NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Bishop Robinson and the redemption of Eros

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Mar. 20, 2012 Bulletins from the Human Side

The blessed bishop from Australia who talks such good sense about human sexuality [1] is a Robinson by name and by myth. For he is a Robinson Crusoe, building a ship with the help of Friday, avatar for all of us, that will allow the church to set sail into the deep of human sexual experience.

The bishop wants the church, in the phrase from the Pentecost season, to "speak an entirely new language" about sexual acts, but he understands that he must phrase his invitation in an old-fashioned vocabulary of legal distinctions and regulations that has become the institution's native and sometimes forked tongue.

He does this gracefully, making a radical proposal to re-examine and renew the church's teachings on heterosexual acts, the necessary condition for its looking again at homosexual acts. He understands that the healthy Fridays, the everyman and everywoman of Catholicism, long ago passed the institutional church in their efforts to understand and to integrate their sexuality into their lives.

Bishop Robinson purpose is, in fact, that set out by Pope John XXIII as his reason for convening Vatican II, "To make the human sojourn on earth less sad."

Indeed, in urging a much needed review of what and how the church teaches about human sexuality, Bishop Robinson draws on themes central to Vatican II. The first of these is found in placing the reality of the human person rather than the abstraction of natural law as the central reference point in church teachings and papal pronouncements about marriage and sexual activity.

The second is found in the shift from an emphasis on objective acts to subjective intentions and dispositions in making judgments on the badness or goodness of how people behave. This rightfully emphasizes the impact that our actions or omissions have on other persons rather than on the ire that has idled within so many church leaders who have been so preoccupied with sin.

The brave bishop also points to the scholarly work, largely pioneered in this country by the courageous Fr. Charles Curran, to modify the long-held teaching that, because of its special nature, every sexual act, thought, desire or even a distraction allowed to light too long in the soul was always and ever a grave mortal sin.

Robinson's convictions on the need for a thorough examination of the church's teaching on sexuality are significant in themselves but also because he has found a way to speak about this essential matter from within the church, even if in the mannered traditional way that dialogue moves, however slowly, toward a wider circle of prelates.

He is, so to speak, seeking to redeem Eros; that is, to recognize the fundamentally healthy and creative nature of Eros rather than to brand it, as the early church fathers did in their misunderstanding of the myth of the Garden of Eden, as the concupiscence-laden consequence of Original Sin.

The stakes are high in this effort to understand Eros as a basically healthy human impulse that takes on its moral

character from being the positive energy in all life-giving and life-enhancing activity from true art to true love. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of Eros in a positive way in his first encyclical on love.

The fathers at Vatican II, asked to vote on a proposal to condemn a variety of "-isms" from communism to eroticism, refused to include the latter after one bishop rose to object to this misunderstanding of Eros that has, as he said, "something good about it."

Goeffrey Robinson is one bishop as well, rising alone as his Vatican II predecessor did, to address the other bishops banked about him as he speaks of their need to understand and affirm afresh what is good and creative rather than what is bad and destructive about every truly human sexual expression of love.

I am betting that, against the odds most people give, Bishop Robinson will speak to and ultimately be heard by what is healthy in his brother bishops.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2016 - 23:04*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/bulletins-human-side/bishop-robinson-and-redemption-eros

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Kennedy's column, Bulletins from the Human Side," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: **Email alert sign-up** [2]. If you already receive email alerts from us, click on the "update my profile" button to add Kennedy to your list.

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/29393/
[2] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup