

# Church must enter sexuality dialogue

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

The core of the Catholic Church's teaching on human sexuality is evangelical in the best sense of the word. It embodies what Pope John Paul II has called "that deep amazement at (our) worth and dignity," which is the Gospel ("Redemptor Hominis," n.10)

Thus, the church teaches that sexual expression within marriage is good and wholesome in itself. It is not what the old moral theology textbooks used to call it: "a lawful remedy for concupiscence."

The church recognizes at the same time that sexual expression, whether inside or outside marriage, is not limited to genital activity.

Marriage and sexuality are about human relationships: relationships between spouses, between spouses and children, between persons, whether married or not.

If human relationships are supposed to be reflective of God's relationship with us, then human sexuality and marriage are about generating, nurturing and sustaining life through mutual love.

Unfortunately, there has been some ambivalence in the church's attitude toward human sexuality and marriage in the past.

The same Paul who spoke of marriage as a symbol of Christ's union with the church

(Ephesians 5:21-33) also urged the Corinthians to renounce marriage in favor of virginity, because he expected the Lord to return very soon (First Corinthians 7:32-35).

Whereas the creation narrative in Genesis (2:18,24) cautioned that it is not good for us to be alone, Paul insisted that "It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman" (7:1). But he did not go so far as to condemn marriage.

St. Augustine influenced the church on this subject more profoundly than anyone else. For him sexuality was linked with animality, and marriage had no other purpose than the begetting of children.

According to Augustine, our sexual desires are the result of original sin, which is transmitted, in turn, through the procreative act.

Fortunately, the Second Vatican Council restored the church's teaching on marriage and human sexuality to its evangelical roots.

First, marriage is no longer to be perceived as a contract regarding the mutual exchange of rights over one's body ("The rendering of the marriage debt").

Marriage is a covenantal relationship, whereby the spouses "render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n.48).

Secondly, marriage is not only for the begetting of children. The "other ends of marriage," the council insisted, are not "of less account" (n.50).

Thirdly, the full consummation of marriage is more than a biological act. The expression of mutual love "pervades the whole of (the spouses') lives" (n.49). Marriage is an "intimate partnership" that is life-long and that touches all of the spouses' relationships (n.48).

If the council put us back on the right course, why, then, is there still so much turmoil and controversy over the church's teaching on human sexuality?

We shall never find the answer if we consult only those who have no problem with the teaching or with its manner of presentation.

An answer can only be found through dialogue with those who say they have a problem with the teaching, with its mode of expression, or with both. And they are more likely to be women than men.

Women in particular reject the notion that sexuality has to do primarily with sexual acts rather than with human relationships.

"Sexuality," a married, professionally employed mother of three recently noted, "is all tied up with how you relate to people. How can a priest relate to the agonies people are going through with divorce, love affairs, abortion, when he has no ex-



## ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

perience of strong relationships?"

The preceding quotation is from an article in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin (June 1991), "Sex, Power, and the Sacred," by Jane Redmont, who is completing a book on American Catholic women.

"When women speak of the priesthood as it is presently structured," she writes, "they do not only mention sex. They speak, in the same breath, about hierarchy, power, and control."

A growing number of women, she reports, feels that "priestly celibacy, women's exclusion from priesthood, and teachings on sexuality and reproduction are related to one another, and that the link that binds them is the fear of women and sex."

"Is sex a reality to be feared, or one of the many places God is present to human beings in ordinary life? Does our religion help us to tell the truth or keep us from speaking it?"

"It is time to talk about (these questions)," she concludes. "And when we gather to discuss them, let the women be there."

A word to the wise is sufficient.

# The touch of Jesus helps us every day

By Father Albert Shamon  
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 7:31-37; (R1) Isaiah 35:4-7; (R2) James 2:1-5.

Sunday's Gospel tells the story of physical healing. It takes place in the region of Decapolis, Gentile territory on the eastern side of the Lake of Galilee.

Some people brought a deaf-mute to Jesus. Because the man could not speak for himself, his friends interceded with Jesus to touch him. Jesus took him off by himself, away from the crowd. As always, Jesus was sensitive to the man's feelings so not to make a public exhibition of him. Jesus also wanted his complete attention.

Alone with the man, Jesus resorted to sign language because the man was deaf. First, he put his finger into the man's ears. Then spitting, he touched his tongue to convey to him that He was going to do something about the impaired senses. Next

He looked up to heaven, pointing out that it was from there that help would come.

Then Jesus emitted a groan because man's miseries always deeply pained Jesus and moved Him to action. And whenever He was deeply touched, Jesus would use his mother tongue, the Aramaic. Thus He said to the man, "Ephphatha!" — meaning "Be opened!" At once the man's ears were opened, and he began to speak plainly.

The deaf-mute had been brought to Jesus that He might touch him.

The touch of a Paderewski or a Paganini could stir up hearts and melt them.

The touch of Michelangelo could transform a block of marble into a glorious angel.

The touch of a da Vinci on canvas could create a Mona Lisa whose enigmatical smile would keep generations guessing.

The skillful hands of a surgeon or nurse can heal the rooted disease and soothe the fevered brow.

The touch of a friend's hand, the gentle pressure, can calm a sorrowing heart or infuse confidence into a faint heart.

The touch of Jesus unstopped deaf ears and loosened a tied tongue.

But the wonder of it all is that Jesus still touches us, to heal and help us each and every day. Today the touches of the Master's hand are the seven sacraments.

A sacrament is simply an encounter with the risen Christ through His ministers. Our Lord said to Sister Faustina: "When you go to confession, know this, that I myself am waiting for you in the confessional; I am only hidden by the priest, but I myself act in the soul..."

Myra Brooks once wrote a beautiful poem called "The Touch of the Master's Hand." An old violin was being auctioned off. The auctioneer was coaxing the crowd to get a \$3 bid. From far back in the room, a gray-haired man came forward and picked up the bow. He wiped the dust from



## A WORD FOR SUNDAY

the old violin, tightened the strings, and played a melody pure and sweet as a caroling angel sings. After the music ceased, the auctioneer — with a voice that was quiet and low — said, "Now what am I bid for the old violin?" It sold for \$3,000.

People asked, "What changed its worth?" Quick came the reply, "The touch of the master's hand."

And so many a man with life out of tune, battered and scarred with sin, is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd — much like the old violin. But the Master comes, and by the touch of His hand, the sacraments, He restores souls to their baptismal glory, opens their ears to God's inspirations and their tongues to His praise.

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### Red Mass set for Sept. 13

ROCHESTER — The St. Thomas More Lawyers' Guild has scheduled its 46th annual Red Mass for 12:30 p.m. on Friday, Sept. 13, at Our Lady of Victory-St. Joseph Church, 210 Pleasant St.

Bishop Dennis W. Hickey will serve as celebrant for the Mass. Father L. James Callan, pastor of St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit and guild chaplain, will deliver the homily.

A luncheon reception in the rectory of Our Lady of Victory-St. Joseph Church will follow the Mass. All are welcome to attend the Mass and reception.

For information, contact Andrew J. Weidman at 716/454-1990.

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