

**SAINT AUGUSTINE AND CONJUGAL SEXUALITY**

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*BY*

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No one has ever questioned the extraordinary quality of St. Augustine's mind. Some, however, consider that mind to have been stained by a pessimistic streak, especially with regard to sexuality; [1] and they feel that Augustine's subsequent influence—proportionate to the quality of his mind—has left the Church's thought burdened, right down to our days, with a negative and defective ethic on sexuality and marriage.

This appreciation does justice neither to Augustine nor to the tradition of Catholic sexual morality. Augustine's outlook, like that of every man, was marked by the experiences of his past. But the Manicheism of his early days remained for him a darkness from which he had emerged, and not a source of recurrent pessimism. [2] Once he began to walk in the light of the faith, his vision of sexuality and marriage became more and more sharpened and refined by his efforts, in controversy, to keep a Catholic balance between the extremes of Manicheism, on the one hand, and Pelagianism, on the other.

### ***The Manichean attack on procreative marriage***

With regard to marriage, a first accusation against Augustine is that he sees only its procreative dimension, to the exclusion of its other aspects. Now it is certainly true that marriage for Augustine is primarily a procreative society. One understands this emphasis better, if one remembers the incredibly insane Manichean tenets he had to combat. Since the body, in the dualist view of the Manicheans, is the work of the devil, the propagation of the body is evil; and marriage, considered as the institutional means of procreation, is also evil. At the same time, sexual activity, so long as conception is avoided, is of little importance, [3] since it affects the body alone and not the spirit.

To the Manichean argument that marriage is bad because procreation is bad, Augustine offers the counter-thesis that it is precisely the goodness of procreation which makes marriage good. [4] This explains in large part his insistence on the generative purpose of sex. [5]

Now, while Augustine's defence of marriage centred on its procreative finality, it is inexact to suggest that he had (to use the modern expression) no "personalist" understanding of the conjugal relationship. In his treatise on Contenance, he strongly defends the goodness of sexual difference and of the union of husband and wife. [6] Of particular importance is his work *De bono coniugali*, written to refute the accusation of Manicheism made by Jovinianus against the Catholics.

In the opening chapter, Augustine clearly sets forth the broad human foundation on which he grounds the goodness of marriage: man's sociable nature and the natural value that man finds in friendship. It is only after laying down that human sociability finds its first natural expression precisely in marital society, that he goes on to indicate what it is that distinguishes the married relationship: i.e., the fact that it involves a man and a woman not in any mere ordinary friendship, but in a procreative society. [7]

Elsewhere in the same work, within the dominant concept that marriage is meant for procreation, we find further clear notes of what may be termed conjugal personalism. Augustine argues explicitly that there are other ends to marriage, besides procreation, which also make it good. Observing that "it is proper to inquire for what reason marriage be good," he goes on, "And this seems to me not merely to be on account of the begetting of children, but also on account of the natural association between the two sexes," [8] whose mutual faith he describes as "the first fellowship of humankind in this mortal state." [9]

He insists on the value of love between husband and wife, and how the *ordo caritatis* unites those whom age or misfortune may have deprived of children: "Now in good although aged marriage, even if the vigour of youth between man and woman has faded, the order of charity between husband and wife remains in its fullness." [10]

He presents fidelity as an exchange of mutual respect and service, [11] and insists too that "the bodies of the married too are holy, when they keep faith to one another and to God." [12] And in his later work on widowhood, he writes: "The good of marriage is always a good indeed. In the people of God it was at one time an act of obedience to the law; now it is a remedy for weakness, and for some solace of human nature." [13]

## The “bona” of matrimony

As can be seen from these passages, Augustine is conscious not only of the procreative ordering of marriage, but also of its unitive value. Now, to my way of thinking, Augustine's doctrine of the triple *bona* of marriage—*proles, fides, sacramentum* [14] — *should be* read not merely in an institutional context (as is normally done), but also precisely in personalist terms. The penetrating analysis of the three-fold matrimonial *bona* has never lost relevance over 1500 years. [15]

It is not Augustine's fault if the *bona* have subsequently been inserted into (and appropriated by) a rather narrow canonical and institutional understanding of matrimony, which laid special emphasis on the aspect of *obligation* involved in each *bonum* and concerned itself mainly with the juridical consequences of their *exclusion*. I think it is beyond question that this dwelling on the obligatoriness of the *bona* has tended to obscure their actual *goodness*. Now Augustine did not present the *bona* mainly as obligations, but as values, as blessings.

"Let these nuptial blessings be the objects of our love: offspring, fidelity, the unbreakable bond. . . . Let these nuptial blessings be praised in marriage by him who wishes to extol the nuptial institution." [16] For him, each of the essential properties of the conjugal society—its exclusiveness, its permanence, its procreativity—is a *good* thing that gives dignity to matrimony and shows its deep correspondence the innate aspirations of human nature, which can therefore take glory in this goodness: “This is the goodness of marriage, from which it takes its glory: offspring, chaste fidelity, unbreakable bond.” [17]

The good or value of fidelity is surely clear. "You are *unique* to me” Is the first truly personalized affirmation of conjugal love; and echoes the words God Addresses to each one of us in Isaiah: “*Meus es tu*” — “You are mine.” [18] The value of a bond of love that is permanent should also be clear: the goodness of knowing that one is entering a stable home or haven, that one's “belonging” to another— and that other's belonging to one—is for always. People want that, and while they know that it will require sacrifices, it is *natural* to sense that the sacrifices are worth it. "It is natural for the human heart to accept demands, even difficult ones, in the name of love for an ideal, and above all in the name of love for a person." [19] There is also a natural value, a truly personalist good, in a union that by its fruitfulness fulfils man's normal longing for self-perpetuation and for the perpetuation, in offspring, of conjugal love. [20]

In this sense one can claim that Augustine's doctrine of the triple *bona* is personalist. If we have largely lost that positive vision of these basic values of marriage, if we too easily tend to think of the burden, and not of the goodness and attractiveness, of an exclusive life-long, fruitful union between man and woman, then it is perhaps we, and not St. Augustine, who could be charged with pessimism. [21]

### **The Pelagian exaltation of sex**

Augustine's writings on sex and marriage aimed to combat not only the negative views of the Manicheans, but also the over-optimistic views of the Pelagians. With regard to his anti-Pelagian works, it is also important to bear in mind the nature and terms of the debate in which he sought to defend a Christian understanding of sexual morality against a naturalistic exaltation of sex.

In his controversy with the Pelagians, the main point that is of interest here is the nature of *concupiscence*. The Pelagians maintained that concupiscence is a natural good, [22] and is evil only in its excesses. [23] Augustine holds that it is in itself a disease or disorder, [24] which accompanies man as a consequence of original sin.

The present imperfections of man are seen by Augustine in the light of the perfection of man's first creation, and of his eternal destiny. The concupiscence of the flesh is but one aspect of that broader concupiscence—an unwanted law everting man's values—that Augustine, like men before and after him, experienced. In his teaching on concupiscence, St. Augustine was of course following in the footsteps of St. Paul, who so bitterly complained to the Romans about the sin-engendered concupiscence which held him captive, and who so forcefully expressed his longings to be freed from the law of sin that dwelt in his members. [25]

Augustine's attitude towards the body has nothing Manichean to it; but he feels how "our body weighs heavily on our soul," [26] and, again like Paul, he looks for deliverance. He particularly senses that sexual nature is out of harmony with its original plan, and he longs for that situation of Paradise where sexual desire and activity would not have been subject to libido, [27] and where it would have been possible to engage in marital relations without having instinct tending to dominate over mind and will and love.

Like Paul, Augustine was not a man for understatement, and it is easy to take some of his affirmations about concupiscence out of context. The Pelagian bishop Julian of Eclanum did exactly this: and we can be grateful to him, for the result was Augustine's *De nuptiis et concupiscentiis*, which clarifies many finer points of his thought and enables us to grasp it in precision.

### *Augustine and sexual pleasure*

Julian had twisted Augustine's strictures on concupiscence, as though they implied a negative judgment on the attraction between the sexes, or on sexual pleasure in marital relations. Augustine vigorously denies Julian's charges that he had ever condemned sexual differences or union or fruitfulness: "He asks us whether it is the difference in the sexes which we ascribe to the devil, or their union, or their very fruitfulness. We answer, then, nothing of these qualities, inasmuch as sexual differentiation pertains to the bodies of the parents, while the union of the two pertains to the procreation of children, and their fruitfulness to the blessing pronounced on the marriage institution. But *all these things are of God*. . . ." [28]

And in a later passage he reiterates that he has nothing to object to Julian's praise (by which he seeks to lead the thoughtless astray) "of the works of God; that is, his praising of human nature, of human seed, of marriage, of sexual intercourse, of the fruits of matrimony: *which are all of them good things*." [29] When Augustine condemns concupiscence, therefore, he condemns none of these divinely-given values of sexual nature. Now a further point is to be noticed. Augustine makes it clear that what he regards as the disorder of concupiscence is not synonymous with sexual *pleasure* either.

This point needs to be specially stressed since, given the vigor with which Augustine criticizes the yielding to concupiscence, a superficial reader might easily be led to conclude that he is criticizing the actual seeking of pleasure itself in marital intercourse. A proper reading shows that this is not so.

Already in *De bono coniugali*, in a passage where he compares nourishment and generation, he had insisted that sexual pleasure, sought temperately and rationally, is not and cannot be termed concupiscence. [30] Elsewhere he contrasts the lawful pleasure of the conjugal embrace with the unlawful pleasure of fornication. [31]

In his debate with Julian, he makes it clear that it is not pleasure which he criticizes: "because pleasure can also be honourable"; [32] and he is content that Julian admits that pleasure can be both licit and illicit. [33] One specially interesting passage shows the methodical way in which he deals with his adversary, declining to let him score debating points by reading ideas into Augustine's writings which he has not put there, or by accusing him of things he has not said. He will go along with Julian when the latter lists the God-made and therefore praiseworthy aspects of the sexual relationship; but he will not let himself be drawn further.

When Julian affirms (as if Augustine had denied) that marital intercourse, with its intimacy, with its *pleasure*, with its semination, are from God and therefore in their own way to be praised, Augustine rapidly ticks off these "non-arguments"—Dixit "*cum calore*"; dixit "*cum voluptate*"; dixit "*cum semine*"—which are irrelevant to their debate, since Augustine is in full agreement that these are good things given by God. But, he goes on, Julian, who says of all of this (making points which I have never called into question), does not mention precisely what I say is bad in intercourse: carnal concupiscence or *libido*. [34]

Before looking more closely at what Augustine means by carnal concupiscence, it is worth summing up what we have so far established. The essential goods of marriage—offspring, fidelity, the unbreakable bond—are vigorously defended and praised by Augustine, who presents them as the laudable blessings of the married state. He also proposes the goodness of sexual differences, and of the intimacy and pleasure of marital intercourse: all of these given by God. The disorder that he draws attention to resides in our sense appetite (which, once again, is good in itself), [35] and that disorder makes itself particularly felt in the area of sexuality. His reserve, then, is not about the goodness of marriage, but about the force and effect of *libido* or the *concupiscentia carnis* which, he says, "is not a good that proceeds from the essence of marriage, but an evil which is the accident of original sin." [36]

### *Concupiscence in marriage*

What then, for Augustine, is carnal concupiscence, if it is not the pleasure of sexual intercourse? [37] It is that "disobedience of the flesh" as a result of which the human will "has lost all proper command for itself over its own members"; [38] "that carnal appetite which impels man to seek feelings because of the pleasure they give, whether the spirit opposes or consents to this." [39]

It is that disordered aspect of sexual desire which breaks away from man's will and from the rational ordering of the sex appetite; which so often makes him experience sexual desire when satisfaction of that desire is either impossible or illicit; which blurs his moral sense, inspiring that his mind reproves: actions that are to be judged "*non concupiscendo, sed intelligendo*. [40] In a word, concupiscence is the compelling tendency to seek pleasure independently of reason or will. [41]

One would expect few to quarrel with Augustine if he had illustrated the presence of concupiscence or lust by simply pointing to such phenomena as fornication or adultery. But we cannot and should not want to pass over the fact that he speaks of concupiscence *within marriage itself*, in the exercise of conjugal relations. One of his frequently repeated ideas is that even in the lawful use of marriage there is an *evil* present, an evil which chaste spouses use well. [42] For some people this idea alone is enough to justify the charge against Augustine of a negative and Manichean approach to sex. Yet I think that his position can be shown not only to be truly Christian, but to contain deep insights for the guidance of both the married and the single.

Part of Augustine's argument is that no one is ashamed of what is *totally* good, [43] and he uses this point to show that *some* element of disorder accompanies the marriage act. He argues that, even though people think it fitting to perform their upright actions in the broad light of day, this is not so with the conjugal act, which—although upright—spouses would *be ashamed to perform in public*: "Why so, if not because that which is by nature fitting and decent, is so done as to be accompanied with a shame-begetting penalty of sin?" [44]

Why is it that normal married couples, who are not ashamed to give public expression to their mutual affection by means of a glance or a smile, would nevertheless be embarrassed to perform the marital act before others, even (it is once again Augustine's example) before their own children?

The explanation no doubt lies partly in the imperious nature of the sexual urge as a result of which an ambivalent element easily enters even into marital sexuality. [45] The ambiguity appears in the very marriage act itself: what should be wholly an act of love may be merely an act of selfishness; what should be the greatest physical expression of self-giving and dedication to another—filled therefore with gentleness and consideration—can be reduced to an essentially selfish act, intent on satisfying a powerful urge to mere physical self-gratification.



Spouses who sincerely love each other are readily aware of this element in their relationship which requires purification. They sense the need to temper or restrain the force drawing them together, in such a way that they can be united in an act of true mutual giving, and not one of mere simultaneous taking. Their intimacy is therefore not something to which they can too lightly abandon themselves, for they are put to the test in it, at least before each other's eyes. It is only natural that they do not want that test to be subject to the scrutiny of others.

A further point is that the sexual urge, besides being imperious, tends to be indiscriminate; it easily disconnects itself from love and draws a person in a direction that love cannot or ought not to go. Such is the case, for instance, of the single person who feels a powerful attraction towards the husband or wife of a friend. The fact of marrying does not necessarily eliminate these difficulties. A married person too can be suddenly beset by an unwanted and perhaps apparently uncontrollable sexual desire for a third person. Within married life itself, as between husband and wife, desire: may come at a moment when it cannot be lovingly satisfied, or go in a direction which may not be properly followed.

The husband who cares for his wife will at times find himself in the throes of this conflict. He realizes perhaps that his wife does not want intercourse, and yet he does: or, more accurately, his instinct does. He would wish to have his sexual nature readily obedient to the call of his will, to the control of reason; yet finds that his instinct does not easily obey. He has to master it. This difficulty which he experiences, this "struggle between will and libido,"<sup>[46]</sup> this threatening presence, also within marriage, of sexual selfishness, constitutes the evil of concupiscence which, according to Augustine, married people must learn to use well.

### *Conjugal chastity*

This disorder of concupiscence, which in our present state accompanies the goodness of marriage, is redeemed by the virtue of chastity. Here Augustine's thought can be condensed in a single phrase, where he distinguishes "the goodness of marriage from the evil of carnal concupiscence, which is well used by conjugal chastity."<sup>[47]</sup>

What Augustine means by married chastity emerges from his comments on the Genesis account of Adam and Eve's behaviour before and after the Fall. Before the Fall, they were naked and yet felt no shame (Gen. 2:25): "not because they could not see, but because they felt nothing in their members to make them ashamed of what they saw." [48] In that state of integrated nature, Adam and Eve sensed nothing disordered—no element of selfishness—in the conjugal attraction between them. Not mere instinct, but their mind and will, would have determined the occasions of having marital relations, which would have corresponded fully and effortlessly to their own sense of mutual donation in the exercise of their generative power. "If there had been no sin, man would have been begotten by means of the organs of generation, not less obedient than his other members to a quiet and normal will." [49]

Augustine dwells on our first parents' reaction when, after sinning, they discovered that sexual desire seemed to have broken loose from conjugality: a sense of shame made them cover their members, and they clothed themselves. It is important to bear in mind that this shame was just between the two of them: who, after all, were husband and wife, and were alone. It was precisely into their mutual relationship that shame had entered. They were not ashamed to be husband and wife, nor to express their conjugal affection; but they were ashamed at a new element that threatened the purity which they had experienced in their original relationship.

Here we see both the effect of concupiscence and the natural reaction to it. Its effect is to make man and woman become too immediately absorbed with the exterior physical aspects and attraction of sex, preventing them from reaching, "seeing," and understanding the inner meaning and real substance and value of sexual differences and complementarity. Our first parents had that deeper and fuller vision in their state of original creation, and so could look with undisturbed joy on one another's nakedness without having sexual attraction or sexual understanding—sexual enrichment—perturbed by an excessive corporal impact. The covering of their nakedness, after the Fall, was a natural reaction designed to defend the clarity of their vision, their ability to see each other's sexuality in its full "spousal" meaning and not to run the risk of being blinded by its physical aspect alone. [50]

In the reaction of Adam and Eve we see the *pudicitia coniugalis*: a certain modesty or reserve as between husband and wife born of their vigilance at what each senses is a tendency not to honor the mystery of their reciprocal sexuality, and not to act according to the laws which their mind discovers in it: a tendency which is a temptation to use, and not to respect, the other. Adam and Eve give a first example of married chastity, taking precautions so as to preserve their mutual love from the selfishness of that urge "which is not readily obedient to the will of even chaste-minded husbands and wives."[\[51\]](#)

The action of Adam and Eve exemplifies that sense of shame which, given the present state of our nature, is now natural to all men and women. [\[52\]](#) Their action also points up a clear lesson: if married people do not observe a certain modesty or restraint in their conjugal relations, this can undermine the mutual respect that should characterize their love, as well as the true freedom with which their reciprocal spousal donation should be made. [\[53\]](#)

### ***Catholic tradition and the wrong use of the body***

As is logical, it is not only in married life that chastity has its applications. Perhaps the closest parallel to the experience of Adam and Eve is that of the teenage boy and girl in whom an initial attraction of idealistic love suddenly becomes aware of the disturbing element of the flesh. They should realize that this new attraction between them is also natural, while at the same time recognizing that not everything about it is good. Just as, at a later stage, the young man and woman preparing to marry can be convinced that not everything is good in the instinct drawing them so powerfully to one another; and can remain so convinced even when they recognize the goodness of the union to which it draws them. It is not bad to be drawn to that union; yet it is not good to be drawn to it against one's better judgment.

So much modern "sex education" is in effect trying to instil into young people's minds the idea that there is no such thing as a good or bad use of sexuality: that all use of the body is in fact indifferent. Augustine, along with the whole Catholic tradition of moral teaching, insists that it *is precisely because the body is good that it can be used wrongly*. So in a characteristic passage, he contrasts the virtuous use of the *evil* of 'libido' (i.e., the ordered use of sexuality despite the disorder of concupiscence) by married people, and the sinful misuse of the *good* of the body by the unchaste.[\[54\]](#)

Concupiscence constantly threatens to dominate both the married and the single; it has, as Augustine says, "to be mastered by the chaste," [55] and chastity, further, is a gift of God. [56]

Continuous pressure is being exercised on young people today to behave as if it were immodesty, and not modesty, which is natural; as if a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, felt no natural reproach—from within—at certain ways of talking or dressing or acting; as if passion were never selfish and grasping and in need of being so judged and resisted. All of this can lead, through a progressive dulling of the moral sense, to the unnatural and inhuman situation where the atmosphere reigning between the sexes becomes one of suspicion, distrust, or fear, and where lack of respect acts as a powerful inhibitory factor on the effective growth and maturing of love.

In this context, it should be emphasized that awareness of the presence of a selfish element in the realm of sexuality is not the result of formal religious training. On the contrary, it is *natural* to each person to be aware of this problem, [57] just as it is natural for each one to be aware of that something wrong with his or her nature which Christians have traditionally called original sin, and which prompts "desires against which the faithful also have to battle." [58] The Church does not accept that it is being pessimistic in urging people to fight against the bad tendencies of fallen nature. This is realism not pessimism. To say we cannot win in the fight would be pessimism; we can win—with Christ, [59] not without him. But to say that there is no fight to be fought, is a form of Pelagianism.

The faithful readily enough recognize the truths behind the Church's teaching; and while they may well wish that there were no need to struggle, [60] they welcome positive guidance about the nature of the war which all of us must wage, and about the spiritual means offered to us (prayer and the sacraments, above all) so as not to be defeated in the struggle, or so as to remedy the defeats that may come and so ensure eventual victory.

### *Truth in sexual knowledge*

Space does not permit more than a brief reference to a question that occupied St. Augustine (although from quite a different point of view to the one outlined here): why Adam and Eve did not (as it seems) have intercourse in Paradise. [61] It was after the Fall that they, to use the biblical term, *knew* each other. [62]

I feel that the expressiveness of the biblical term warrants a reading with rich pastoral and spiritual overtones.

Canon law puts personal consent at the heart of the constitution of the matrimonial covenant, and insists that no human power can replace this consent (c.1057, § 2). It does not seem necessary to suppose that divine power—God's will—replaced the human consent of Adam and Eve. One can surely say rather that they—knowing they had been created by God to be husband and wife—joyfully accepted and ratified this divine choice. If they did not have intercourse in Paradise, however, this was no doubt because they were not yet "ready for it"; they were still, we might say, in the period of courtship, in the process of getting to know each other spousally; and the act of intercourse—as involving the fullness of spousal donation, self-revelation, and knowledge—would, at that stage, not yet *have made sense*. [63]

It is the tendency towards sexual union when this "does not make sense" that is the practical expression of carnal concupiscence, present in both the single and the married. Intercourse for those not joined in marriage makes *no* sense: they *cannot* share the spousal knowledge of each other implied in intercourse, which thus becomes a non-sensical act. For husband and wife, intercourse makes sense; but it only makes full sense if the act implies a ratification of the procreative orientation of the married relationship. That is why contraceptive marital intercourse again makes no sense; it "contradicts the *truth* of conjugal love," [64] and is therefore a sign of the domination of carnal concupiscence. And that is further why intercourse restricted to the infertile periods without due reason, makes *little* sense; whereas restriction to those periods, with sufficient reason, *makes* sense, and shows the full dominion of reason over instinct.

### ***The imperfection of non-procreative marital intercourse***

What should we think of Augustine's frequently expressed opinion that married intercourse is justified only if it is intended to be procreative, and has an element of imperfection or venial fault, if carried out solely for pleasure? [65] Augustine was basing himself on 1 Corinthians 7:5-7, where St. Paul, advising spouses not to abstain too long from intercourse, adds that he says this "*secundum veniam*" (The Vulgate says "*secundum indulgentiam*"). Since Paul is evidently speaking of what can be *allowed* to married couples, one can certainly quarrel with Augustine's exegesis that he is imputing a *sin* to them.

It seems to me that, as between Paul and Augustine, the difference of emphasis but also the close connection in their thought, is shown in the proposition that for spouses to seek intercourse—consciously disconnected from its procreative finality—is *excusable* self-seeking (Paul), but is still *self-seeking* (Augustine), and in this latter sense a *venial* fault. [66]

No doubt it is hard nowadays to subscribe to such a view, which seems to pass over the *humanitatis solatium* aspect of marriage. Some would reject it out of hand as ignoring the unitive power and function which marital intercourse has, in itself. This latter point merits some consideration.

Augustine, if he were alive today (and Thomas Aquinas with him), might draw our attention to the essential teaching of *Humanae Vitae*—that the unitive and the procreative aspects of the marriage act are inseparable—and ask us to ponder whether one can actually say that intercourse has a unitive meaning, "in itself," without reference, that is, to its procreative function. [67] If *Humane Vitae* tells us that the two meanings of the act are inseparable, does it not follow that the exclusion of the procreative meaning—even on the merely intentional level—frustrates the act's unique power to express and effect union? The human meaning of "You are my spouse" is, "You are unique to me; and the proof of your uniqueness is that with you, and with you alone, I am prepared to share my procreative power." The unitive function and meaning of conjugal intercourse consist precisely in this *sharing of reciprocal procreativity*; one can find nothing else in it that makes it truly expressive of the *uniqueness* of the conjugal relationship. [68]

If spouses are not consciously seeking the unitive experience of sharing their complementary procreativity, what else is it but pleasure (divorced from meaning) that they are seeking? Be it noted: I do not say they do wrong in seeking this pleasure; all I suggest is that the mutual sharing of pleasure alone is a very *imperfect* (and non-conjugal) substitute for the truly unitive experience involved in intercourse open to life.

Married chastity is necessarily based on understanding and respecting the procreative orientation of the conjugal act. Augustine points out how concupiscence is moderated by "parental affection": and says that "a certain gravity or depth of meaning is given to the intense pleasure of intercourse when husband and wife reflect that their union tends to make them father and mother." [69] Once again we see that he has nothing to say against pleasure, but insists on the need to reflect on the *meaning* lying behind an act as pleasurable as intercourse. [70]

St. Augustine's insistence that marital sex is truly rational only if it is open to procreation may seem, at first sight, to have neglected the personalist value of sexuality. A closer analysis, however, should lead us to ask whether there is any true personalism that is anti-procreative; i.e., whether sex deliberately separated from its procreative orientation has rational and personalist conjugal meaning.

While we are of course free to disagree with Augustine or Aquinas, it could well be asked if there is not a tendency today to leave married people with the impression that nothing in their mutual physical relationship calls for restraint, that their mutual love is in no way endangered by the element of selfishness operative in sexuality. Proper guidance for the married should surely help them to distinguish that element of self-seeking which can be present in their intimate relations, and which tends to be more present the more the conjugal act itself is intentionally severed from its procreative orientation. In Augustine's teaching, conjugal chastity keeps spouses on the right side of the *limes mali*, [71] the boundary of evil, beyond which lies the area of moral fault.

I have argued elsewhere [72] that it seems inadequate to wish to explain the pleasure of conjugal intercourse exclusively in terms of its procreative purpose. The abundance of pleasure in this act is surely also meant to correspond to the joyous sense of mutual spousal surrender and possession. It is part of my argument, however, that these personalist values to be naturally found in the marriage act are destroyed if one deliberately denaturalises the act by contraception. If spouses allow pleasure to matter too much to them, they are in danger of taking rather than of giving, and of so losing the sense of mutual donation. Conjugal chastity will help them keep the truly personalist values paramount in their minds: i.e., the reaffirmation, by means of intercourse, of their spousal relationship, shown in the sharing of open-to-life procreativity. These higher motives express and preserve their good will. And then, as Augustine says, the good will of the spouses leads and ennobles the ensuing pleasure (which is had and enjoyed), but their good will is not led and dominated by that pleasure. [73]

### *Neo-dualism?*

It may well be that earlier in the twentieth century Christians needed to shake off a certain Puritanism in sexual matters, although it should be said that this was a particularly Protestant problem. In any case, it is scarcely the problem facing us today.

In this context, it is interesting to recall how Augustine had first to defend marriage and sexuality against the Manichean tendency to treat them with contempt or hatred, and later had to continue to defend them against the Pelagian tendency to treat them as if there were nothing delicate or problematic about them.

Insofar as Puritanism or Jansenism contained some semi-Manichean elements, we have moved away from them. Augustine's firmly held, middle-of-the-road position [74] can warn us of the dangers coming from a neo-Pelagianism, with its false suggestion that *nothing* is wrong with sex, that there is nothing needing *control in sex*.

Augustine no doubt realized something that we could well ponder. The position which denies there is any difficulty to sex, can end by denying there is any goodness to it. If Pelagianism (or neo-Pelagianism) will not face up to the selfish potential of the sexual instinct, then, despite its apparent exaltation of sexuality, it can in the end provoke a near-Manichean reaction, which trivializes sex. In the current devaluation of marriage and procreation, one can read signs of this. Sexuality, deprived of mystery and of meaning, of importance and of difficulty, is being separated both from the order of reality and from that of grace. It is being presented more and more in a depersonalized and basically dehumanized light, as a mere corporal or physiological activity, which man can engage in without involving his spirit. The dualism of this view is profoundly anti-human and anti-christian.

## Endnotes

1. The theme has been the object of intense debate over the last decades. Among other positive appreciations, see: D. Faul, "Saint Augustine on Marriage" *Augustinus* 12 (1967): 165-180; Fr. Joseph Thonnard, "La morale conjugale selon saint Augustin" *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 15 (1969): 113-131; M. Zalba, "En torero a una interpretación agustiniana" *Augustinus* 15 (1970): 3-18; L. E. Samek, "Sessualità, matrimonio e concupiscenza in sant'Agostino," *Studia Patristica Mediolanensia*, 5 (Milan, 1976): 212-272. Since the debate continues, this contribution of a moralist-canonist may offer some new lights.

2. Cf. E. Schmitt, *Le manage chrétien dans l'oeuvre de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1983), 107ff.



3. Is it not you who hold that begetting children, and so imprisoning souls in the flesh, is a greater sin than cohabitation?" ("Nonne vos estis que filios gignere, eo quod animae ligentur in carne, gravius putatis esse peccatum quam ipsum concubitum?") *De moribus Manich.*, c. 18, n. 65 (PL 32, 1372).
4. "Non enim concubitum, sed ut longe ante ab Apostolo dictum est (I Tim. 4:3), vere nuptias prohibetis, quae talis operis una est honesta defensio." *De moribus Manich.*, c. 18, n. 65 (PL 32, 1372). Cf. *Contra Faustum Manich.*, lib. 30, c. 6 (PL 42, 494).
5. Cf. Covi, D.: "El fin de la actividad sexual según San Augustin," *Augustinus* 17 (1972): 58; Samek, "Sessualità, matrimonio e concupiscenza," 215-218.
6. *De cont.* c. 9, n. 23 (PL 40, 364-365).
7. "Sociale quiddam est human natura, magnumque habet et naturale bonum vim quoque amicitiae. . . Prima itaque naturalis humanae societatis copula vir et uxor est . . . Consequens est connexio societatis in filiis, qui unus honestus fructus est, non coniunctionis maris et feminae, sed concubitus. Poterat esse in utroque sexu, etiam sine tab commixtione. . . amicalis quaedam et germana coniunctio." *De bono coniug.*, c. 1 (PL 40, 373).
  8. "Bonum coniugii . . . cur sit bonum merito quaeritur: Quod mihi non videtur propter solam filiorum procreationem, sed propter ipsam etiam naturalem in diverso sexu societatem." *De bono coniug.*, c. 3, n. 3 (PL 40, 375).
  9. "Quae prima est human generis in ista mortalitate societas." C. 6, n. 6 (PL 40, 377).
  10. "Nunc vero in bono licet annoso coniugio, etsi emarcuit ardor aetatis inter masculum et feminam, viget tamen ordo caritatis inter maritum et uxorem." C. 3, n. 3 (PL 40, 375).
  11. "Fides honoris et obsequiorum invicem debitorum." Ibid.
  12. "Sancta sunt ergo etiam corpora coniugatorum, fidem sibi et Domino servantium." C. 11, n. 13 (PL 40, 382).
  13. "Nuptiarum igitur bonum semper est quidem bonum; sed in populo Dei fuit aliquando legis obsequium; nunc est infirmitatis remedium, in quibusdam vero humanitatis solatium." *De bono vid.*, c. 8, n. 11 (PL 40, 437).

14. *De bono con.*, c. 2r n. 32 (P L 40, 394); *De nupt. Et conc.* I, 17, n. 19 (FL 44, 424); *De Gen. ad litt.*, lib. IX, cap 7, n. 12 (PL 34, 397); *De pecc. orig.*, c. 34, n. 39 (PL 44, 404); *De sancta virginate*, c. 12, n. 12 (PL 42 401).

15. Cf. B. Alves Pereira: *La doctrine du mariage selon saint Augustin* (Paris,1930); A. Reuter, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini doctrina de bonis matrimonii* (Rome: 1942); Samek, *Sessualità, matrimonio e concupiscenza*," 215-218.

16. "In nuptiis tamen bona nuptialia diligentur, proles, fides, sacramentum . . . . Haec bona nuptialia laudet in nuptiis, qui laudare vult nuptias." *De nupt. et conc.* 1, c. 17, n. 19 (PL 44, 424-425); cf. c. 21, n. 23.

17. "Illud esse nuptiarum bonum unde gloriatur nuptiae, id est, proles, pudicitia, sacramentum." *De pecc. orig.*, c. 37, n. 42 (PL 44, 406).

18. 1s. 43:1.

19. Pope John Paul II, *General Audience*, April 28, 1982; cf. *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, V, 1 (1982), 1344.

20. Cf. the author's paper "The Goodness of the Bonum Proles (given at the Princeton University Symposium on *Humane Vitae: August 7-12*,1988), in *International Review*, vol. 12, no. 3 (1988): 181ff.

21. "Are we not in danger of coming to a point where the exclusion of one of the "bona" no longer seems surprising or unnatural to us? Yet it is surprising, precisely because it is not natural.

22. *Contra Jul. Pel.* IV, c. 21 (PL 45, 1348).

23. *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 19, n. 34 (PL 44, 456).

24. Cf. *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 32, n. 55 (PL 44, 469); *Contra Jul. Pel.* V, c. 39 (PL 44, 807).

25. Rom. 7:8, 23-24; cf. Gal. 5:17.

26. In reference to Rom. 7:24: "Ubi quid intellecturi sumus, nisi quia corpus quod corrumpitur, aggravat animam?" *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 31, n. 35 (PL 44, 433).

27. *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 27, n. 30 (PL 44, 431); *De civ. Dei* XIV, c. 23, c. 24 (PL 41, 430sq); *Contra Jul. Pel.* III, c. 25, n. 57 (PL 44, 731-732); *De Gen ad litt.* IX, c. 10, n. 18 (PL 34, 399).

28. "Vides igitur quemadmodum nos interroget . . . utrum diversitatem sexuum dicamus ad diabolum pertinere, an commixtionem, an ipsam fecunditatem. Respondemus itaque, nihil horum; quia et diversitas sexuum pertinet ad vasa gignentium, et utriusque commixtio ad seminationem pertinet filiorum, et ipsa fecunditas ad benedictionem pertinet nuptiarum. Haec autem omnia ex Deo . . ." *De nupt. et conc.*, II, c. 5 (PL 44, 444).

29. "Insinuare se nititur cordibus parum intellegentium, laude operum divinatorum, hoc est, laude naturae humanae, laude seminis, laude nuptiarum, laude utriusque sexus commixtionis, laude fecunditatis: quae omnia bona sunt." *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 26, n. 42 (PL 44, 460).

30. "Et utrumque non est sine delectatione carnali, quae tamen modificata, et temperantia refrenante in usum naturalem redacta, libido esse non potest." *De bono con.*, c. 16, n. 18 (PL 40, 385).

31. "Delectant coniugales amplexus: delectant etiam meretricum. Hoc licite, illud illicite." *Sermo* 159, c. 2, n. 2 (PL 38, 868-869).

32. "Quia potest voluptas et honesta esse . . ." *De nupt et conc.* II, c. 9, n. 21 (PL 44, 448).

33. "Satis est nobis, quod confitearis aliam esse illicitam, aliam licitam voluptatem. Ac per hoc mala est concupiscentia quae indifferenter utrumque appetit, nisi ab illicita voluptate licita voluptate licita voluptate frenetur." *Contra Jul. Pel.* VI, c. 16, n. 50 (PL 44, 852); cf. *ib.* IV, c. 2, n. 7 (PL 44, 739).

34. The passage reads: "'Ista,' inquit, 'corporum commixtio, cum calore, cum voluptate, cum semine, a Deo facta, et pro suo modo laudabilis approbatur' . . . Dixit 'cum calore'; dixit 'cum voluptate'; dixit 'cum semine': non tamen dicere ausus est, Cum libidine: quare, nisi quia nominare erubescit, quam laudare non erubescit?" *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 12, n. 25 (PL 44, 450). For the evolution of Augustine's thought on concupiscence and libido, see Schmitt, *Le mariage chréteïn*, 94-105.

35. *Op. imperf. c. Jul.* IV, c. 29 (PL 45, 1353).

36. "Non est enim ex naturali connubio veniens bonum, sed ex antiquo peccato accidens malum." *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 17, n. 19 (PL 44, 475).

37. And if, therefore, it presumably is not the *rational* desire for pleasure either.

38. "... etiam in membra propria proprium perdidisset imperium." *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 6, n. 7 (PL 44, 418); cf. *De Gen. ad litt.* IX, c. 10, 16ff. (PL 34, 398).

39. "Libido autem sentiendi est, de qua nunc agimus, quae nos ad sentiendum, sive consentientes mente, sive repugnantes, appetitu carnalis voluptatis impellit." *Contra Jul. Pel.* IV, c. 14, n. 65 (PL 44, 770).

40. *Op. imperf. c. Jul.* IV, 69 (PL 45, 1379).

41. It seems more accurate to describe concupiscence as "un manque de contrôle de la raison et de la volonté sur les mouvements des organes sexuels" (E. Schmitt, *Le manage chrétien*, 95) than simply as "the passionate, uncontrolled element in sexuality" (G. Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo* [Canterbury Press, 1986], 375). Man's passions form part of his nature, also in its original state. It is not the passionate, but the uncontrolled, element that characterizes concupiscence.

42. "Cf. *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 21, n. 36 (PL 44, 457); *De pecc. orig.*, c. 37, n. 42 (PL 44, 406); *De cont.* c. 12, n. 27 (PL 40, 368); *Contra Jul. Pel.* V, c. 16 (PL 44, 819), etc. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Suppl.*, q. 41, art. 3 ad 4.

43. "Cum debeat neminem pudere quod bonum est." *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 21, n. 36 (PL 44, 457).

44. "Unde hoc, nisi quia sic geritur quod deceat ex natura, ut etiam quod pudeat comitetur ex poena?" *De civ. Dei*, XIV, c. 18 (PL 41, 427); cf. *Contra duas Ep. Pelag.* I, c. 16, n. 33 (PL 44, 565). Insofar as some looser expressions of St. Augustine may seem to present concupiscence as involving personal guilt, he stands corrected by Thomas Aquinas, who teaches clearly that concupiscence remains in us as a defect ('poena') that accompanies our fallen state, and not as a moral fault ('culpa'): "non est malum culpae, sed poena tantum, quae est inobedientia concupiscentiae ad rationem" (*Suppl.*, q. 49, art. 4 ad 2).

45. That there is something to purify in marital sexuality is expressly recalled by Vatican II when it speaks of how our Lord has "*healed*" ("sanare"), perfected and elevated" conjugal love, also in its physical expressions (*Gaudium*

*et Spes*, n. 49; cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 3). Divine grace is needed to heal the wounds of sexual concupiscence: cf. Thonnard, F.-J.: "La morale conjugale selon saint Augustin," 131.

46. "Hanc voluntatis et libidinis rixam." *De civ. Dei* XIV, c. 23, n. 3 (PL 41, 431).

47. "Nuptiarum bonum a concupiscentiae carnalis malo, quo bene utitur pudicitia coniugalis." *De nupt. et conc.* II, Preface (PL 44, 435-436); cf. *Op. imperf. c. Jul.*, Preface (PL 45, 1049).

48. "Non quia non videbant, sed quia nihil unde confunderentur in membris senserant, quae videbant." *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 5, n. 6 (PL 44, 417).

49. ". . . si peccatum non praecessisset, tranquillae voluntati obedientibus sicut caetera membra genitalibus, seminaretur homo." *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 7, n. 17 (PL 44, 446); cf. *ibid.*, c. 22, n. 37; c. 31, n. 53.

50. Cf. John Paul II, *General Audience*, January 2, 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, III, 1 (1980): 11-15.

51. "Ita ut ipsis quoque pudicis ad nutum non obtemperet coniugatis." *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 35, n. 59 (PL 44, 472).

52. "Hoc pudoris genus, haec erubescendi necessitas certe cum omni homine nascitur, et ipsis quodammodo naturae legibus imperatur, ut in hac re verecundentur etiam ipsa pudica coniugia." *Contra Duas Ep. Pelag.* I, c. 16, n. 33 (PL 44, 565).

53. ". . . that interior freedom of the gift, which of its nature is explicitly spiritual and depends on a person's interior maturity. This freedom presupposes such a capacity of directing one's sensual and emotive reactions as to make self-donation to the other possible, on the basis of mature self-possession . . ." John Paul II, *General Audience*, November 7, 1984: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, VII, 2 (1984): 1174-1175.

54. "Bonum opus est bene uti libidinis malo, quod faciunt coniugati, sicut e contrario malum opus est, male uti corporis bono, quod faciunt impudici." *Contra Jul. opus imperf.* 5, 12 (PL 45, 1143).

55. . . de libidine imperiosa impudicis, domanda pudicis." *De nupt. et conc.* II, c. 35, n. 59 (PL 44, 471). St. Thomas Aquinas says that continence "importat resistantiam rationis ad concupiscentias pravas" (II-II, q. 155, art. 4).

56. ". . . donum esse, et hoc a Deo." *De bono vid.*, c. 4, n. 5 (PL 40, 433); cf. *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 3, n. 3 (PL 44, 415).

57. Cf. F.-J. Thonnard: "La notion de concupiscence en philosophie augustinienne," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 3 (1965): 95.

58. "Operatur desideria, contra quae dimicant et fideles." *Contra Jul. Pel.* II, c. 3, n. 5 (PL 44, 675).

59. "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

60. "Nullus quippe sanctorum est, qui non velit facere ne caro adversus spiritum concupiscat." *Op. imperf. contra lul. VI, c. 14* (PL 45, 1531).

61. Cf. St. Thomas, *Prima Pars*, q. 98, art. 2 ad 2.

62. Cf. Gen. 4:1.

63. If one supposes (although the position is not free from difficulties) that their consent to be husband and wife came at a later time, the matter is clearer still: intercourse—the act of spousal knowledge—when they had not *yet* consented to be spouses, would have made *no* sense.

64. Pope John Paul II, Address, September 17, 1983: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, VI, 2* (1983): 563.

65. "Numquid hoc non est peccatum, amplius quam liberorum procreandrum necessitas cogit, exigere a coniuge debitum? Est quidem peccatum, sed veniale." *Sermo* 51, c. 13, n. 22 (PL 38, 345); cf. *De bono con.*, c. 6, n. 6 (PL 40, 378); *De nupt. et conc.* I, c. 14, n. 16 (PL 44, 423); *Contra Jul. Pel.* V, c. 16, n. 63 (PL 44, 819); *Op. imperf. c. Jul.* I, 68 (PL 45, 1091), etc. It should be noted that Thomas Aquinas teaches the same: II-II, q. 154, art. 2 ad 6; *Suppl.* q. 49, art. 5; cf. q. 41, art. 4.

66. See Samek, "Sessualita, matrimonio e concupiscenza," 245-247.

67. See *ibid.*, 271.

68. Cf. the author's paper, "The Inviolability of the Conjugal Act," in *Creative Love* (Findings of the San Francisco Conference on Human Reproduction: July 1987) (Christendom Press, 1989), 151-167; published also under the title of "Marriage and Contraception," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, English ed. (October 10, 1988): 7-8.

69. "Intercedit enim quaedam gravitas fervidae voluptatis, cum in eo quod sibi vir et mulier adhaerescunt pater et mater esse meditantur." *De bono coniug.*, cap. 3 (PL 40, 375). That "gravitas" has here the sense of "depth of meaning," seems evident since Augustine speaks of spouses who *meditate* on the natural finality of the act they are performing.

70. St. Thomas indicates that the defect in conjugal intercourse is not the intensity of the pleasure accompanying it (which he defends), but the fact that this pleasure does not follow the guide of reason: Suppl. q. 49, art. 4 ad 3.

71. Cf. *Contra Jul. Pel.* IV, c. 8, n. 49 (PL 44, 763).

72. "The Inviolability of the Conjugal Act," 163-164.

73. "Bona voluntas animi, sequentem ducit, non ducentem sequitur corporis voluptatem." *De nupt, et conc.* I, c. 12, n. 13 (PL 44, 421). We could remark here on how the Catholic attitude towards pleasure is boldly brought out by Thomas Aquinas. He teaches that in the state of innocence the pleasure of marital intercourse would have been even greater, due to a purer nature endowed with a more sensitive body (*Prima Pars*, q. 98, art. 2 ad 3).

74. Cf. *Op. imperf. c. Jul.* III, c. 177 (PL 45, 1321); VI, c. 14 (PL 45, 1528), etc.

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