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On sexuality, the hierarchy has usurped the entire teaching office

Regina Schulte | Oct. 15, 2010

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The cover of "The Sexual Person," by Todd A. Salzman, who heads the theology department at Creighton University, and retired Creighton professor Michael G. Lawler. (CNS/Georgetown University Press)

COMMENTARY

For more than three decades the Catholic church has seen no progress in formulating a contemporary understanding of human sexuality, one that will provide principles for pastoral accommodation to new insights. If this were a board game, the church?s piece would still be sitting on ?Start.?

Last month we witnessed a reoccurring event. This time two theologians at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, who have been attempting to bring lay insights into the subject of human sexuality, were sharply rebuked by the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for defending the moral legitimacy of homosexuality, contraception, premarital sex, and other hot-button issues in sexual ethics.

The Sept. 15 doctrine committee, in addressing the men?s book, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, found serious error, saying the work could not be considered authentic Catholic teaching.

?The book proposes ways of living a Christian life that do not accord with the teaching of the church and the Christian tradition,? according to the statement.

By rejecting the book as in opposition to ?authentic? teaching, the bishops once again reeled this vital issue back to the 1966 papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. It was then that Pope Paul VI stunned the church by writing that allowing contraceptive practice as a moral choice for married couples would break with traditional church teaching.

By then the majority of laypeople had already concluded that artificial birth control was a necessity, and therefore a right for them and their families. The theological community (lay men and women among them by that time) felt that their role in serving the church community compelled them to dissent from *Humanae Vitae*. ?Traditional? moral teaching was woefully inadequate, many concluded, and imposing it with this unilateral decision was a misuse of papal authority.

Thus it was that the Catholic Theological Society of America commissioned a study of sexual morality to be undertaken by a committee chosen from their members. Theologians Anthony Kosnik, William Carroll, Agnes Cunningham, Ronald Modras and James Schulte took on the task. In 1977 they published *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought*.

In a near instantaneous reaction that bordered on hysteria, it was condemned by the hierarchy, despite the fact that the Catholic Press Association that year gave the book its first-place award in the theological category.

The denouncing of *Human Sexuality* then and *The Sexual Person now* -- 33 years later -- indicates nothing has changed and that we are hearing the repetition of a conventional mantra: They are not in accord with traditional/authentic (i.e., hierarchical) church teaching.

In both cases, this judgment was delivered with neither prior dialogue with the authors or invitation to enter a dialogue. That both of these studies took the matter into territory dictated by contemporary need received no consideration. The grace experience of the laity, known as the *sensus fidelium*, remained outside the pale.

True, a nod to the person-centered natural law used in both studies can be found in a few church documents. Pope John Paul II nudged this forward. However, these concessions seem never to get translated into praxis. In the end, conclusions and rejections continue to revert to ?authentic? teaching.

In both of these scholarly works, theologians found the seed for their thought in the 1965 document *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council. Article 51 states that the moral aspects of conjugal love and procreation derive from ?the nature of the human person and his acts.?

Society has since come to realize the many and deep complexities embedded in ?the human person? and how sexuality engages our very ?nature.? New advances in science, biology, psychology, genetics and medical sciences are creating an accumulation of situations and possibilities not even dreamed of when the church?s traditional sexual moral code was formulated. Consider surrogate motherhood; sex-change operations; in vitro fertilization; homosexual, bisexual and transsexual orientations; the distinction between sex and gender, to name a few. Add the AIDS epidemic and cultural changes and it becomes obvious that the center (of hierarchical teaching) will not hold.

Among the issues needing to be addressed are cohabitation, physical expression of homosexual love, remarriage after divorce, gay marriage, and, yes, abortion. And then there is the elephant in the room: the growing and unsustainable overpopulation of our planet.

In neither *Human Sexuality* nor *The Sexual Person* did the authors consign traditional precepts to the trash bin. Rather, they recycled them into interpretations applicable to contemporary realities. Continuity implies growth and development; it does not mean sameness. For instance, the unitive and procreative ends of marriage remain operative, but their meanings have been broadened. ?Natural law? for humankind has moved out of biology and into experience-fed reasoning that neglects none of the insights of the past.

Eternal, unchangeable laws built into creation, and thus mandated by God from on high, form the starting premise of the ?deductive? approach from which past teaching was developed.

Marrying this ?classicist? view to a ?physicalist? one yields a static conclusion: Sexual morality is discerned from the compatibility of male to female genital anatomy and the automatic biological processes of the human reproductive system. Human participation in ongoing evolutionary change is not acknowledged.

The tenets of stoicism, Gnosticism, dualism and Platonism in the Greco-Roman environment of the early church contributed to the negative attitude toward sex that continues in the church?s stringency regarding sexual activity. Sex was painted as unworthy at least, sinful at best. It was to be merely tolerated, but only for procreation and to alleviate concupiscence. To remain ?pure? from it was a grace.

The inductive model, on the other hand, used in both *Human Sexuality* and *The Sexual Person* approaches

sexual ethics from historical consciousness in analyzing human experience. Behavior protective of human values is judged by principles rather by immutable laws. This view of natural law recognizes that humans not only have a history, but that they create it -- and are themselves changed in the process.

Logically, then, this person-centered version of sexual morality is in accord with the statement of *Gaudium et Spes*, because the nature of the human person is foundational to it. But human nature is ever-changing -- both vertically and horizontally, and so our knowledge of it is also always in process.

Blessed John Henry Newman wrote: ?To live is to change; to live long is to have changed often.? Principles allow development and provide relevant guidance in the wake of change.

By the mid-20th century a new force emerged on the global scene: the liberating awakening of women. They found their voice and brought to the public?s awareness a pivotal fact: Human experiences and conscious reflection on them are mediated through the sexuality/gender of the persons doing the communicating. The entirely male-run church had been operating bereft of feminine experience.

As did laymen, women infiltrated the theological enclave long open only to the clergy. They began adding their insights and expertise, based on experience, to the study of sexual morality. Today there are more lay theologians than clerics in the field, and a vast number of them are women bringing richer and more diverse experiences and insights.

Is it reasonable, then, to derive sexual guidelines only from the more limited experiences of males committed to lifetime celibacy?

Should final decisions regarding sexual morality for all persons be filtered only through such a single mindset and then imposed dictatorially on all members -- men and women, married and single, homosexuals at all androgynal points on the spectrum?

It borders on the ridiculous to disallow contributions that the very people possessing the requisite wisdom born of experience can bring to the discussions.

Pope Paul VI rejected the consensus of lay members (only one woman was included) on his commission to study birth control. The 1977 Catholic Theological Society of America study had a broader representation: two priests, two married men, and a woman religious.

The Sexual Person is an offering from two married men, bringing moral insights from both their academic profession and their lived family experiences.

The roles of theologian and bishop in their complementary relationship are badly in need of re-examination and carefully nuanced distinctions.

It is apparent that the hierarchy has usurped the entire teaching office -- the ?magisterium? -- for themselves; yet they are only one of three components endowed with this charism. Theologians and the wisdom born of experience in the ?sense of the faithful? comprise the other two. It would seem, then, that appropriate exercise of their distinctive roles requires that bishops collaborate rather than compete.

Finally, theologians must constantly emphasize that their role is not catechesis. Theology?s mission is not that of mere communicator between hierarchy and laity. When denunciations such as that pronounced on this latest scholarly work by Salzman and Lawson cease to be standard operating procedure, then, and probably only then, will Catholic moral theology move forward, offering light and guidance to contemporary Catholics -- and to society at large with whom it will undoubtedly resonate.

[Regina Schulte is a theologian and the wife of the late James Schulte, coauthor of *Human Sexuality*.]

Editor's Note: For more on church teaching on sexuality, see *NCR*'s editorial: The wisdom of the church?s three magisteria [1].

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