

The wisdom of the church's three magisteria

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There are no perfect rules for sexual behavior. Human sexuality is complex and multilayered. Because it's such a powerful energy, it will always need to be protected and shaped by personal responsibility and institutional guidance, yet it also needs to be respected and acknowledged as a creative and mystical spiritual source.

Two principles capture the essence of the official Catholic position on the morality of sexuality: first, that any human genital act must occur within the framework of heterosexual marriage; second, each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life.

In their comprehensive overview of Catholic sexual ethics, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, published in 2008, theologians Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler of Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., examined and challenged these principles, contending that the church is being inconsistent in its teaching by adopting a dynamic, historically conscious anthropology and worldview on social ethics and the interpretation of scripture, while adopting a static, classicist anthropology and worldview on sex matters.

While some documents from the Second Vatican Council, like *Gaudium et Spes*, which carried this statement -- "The marital act promotes self-giving by which spouses enrich each other" -- gave hope for a renewed understanding of sexuality, the church has not carried out the full implications of this approach.

In short, Salzman and Lawler say, emphasize relationships, not only acts, and recognize Christianity's historically and culturally conditioned understanding of human sexuality. Their daring and potentially revolutionary book aimed to provoke constructive dialogue among theologians, and between theologians and the church's magisterium.

In a 24-page critique issued Sept. 15, the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops concluded the book was "in serious error, and cannot be considered authentic Catholic teaching." The committee issued its critique, it said, because of the pastoral danger that readers of the book could be confused or misled.

"There is need of a standard above one's personal experience -- provided by natural law, scripture and the magisterium," the document said. "Salzman and Lawler, however, explicitly reject the idea of a hierarchy among the sources of moral knowledge. ... In this approach, there is no overall authority to resolve conflicts among the sources; there can only be 'dialogue.'"

It was the newly Blessed John Henry Newman himself who pointed out that there are really three magisteria in the church: the mouth of the episcopacy, the doctors (meaning the theologians) and the people in the pews. Newman valued all three equally and the wise balance and guidance they provided.

"I think I am right in saying that the tradition of the apostles, committed to the whole church in its various constituents and functions ... manifests itself variously at various times: sometimes by the mouth of the episcopacy, sometimes by the doctors, sometimes by the people, sometimes by liturgies, rites, ceremonies, and

customs, by events, disputes, movements, and all those other phenomena which are comprised under the name of history. It follows that none of those channels of tradition may be treated with disrespect.?

Newman was fascinated with the interactions among these three magisteria in history when doctrine and theology were being formulated, notably in the early centuries when the laity saved the church from the Arian heresy and then in the 19th century when the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was forged by Pope Pius IX, who preferred expressions taken from the church's lived experience, from the faith and worship of the Christian people, to scholastic definitions.

Fr. Charles Curran, moral theologian at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, writes in his foreword to *The Sexual Person*: "Anyone familiar with the Catholic tradition and its history knows that arguments and even sharp differences between and among Catholic theologians are nothing new. In fact, in earlier times the differences were more severe than they are today. ... In that historical context, *The Sexual Person* makes a significant contribution. Not all theologians will agree with what Salzman and Lawler propose but all must recognize they have achieved their purpose of entering into a genuine and respectful dialogue in the search of the truth and meaning of human sexuality in the Catholic tradition today.?"

Such dialogue has shaped the church's overarching cultural and ethical watchtower from the earliest days, and it should guide us reliably and wisely through the complex terrain of sexual ethics as well.

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