

Introduction to Christian Ethics – Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

HPRS4092

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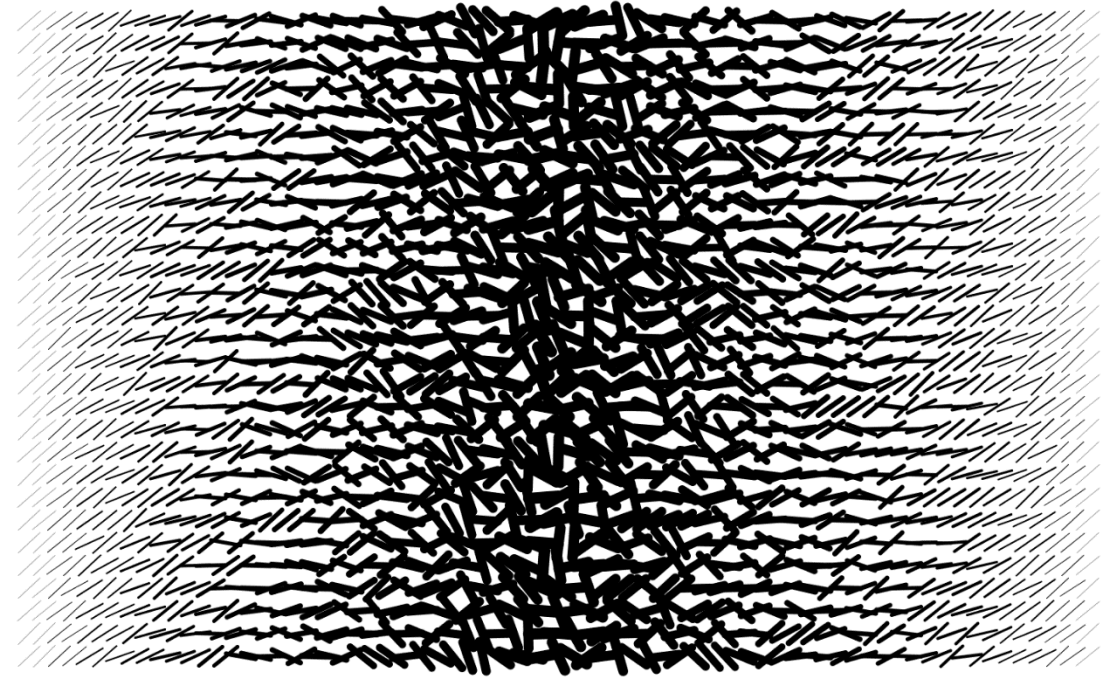
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Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

In the previous sections, we have explored a number of different approaches to ethics, the style and argumentative logics by which ethical issues are understood and by which ethical resolutions or guidance can be formed.

The module now takes a different direction, turning to focus on specific areas of life that have proved problematic, controversial, or interesting for Christian ethics.

For each section, I hope to provide an introductory account of the main Christian ethical commitments relevant to it – obviously a full account of each of these areas could, of itself, fill an entire module! We begin by looking at the overlapping concerns of sex, gender, and sexuality in this section, establishing the key grounds on which Christian ethics approaches the topic.



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Scriptural Injunctions

I want us to begin this section, as usual by now, by examining some of the scriptural passages relevant to the topic of sex, sexuality, and gender – looking at where these prohibitions and instructions come from, in order to provide a grounding for later reflection on the nature of the theological arguments built on top of them.

In doing so, we see a distinct development of Old Testament texts into the New Testament, and then further theological development of these scriptural injunctions by key figures in the Christian theological tradition, such as Augustine and Aquinas.



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Old Testament View

Many of the foundations of Christian approaches to matters of sex arise from the Book of Genesis. This is perhaps unsurprising given the book largely deals with the beginning and purpose of Creation – and therefore with the beginning and purpose of humanity.

As we can see in the two quotes from Genesis opposite (1:27-28 & 2:23-24), sex is created by God with a purpose and with certain boundaries. This purpose is defined by its teleological end – the purpose of sex is to be found in its outcome, procreation, rather than in its genesis or practice.

*So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Genesis 1:27-28

*²³ The man said, “This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”*

²⁴ That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Genesis 2:23-24



Old Testament View

In addition to these proscriptions around sex, the Old Testament also have a significant amount to say about gender – specifically the maintenance of gender distinctions.

These distinctions of gender feed into a number of the other forms of distinction and separation which are a feature of the Levitical code more generally – how each gender should act in order to accentuate their difference and discourage any forms of mixing.

This is highlighted by the ownership of women by men, and the inherent ritual uncleanness associated with menstruation and childbirth.

⁵ *A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.*

Deut 22:5

¹⁹ *“Keep my decrees.*

“Do not mate different kinds of animals.

“Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed.

“Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.

Lev 19:19

²⁷ *“Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.*

Lev 19:27



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New Testament View

Moving on to the New Testament, Jesus says little directly about sexual relations, beyond a reference in Mark to 'sexual immorality' making us 'unclean from within'.

Paul, author of much of the New Testament, speaks somewhat more about sex, developing the notion of the body as being a temple of the Holy Spirit – a place redeemed from slavery to desire, and purified by the Spirit.

²⁰ He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them.
²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

Mark 7:20-23

²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart

Matt 5:28

³ It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; ⁴ that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable, ⁵ not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God

1 Thess 4:4-5



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Pauline Development

This leads to a strong focus on maintaining this purity through resisting temptation to sin – something that can be clearly seen in 1 Corinthians.

The context of this is the association with ritual prostitution in much of the contemporary Near East, where rituality and carnality were closely associated.

¹² “I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³ You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.

1 Corinthians 6:12-20



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New Testament View

Another interesting feature of the shift from the Old Testament to the New Testament is the reduction in the focus on distinctions – between genders, over sex, between ethnicities – that occurs in the light of a number of statements of radical equality made by Jesus, something that would have been incredibly shocking to the strict and carefully divided societies of the time.

In those contemporary societies, distinctions of class / ethnicity / gender were very important not just for the social structure, but also as a reflection of divine order.

²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28

⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

John 8:9-11



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Augustine (354-430AD)

Within Augustine's work, to which I am sure you will return in your studies, the origin of sexual lust and passion within humanity can be traced back to the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis.

Before the Fall, sex was an act of will, while after the Fall, sex was an act of passion.

For Augustine, the purpose of sex was for procreation and the only suitable location of it was within marriage – sex is a duty not a pleasure.

Further to this, sexual passion was a cloud that obscured the true purpose of humanity – the recognition and worship of God.

Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust.

(II.2.1)

For my will was perverse and lust had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity.

(VIII.5.1)

By your grace it will no longer commit in sleep these shameful, unclean acts inspired by sensual images, which lead to the pollution of the body: it will not so much as consent to them.

(X.30.2)



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Augustine

We see an emerging dualism here, between the body as a seat of wickedness and passion – e.g. the sins of the flesh – and the soul, which had to fight to overcome these temptations.

This picks up the Pauline invocations about purity – e.g. Romans 7:15 and Romans 8:13 – and combines them with beliefs about the innate sinfulness of the body. We can see this in the rituals of self mortification that emerge in the Christian tradition.

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

Romans 7:15

¹³ For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

Romans 8:13



Aquinas (1225-1274AD)

For Aquinas, another scholar you will come across again, sex is for procreation – a primary good that follows God's will for us.

Any act which deviates from this primary good, is wrong – therefore forms of sex which do not have the possibility or desire for procreation within them are immoral.

This leads Aquinas to condemn sexual acts like masturbation and homosexuality – and form the foundation of prohibitions on contraception in the Catholic tradition.

For Aquinas, adultery is natural, but it breaks the primary good of living harmoniously in society.

I answer that, As stated above (A6,9) wherever there occurs a special kind of deformity whereby the venereal act is rendered unbecoming, there is a determinate species of lust.

This may occur in two ways:

First, through being contrary to right reason, and this is common to all lustful vices; secondly, because, in addition, it is contrary to the natural order of the venereal act as becoming to the human race: and this is called "the unnatural vice." This may happen in several ways. First, by procuring pollution, without any copulation, for the sake of venereal pleasure: this pertains to the sin of "uncleanness" which some call "effeminacy."

Secondly, by copulation with a thing of undue species, and this is called "bestiality."

Thirdly, by copulation with an undue sex, male with male, or female with female, as the Apostle states (Rm. 1:27): and this is called the "vice of sodomy."

Fourthly, by not observing the natural manner of copulation, either as to undue means, or as to other monstrous and bestial manners of copulation.

Summa Theologica II-II, 154, 11



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These biblical passages and their development in the historical Christian theological tradition have led to a number of principles which undergird much Christian reflection on matters of sex, sexuality, and gender.

These include principles like God's creation of the world being good, that we should perform good and enjoin evil, that God's grace builds on our natural order and completes it, and that our natural purpose can be divined from God's example.

This has resulted in a very teleologically focused (focused on the *telos* or ends) form of sexual ethics – where the purpose of the act was narrowly defined and was the most important characteristic of its moral value.



Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

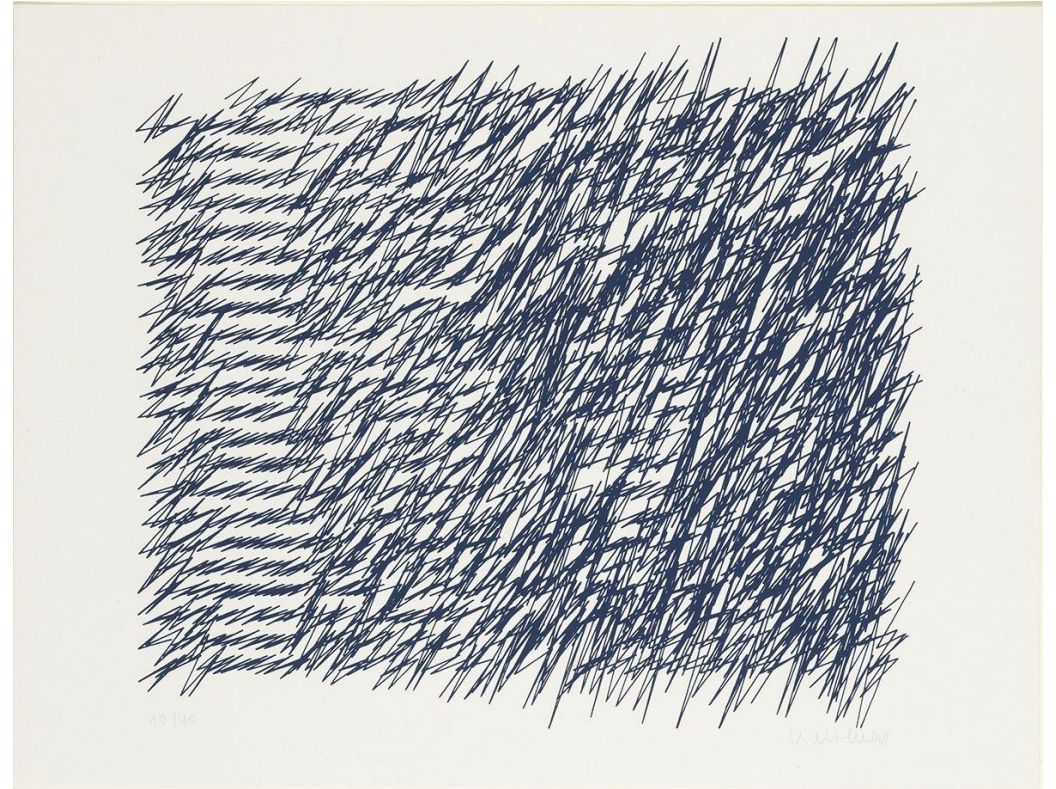
In addition, the tradition has developed a number of general principles which guide moral reflection on these issues. This is particularly true of the Catholic tradition. These include:

Contra naturam – ‘against nature’ or against the natural order

Ex toto genere suo – ‘from their whole nature’, used as categories of particularly grievous sin

Parvitas materiae in sexto – ‘in venereal pleasures there is no slightrness of matter’, meaning that sexual sin is grave by its very nature

Deus impossibilia non iubet – ‘God does not order impossible things’, meaning that God would not command us to do something impossible.



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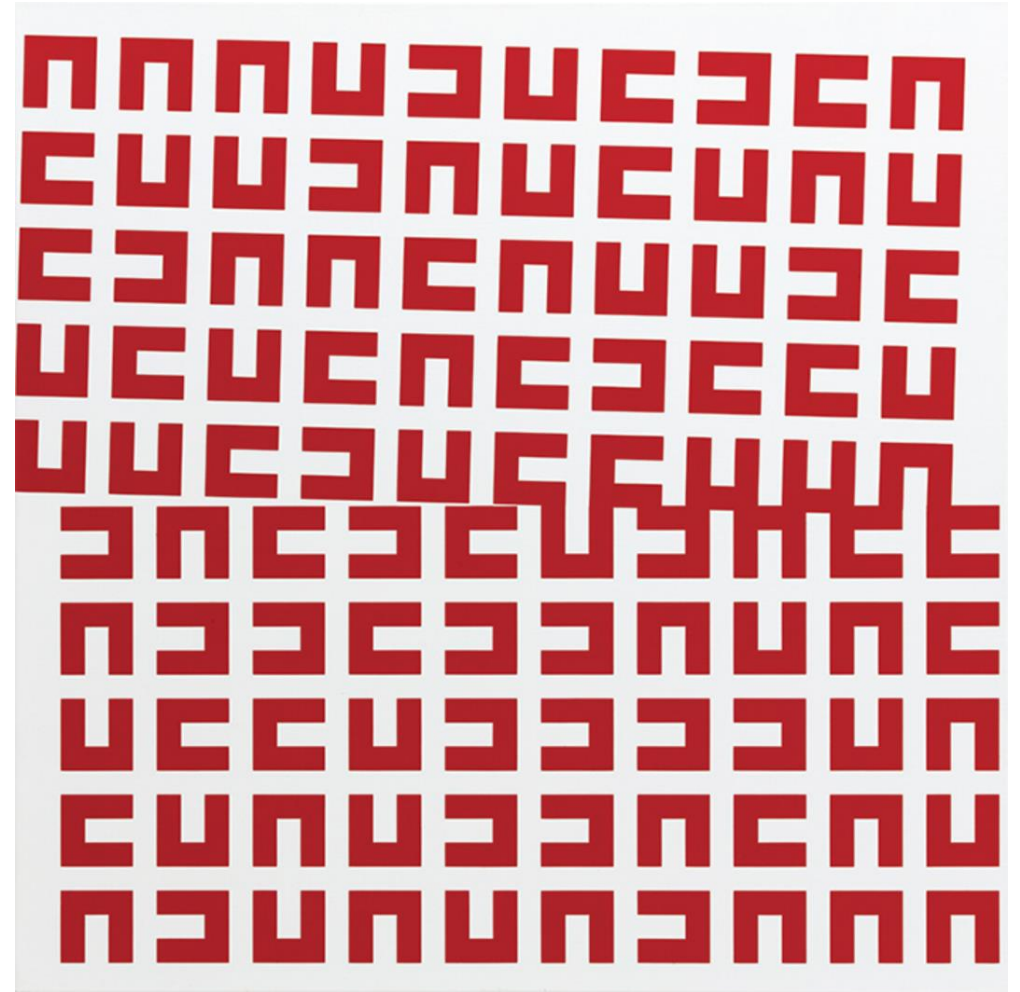
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Contra Naturam

The principle of *Contra Naturam* underlies a great deal of Christian moral reflection on matters of sex, particularly in the Catholic tradition.

While commonly translated as ‘against nature’, it is not the case that it is necessarily against the laws of nature. Rather, the nature which these acts are against is the nature of purpose of the human person.

An example of this could be attitudes towards contraception – while the use of a contraceptive may be against the ‘natural law’ – there being few examples of contraceptive processes to be found in nature – it is seen to be against the nature of the sexual act as one which leads to pro-creation.



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Deus impossibilia non iubet

This principle is that God will not command us to do something, or to uphold an ethical standard, which, by our nature, is impossible for us.

Rather, God's grace is understood to be always available to us, and present with us, to enable us to do the morally correct thing.

This means that failure to uphold moral injunctions cannot be understood as an impossibility, but rather as a consequence of our own weakness and fallenness.

Pope Pius XI reaffirmed this stance re: the purpose of sex and contraception in his encyclical *Casti Connubii* in 1930.

11. Thus amongst the blessings of marriage, the child holds the first place. And indeed the Creator of the human race Himself, Who in His goodness wishes to use men as His helpers in the propagation of life, taught this when, instituting marriage in Paradise, He said to our first parents, and through them to all future spouses: "Increase and multiply, and fill the earth."

61. This truth of Christian Faith is expressed by the teaching of the Council of Trent. "Let no one be so rash as to assert that which the Fathers of the Council have placed under anathema, namely, that there are precepts of God impossible for the just to observe. God does not ask the impossible, but by His commands, instructs you to do what you are able, to pray for what you are not able that He may help you."

Casti Connubii – "Of Chaste Wedlock", Pius XI, 1930.



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Homosexuality

An interesting example of where these principles of the Catholic tradition express themselves in this sphere is the matter of homosexuality.

As can be seen opposite in a quotation from the Catechism, homosexuality is seen as being intrinsically disordered because its performance is not open to the gift of life (pregnancy), and is therefore against the purpose of both sex (procreation) and humanity (worship of God through controlled sexual behaviour).

Thus all non-procreative sexual acts are against nature, and therefore immoral, but this does not mean that the person themselves is – only their acts.

“Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexuality as a grave depravity, tradition has always declared that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered. They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.”

Catholic Catechism, 2357



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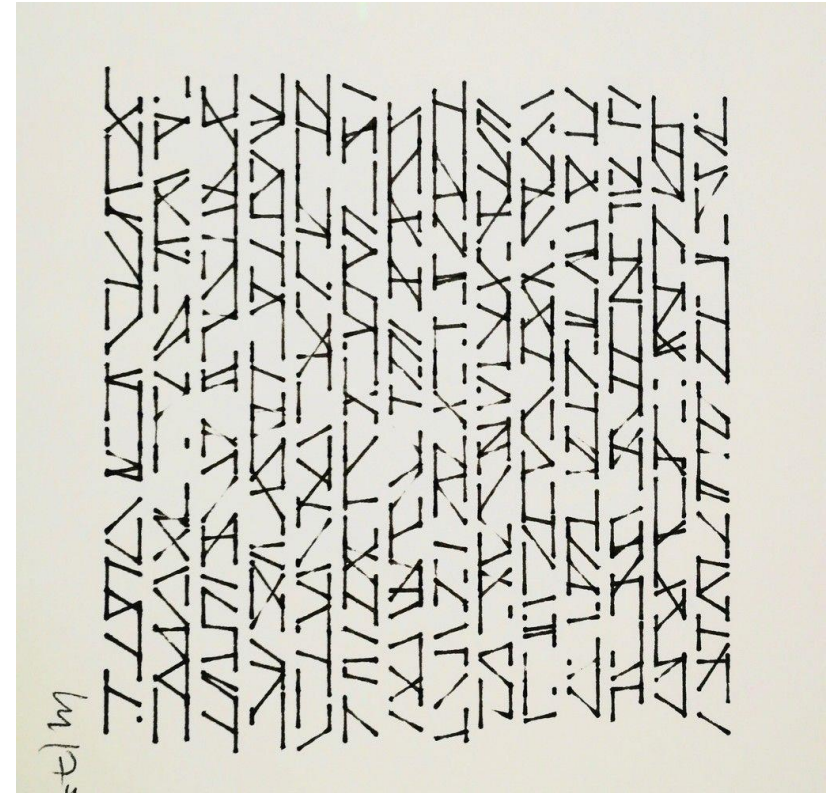
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Although we have largely focused on the Catholic tradition in this section, these principles underlie much of the rest of Christian thinking in these areas.

As we have seen, this tradition makes no real distinction between sexual activity and sexual nature, there is a lack of a positive theology of sex and sexuality within it, and it seems divorced from much human experience of sex and sexuality.

For example, Catholic teaching on contraception is regularly ignored by many Catholics.

This means that much reflection on these matters is immediately constrained by the focus on pro-creation, with little room for the consideration of other goods associated with sex, marriage, and sexuality. This has, however, recently changed within the Catholic tradition, as the two following quotes demonstrate.



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What is the purpose of marriage?

Pius XII 1951 – Address to Midwives

“Now, the truth is that matrimony, as an institution of nature, in virtue of the Creator's will, has not as a primary and intimate end the personal perfection of the married couple but the procreation and upbringing of a new life.

The other ends, inasmuch as they are intended by nature, are not equally primary, much less superior to the primary end, but are essentially subordinated to it.”

Paul VI 1965 – Gaudium et spes

“Marriage to be sure is not instituted solely for procreation; rather, its very nature as an unbreakable compact between persons, and the welfare of the children, both demand that the mutual love of the spouses be embodied in a rightly ordered manner, that it grow and ripen. Therefore, marriage persists as a whole manner and communion of life, and maintains its value and indissolubility, even when despite the often intense desire of the couple, offspring are lacking.”

Reading

The compulsory reading for this section is:

Catechism of the Catholic Church
Part Two: Section Two: Chapter Three:
Article Seven: The Sacrament of Marriage

Part Three: Section Two: Chapter Two:
Article Six: The Sixth Commandment

Issues in Human Sexuality
3. The Christian Vision for Human Sexuality

4. The Phenomenon of Homosexual Love

ISSUES IN HUMAN SEXUALITY

A Statement by the House of Bishops
of the General Synod of the Church of England,
December 1991



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