect of sexuality in her teaching. As Pittenger points out, this emphasis tends to obscure the deeper realities of human sexuality. As a corrective measure, Pittenger suggests adopting the term "conjunctive system" for specifically human sexuality and reserving the customary "reproductive system" for all other sexuality:

For with man the point of his sexuality is not the merely biological possibility of continuing the species; rather, it is the way in which two human beings can give each of them himself to the other.
...⁽⁷⁾

This self-giving which is at the heart of the human conjunctive system, is precisely the element in human sexuality that not only distinguishes it from animal sexuality, but also reflects the divine nature itself: God's own eternal outpouring of himself in a ceaseless act of love. Without this element in human sexuality—or to be more precise, in any sexual encounter between human beings—sin enters, in that a betrayal of our God-given sexuality with its inherent self-giving has taken place. Karl Barth once wrote: "Coitus without coexistence is demonic." Sexuality divorced from the divine activity of self-giving in love is indeed a homeless and alienated thing and a betrayal of our very humanity itself. To betray our own God-given nature—whether by seeking to become disembodied spirit or, in this instance, creatures of mere flesh—is always sin. And like all sin, such acts, by their very nature, isolate and alienate one from the very heart of being. Sin always condemns us to a terrible loneliness, a loneliness quite different from the human loneliness no man or woman can avoid. Dante's image of ultimate sin expresses this: Satan himself, unlike all the other creatures in hell who have at least some social intercourse, lies frozen in icy isolation at the very bottom of hell, imprisoned there by the ice that never thaws because of the beating of his own vast wings. One of the great horrors of sin is just this: that it removes us from the conjunctive system which is at the very heart of existence. Sin exiles one from the sexuality of being, from the festival of creation itself, from the life of dialogue which is the nature of God and man.

It is the role of spirituality to lead men and women out of the exile of sin into full holiness and wholeness. A healthy and healing spirituality must guide men and women deeply and rightly into their sexuality, into their earthiness as well as into their inner life where God still breathes his life into their clay and summons men and women into the life of dialogue, of self-surrendering love, which is God's own supremely creative activity.

It is the role of a healthy spirituality to help men and women discover that their flesh and its desires are not inherently evil, but are sharings in the passionate longings of God himself to relate to creation, sharings in God's own lust for life. Spirituality must show forth that God who is shamelessly, even scandalously, in love with earth; the God who made himself a fool for love of his human creatures in the supreme folly of the Cross.

It must be the role of a healthy spirituality to help men and women celebrate the physical world of nature in which God has privileged them to share, and to celebrate this by living in a right relationship with their bodies and flesh, with earth and nature. This right relationship can only arise out of a heart or spirit that has been restored by grace to its rightful status as regent of the created world.

That dominion over the earth which God entrusted to human beings in Genesis is properly exercised only in love, in self-giving. It is not surprising that in our day and age this dominion has become a fallen and wounded (and wounding) domination over nature and persons, a domination that serves the forces of dissolution and death instead of the creative Lord of life. It is not surprising, for when man is alienated from his full sexuality, he will inevitably

be alienated from the world of nature and from earth itself. He will have no love of earth, of flowers and meadows, of cool dark forests and wild rushing brooks. He will have lost his taste and savor for the things of earth. There can be no surer sign of his alienation from God than this loss. No longer does he share in God's passion for creation, in God's endless creativity that flowers forth in illimitable profusion.

Thus, where fallen man's mechanical technology (so divorced from the organic and earthy) is able to produce a million identical—but unloved, unknown—objects, God's passion for creation, his loving lust for life, knows only how to create beloved and familiar individuals. Where fallen man's vision can look at a million roses and be content to let his mind rest in the abstract category "roses," God sees and loves and sustains each singular rose, so pleased with the wonder of it that, like an enraptured child, he says, "Do it again!" And he, whose word makes things real, creates another rose, and another. To be truly like God, that is, to be truly redeemed and released from our exile of the heart, we must share through our bodies and senses in God's own delight in created and earthy things.

So the function of a healing spirituality must be to restore the right relation between spirit and sexuality, to heal any woundedness, to lead homeless sexuality out of its exile from the heart, from the spirit—that inner dimension where God lives and breathes within us and longs to make love to us and through us to all of his creation. As in us, in and through our healed spirits and restored hearts, God touches earth, so it is in us who are the priests of creation that earth is lifted up to God. In my love of a single rose, God and rose meet in exquisite intimacy and my own spirit blooms in likeness to its creator, filled with the savor and tang of the rosiness of God, author and lover of all roses. It may seem to some at this point that we have wandered away from the topic of sexuality, but this is not so. Our sexuality is the dimension in us where the physical earth and material creation join in the deepest intimacy with the world of spirit and with God. Any homelessness from earth; any inability to love a rose or to rejoice in the physical beauty of another man or woman; any failure to thrill at the flaming colors of autumn woods or the haunting sound of the night wind keening in winter trees; any tendency to see another human being as merely one nameless object among a million interchangeable objects—all of these bespeak a homelessness and brokenness, a lack of full health and human wholeness, a failure to see and to love as God sees and loves.

Sexuality is far more than what happens in one's genitals. Sexuality is the dimension, the competency in us, that permits us to enter into the vast choric dance of all creatures with one another and with the Lord of the dance. To miss this universal yet concrete dimension of sexuality, to feel somehow that only the ultimate genital orgasm is what sexuality is about, is tragic and demonic.

It is tragic because in our obsession with a fragment of sexuality, we shall miss the whole splendid and dynamic scope of it; we will miss the sheer delight (of which orgasm is the vaguest foretaste) in all earthiness and creation that God would have us feel and share. It is demonic because, in this blindness, the fragmented bit (genitality divorced from full sexuality) will take on a furious potency that, like any idol, will seek to devour and consume one and make all things serve its fierce and insatiable hunger to sustain its own thwarted and perverse existence. Genitality divorced from the whole divine choreography of sexuality must become twisted, stunted and grotesque. Like anything that has cut itself off from the divine source of life, it will require ever greater satisfactions and stimulations in order to sustain its illusion of life and existence, its forgery of true being. This frenzied thirst for life will become a demonic drive toward more and more genitality to the exclusion, ultimately, of everything else. And one will have arrived at the great loneliness that is sin, apartness from God, the source of true being. It is the exclusion, and one's attendant withdrawal from the vast social/sexual life of creation in dialogue with God, that is evil; it is not our genitality in itself. But because the spirit here has failed to rule in this and to direct genitality to its proper role in the dance of creation, genitality is sinned against.

The corrective, consequently, is not to deny genitality or to inveigh against it but to look to the ailing spirit that has failed, for whatever reason, to exercise its proper dominion over sexuality. One of the great values of the truly and

happily celibate man or woman is to witness to this reign of the spirit over sexuality—a reign that only enhances and deepens one’s humanness and likeness to God, that only broadens and widens the scope of one’s love.⁽⁸⁾

It is the role of an authentic Christian spirituality to lead men and women out of homeless sexuality into a right relationship with their whole God-given natures and with their bodies and the material creation over which they are called by God to have dominion in love. The role of spirituality is to assist in restoring men and women to their true selves as God has willed them to be; to entice and encourage and direct them to enter joyfully into full possession of the humanity God has bestowed upon them; to help them to celebrate, in the freedom of the redeemed sons and daughters of God, the festival of their competency as truly human beings, in whom the image and likeness of God are restored to original harmony.

God finds his earthly creation delectable—it tastes good to him, it smells good, it looks good. And he who would withhold from us nothing of his own joy in being, calls us, creatures of clay who live and breathe with his own spirit, to share through our sexuality God’s delight in the festival of his own competency which is earth. The end of our sexuality, in which spirit is truly wedded to earth, is that final luminous freedom to live in the sheer fullness of life and to become radiant with that all-encompassing love which Dostoyevsky’s Father Zossima describes in *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Brothers, have no fear of men’s sin. Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.⁽⁹⁾

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- (1) Rainer Maria Rilke. “The Young Workman’s Letter” in *Where Silence Reigns* (New York: New Directions Publishing Co., 197K), p. 76.
- (2) William F. Kraft, *Sexual Dimensions of the Celibate Life* (Kansas City: Andrews & McMeel, Inc., 1979), p. 29.
- (3) *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- (4) Paul Evdokimov, *The Struggle With God* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1966), p. 131.
- (5) Nicholas Berdyaev, *Christian Existentialism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), p. 98.
- (6) Norman Pittenger, “Process Theology. A Whiteheadian Version” in *Religious Experience and Process Theology*, eds. Harry Cargas and Bernard Lee (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 11.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- (8) Kraft, p. 10: “The celibate mode of living should increase the likelihood of experiencing transcendent values that support and promote love. For instance, the celibate life usually encourages silence, and silence encourages listening. Celibates should have more opportunities for recollection, meditation, contemplation, and other experiences that promote love. Indeed, celibacy usually involves more lonely aloneness. Nevertheless, celibates can be guardians and vanguards of love.”

Chastity, rather than being a repression of sexuality, is really the healthy mastery of it. Chastity, therefore, is not finally a state one can enter by a vow or an act of law. It is a state into which one must grow by a healthy and responsible and creative use of our sexuality. Unless a person is moving steadily deeper into this dimension, his or her value as a sign is critically weakened. (J.M.D.)

(9) Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), pp. 382-383.

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