

THE BODY IN CONTEXT by Gareth Moore OP *SCM Press* London. 1992 xii + 242 pp. £17.50.

The Body in Context is an introduction to the Christian ethics of healthy, pleasurable and good sex. Gareth Moore believes that good sex depends on context. It matters where, when and with whom you do it. Moore argues that sex is best when it takes place within a close and sustained friendship. This might be a marriage between a man and a woman, but it need not be. It could be a friendship between two women or two men. Sex occurs in all sorts of contexts. But Moore argues that in some contexts—casual affairs, "one night stands", brothels—sex, while it has its pleasures and excitements, is not the pleasure and excitement of loving friendship, and thus not the best sort of sex. Indeed, such encounters may make it more difficult to achieve such a good. This is why the Church discourages such relations, for it wants people to enjoy the best sort of sex. The social context which gives human action its meaning is humanly invented. This does not mean that what is good for us is whatever we want it to be, or that such a good is entirely relative to our social setting. There is an objective human good, but it is not something that we can discover other than by inventing it. We discover the good by imagining, forming and sustaining forms of life that produce human flourishing. Thus the Christian idea of marriage is the invention of a way of life within which a certain good can be achieved—the good of a close, stable and loving relationship open to and fitted for the gift of children. The greater Christian invention of this relationship is one of the contexts within which human sexuality can flourish. But it is not the only one.

On reading the above some may wonder if they and Moore are thinking about the same Church. If so, it is because I have indicated only one of Moore's concerns. Another is to question the major and most commonly used arguments in support of certain Church teachings, in particular those on marriage as the only context for sexual intercourse, on the use of artificial contraceptives and on homosexual acts. He does not challenge the teachings, only the *arguments* that support them.

The significance of nature depends upon how we choose to categorise it, and the importance we give to some categories over others. Depending on what we find between the legs of a baby when it is born we categorise it as either male or female, thus consigning it to a future role and agenda, to future expectations, behaviours and commitments. On the whole a male baby is valued more than a female one. But it need not be so. We can imagine a different society, a different significance attaching to our sexuality.

Because the meaning of nature has to be read into it before it can be read out of it, nature of itself does not provide an argument for saying that sex finds its natural place in marriage, or is naturally ordered toward procreation, or is unnatural when enjoyed by people of the same sex. Equally with scripture; its significance has to be read in before it can be read out. The decision to treat certain texts as normative and not others

(e.g. the Church wants to follow the command of Leviticus 18:22, but presently ignores 20:13), depends on a prior decision that one text matters and another doesn't. Moore shows comprehensively that nature and scripture do not of themselves support the Church's teaching on marriage, contraception and homosexuality. This, he suggests, does not invalidate the teaching, it only means that reasons for its support must be found elsewhere.

While Moore points out confusions in certain texts issued by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he does not reflect upon why these texts are confused, nor upon their effects, both intended and accidental. But their effects, the social relations they promote, raise a serious question of responsibility. Do these teachings promote human flourishing? Take the question of homosexuality. "Homophobia" exists in society and in the Church, as Moore acknowledges (p.192); the Church's arguments against homosexual practices are "seriously deficient", as Moore shows (p.212). Is it possible that these *seriously deficient arguments* promote ecclesial and social "homophobia"? Do they underwrite an irrational fear and hatred of gay and lesbian people?

Moore presents a strong argument against considering homosexuality a "condition" of certain unfortunate persons, "like a tumour on their moral insides" (196). He suggests that the "traditional unacceptability of homosexual activities" should be understood as a reaction not to the "symptoms of a condition", but to the breach of the Church's "sexual discipline" (198). But such a view is hardly arguable after the publication in 1986 of the CDF's *Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. For there it is argued that homosexuals as such are ordered toward an intrinsic evil. They are not simply people who may transgress certain rules of sexual behaviour: they are objectively ordered toward doing so. They are sick people. Never mind if such an idea is confused and preposterous, its implications are clear: a society which defends the civil liberties of homosexuals will suffer other disorders and evils. Bishops—so the CDF instructs—should seek to counter any attempt to grant fundamental civil rights to gay and lesbian people.

Such views make sense within the social imagination of the CDF. However, if one were to consider such an imagination vicious—that is contrary to human flourishing—one would be faced with a real question as to the authenticity of the CDF's teaching. Here there seems to be a very real problem; threatening the integrity of the Christian body.

If Moore does not question the ideological formation of the CDF's teaching, there is more than enough to be getting on with in his acute, graceful and charitable work. I only hope that it will be made required reading for all bishops and members of the CDF. As Gareth Moore says, in the final understatement of his book, "the church needs to do more thinking about sex".

GERARD LOUGHLIN

[This review is a shortened version of a text first published in *Quest Journal* No. 19, December 1992, pp. 11–14.]