

COLUMNISTS

Sexual ethics don't fit our needs

A group of students asked me the other day about which aspect of Catholic moral theology needs the most work, in my opinion. I told them that there seem to be many breakthroughs taking place in the area of human genetics, so a lot of thinking should be directed toward this important arena. Still, I acknowledged that there are many good people devoting their significant talent to this enterprise.

I considered the area of social ethics, which includes reflection about the distribution of wealth. With the majority of our planet living in destitution and misery, it might seem that we need more reflection in this important area. I put this idea aside, too, however, since I think we already know what ought to be done in the realm of economic ethics. The problem is that those who have choices in this area simply do not want to change things.

I finally told them that in many countries and cultures today, it would seem that there is a need for renewal in the area of sexual ethics. When asked for some explanation of this assertion, I referred to the obvious truth that our current ethic does not seem to be adequate to the needs of most people living in our culture or in countries like ours. Four inadequacies seem to characterize current ethics surrounding the topic of sex and sexuality.

The first is a failure to appreciate the basic God-given goodness of human sexuality. This is a basically anti-Christian perspective and has been consistently rejected by the church each time it reappears in history. And it reappears often. Heresies like Jansenism, Albigensianism,



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

Gnosticism, Manichaeism are names of a few of the basic systems that promoted the error that sex is somehow evil. These views reinforce fears of the body and downplay the truth that God created us as sexual beings destined to grow and flourish through our sexuality. It is likely that we can all name friends and associates who cannot relate to others as warmly, as openly or as confidently as they might because of religiously inspired fears about sexuality. The negativity at the base of these views is alive and well in today's ethics, too, and it needs to be corrected.

The second false tendency in sexual ethics is an over-emphasis on the physical aspects of human sexuality. In some views of sex, its physical aspects and consequences are stressed so much that the personal, emotional and social aspects are neglected. We see this in cultural attitudes that promote sex-for-fun, but we see it in views that overemphasize "sex for procreation," too. Catholic moral theology has often fallen into this latter category. Jesus' words about a married couple becoming one flesh (Mt 19:6) imply that love, fidelity and covenanted friend-

ship provide the basis for sexual activity. Speaking of sexuality in terms of procreation apart from the emotional nurturing of spouses has sometimes occurred in our tradition. Like the dualism mentioned above, this false emphasis on the physical aspect of sex has hurt people, too. It has also caused us, I think, to have an inadequate response to the "sex for pleasure" distortion so alive in the culture around us.

A third mistake we make is to offer overly romantic views of human sexuality. While sex and sexuality contribute to our deepening and enrichment as human persons, and while it is a factor in all our human relationships, and in our relationship with God, we ought not to expect sex to answer all our personal needs or to deliver human fulfillment to us by itself. Not every relationship is a sexual one. It is simply unrealistic to assign such unrealistic aspirations to sex.

Separating the personal and romantic side of human sexuality from the responsibilities we all owe to society, from the ethical obligations we owe to our spouses, or from society's need for stable unions and families, lends a false emphasis to human sexuality. Some literature today, even religious writing, can sometimes associate too closely the experience of human fulfillment with sex.

The final mistaken emphasis comes from stressing society's interests in human sexual behavior to such a degree that we neglect its personal and physical dimensions. Today we recognize more than ever that society needs stable families, that the breakdown in family life in our era is creating a variety of problems

that have a detrimental effect on society as a whole. Still, to fail to give sufficient emphasis to the personal needs of partners, or to stress society's need for stable families without acknowledging the fuller potential of human sexuality, distorts our understanding of sexuality, too. Religious ethics can and do err in this direction.

Each of these distorted perspectives, along with several others, can be found to some degree in Catholic moral theology dealing with this topic today. It is my firm conviction that we need to renew our thinking on this topic. Above all, we need to come to grips with the core beliefs we have as Christians that human sexuality is good and that it is God's good gift to us.

We need to acknowledge in our theology and ethics that human sexuality touches every aspect of our being and existence, including the spiritual. We need to provide a positive theology of human sexual experience so that we can offer views of sex and sexuality that provide a genuine alternative to the irresponsible views offered by so much of today's entertainment industries. We need to invite both men and women and every social and economic class to help us reflect on this issue, and we need to move beyond our tendency to condemn those whose questions or experience seem to challenge our own. There is a genuine need for a renewal in Catholic moral theology concerning questions of sex and sexuality. Instead of fearing or denying this possibility, we ought to be demanding that it take place, soon.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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