

MORAL DILEMMAS

II. Anomalies and Grace

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THE 'muddled marriage' is only one among a great number of cases needing very special pastoral sympathy and care and guidance, in these days especially. The grim fact has to be faced that problems connected with the sexual life, often caused by a clash between the individual Catholic's instinct or indeed conviction on the one hand and the Church's teaching as it is so often presented or understood on the other, are responsible not only for great unhappiness in the lives of innumerable Catholics, but also for the fact that an appalling number are led, by their inability to 'conform', to leave the Church altogether. The equally grim fact has also to be faced that within the Church the growing conviction among lay people that the clergy either cannot or will not understand or sympathise with their very real difficulties is leading to a wider and wider cleavage between the two.

The case of preventive birth-control is a notorious example. There are married people who for one reason or another just cannot, at least temporarily, have more children: what an insult to tell them, *sans façons*, that in that case they must just 'abstain from indulgence in sexual intercourse'. (Ecclesiastical jargon often indicates a lack of real theological thinking.) The whole point is that this is not a question of 'indulgence': it is of the very essence of their married, their Catholic married, life. From the layman's point of view what too often happens is that first they are told how wonderfully God has blessed the mystery of human love and sex and marriage, and then in the next breath they are told to go off and do without it. The very first thing they must be made to see is that the Church does not regard abstinence for them as a 'solution': that in fact, apart from the not very safe or satisfactory, though indeed helpful, expedient of the 'safe period' there *is* no solution. We are living in a very unnatural sort of world; and in consequence,

what is natural for us, and therefore good, is often impossible. If indeed they can, in these unnatural circumstances, manage when all else fails, to achieve abstinence together in union with the sufferings and the sacrifice of our Lord, they are achieving heroic virtue, which means something like sanctity, and they should be told so. But to demand this heroic virtue of them with the easy nonchalance or the impatient curttness with which one might command a boy to stop stealing apples from an orchard is to do a grave dis-service to God and man alike.

But it is not marriage only which provides these painful and often insoluble difficulties. Every individual human being has his own individual psycho-sexual make-up and therefore his own individual difficulties. Quite apart from the normal problems of adolescence there are the various adult problems which beset the heterosexual, the homosexual, the bisexual, the 'intersexual' or hermaphrodite, the auto-erotic; there are all the more or less pathological manifestations of the sexual instinct; and all of these, or rather each of these, needs understanding and sympathy if guidance is to be given, and positive and creative guidance if anything of value is to be achieved.

What could be more discouraging to anyone, of whatever age or 'type', who is struggling with his or her particular difficulties, than to be blandly told by someone who presumably has no experience of any such difficulties: *Gratia Dei sufficit*—go to the sacraments, and 'the grace of God is sufficient'? The plain fact of the case as they see it is that the grace of God is *not* sufficient, for they go to the sacraments, they go on trying, and their difficulties none the less continue. This does not mean that we must not quote St Paul to them: it does mean that we must explain him. In the same way we must not water down the Church's teaching about sin: we must explain it; and above all we must explain that the struggle *against* this or that tendency is part of something much greater and wider, the struggle *for* something, and that this in its turn is not essentially a struggle to do something but to be something—to be taken into, and possessed by, that torrent of life and of love which is the Christ-life on earth.

Grace is indeed sufficient: but for what? Not to do away with all difficulties instantly, or after a short—or perhaps a very long—period, for it is not magic. It is sufficient, given goodwill and courage and perseverance, to transform the personality gradually, slowly, perhaps very slowly, but surely till it becomes ensouled by love. The difficulties may even then continue, materially speaking, but they will have lost their sting, their malice: they will not kill or quench the life that has been received.

But if they continue at all, in any sense, it must mean that victory has not been achieved, and therefore grace has not been sufficient after all? No; the whole point of this life is that it is struggle, not victory, not *quies*. The trouble is that our idea of what this struggle is has been so largely falsified: we tend to think of the Christian life as a struggle against immorality, and immorality as a question of sins of the flesh. Now where these latter are concerned the issue seems clear-cut: as long as I continue to commit these sins I am enslaved; once I have stopped committing them I am victorious. (Yes, though even so it is not quite so simple as that: you might for instance have achieved continence but not chastity, which incidentally would be a very dangerous state of affairs.) But take the case of charity, the most important of all: if you could say you no longer committed any sins against charity, would you then have achieved victory? In a sense, yes indeed, beyond the dreams of most mortals; but still only in a sense. Charity consists not in an abstention but in a state of being—of being in love with God and his creation; and love can go on growing indefinitely, so that here you would not have achieved victory until you had achieved the fullest measure of love of which God had made you capable.

That the struggle continues, therefore, is no cause for despair or even despondency: it is the condition of life. Yes, but nevertheless, the Catholic will cry, you tell us that x is a mortal sin and that if I commit it and die I shall go to hell: so how does all that help me? It helps because it will rectify just that way of looking at things, which is a falsification not only of the nature of morality but, far worse, of the nature of God. If x is a mortal sin then it is always a

mortal sin, objectively speaking; but the more you struggle against it the less likely it is, in each successive case, to be mortal subjectively speaking; and the more love of God there is in you the less likelihood there is of any sin at all being mortal subjectively speaking—because the less there will necessarily be of deliberate malice and the more of mere frailty. And quite apart from all that, do you really think that God, who is Love and who died to save us, could do as you imply: could ignore a man's struggles however unsuccessful, and wait till he had fallen and then pounce upon him? You must not of course begin to minimise sin on that account or to adopt a false optimism: on the contrary, it is essential to try to deepen and deepen your sense of sin in general, its true nature, its horror, the way it hurts God. But at the same time you must try equally to deepen your sense of God's mercy and love and understanding, and your humble hope in them.

A well-known book and film have made familiar to us recently the motto, 'Never take no for an answer'. An analogous motto might well find its place on the title page of every book of pastoral theology: 'Never give don't for an answer'. Nothing so fills people with discouragement, and perhaps in the end despair, as to have to listen to violent diatribes about the heinousness of this or that mode of behaviour without one word or thought of constructive advice or encouragement. There may be, there often is, no real solution to a human problem: there is always something constructive and creative to be said about it.

It is a heartening thing that the outstanding work of the *Cahiers Laënnec*, in which doctors, psychiatrists and theologians collaborated in a truly constructive approach to these problems, is now available in an English translation.¹ Here

¹ *New Problems in Medical Ethics*, edited in English by Dom Peter Flood, O.S.B. Translated from the French 'Cahiers Laënnec' by Malachy Gerard Carroll. (Mercier Press; 21s.)

The book comprises four studies, on the Sexual Problems of the Adolescent, on Intersexuality, on Abortion and on the Lourdes' Cures. It is a great pity that a better (and more accurate) title was not found for this translation, and that the translation itself is sometimes lacking in clarity; moreover, there are medical terms which should have been explained for the non-medical reader, and some German quotations

you will find, on the medical side, a treatment as humane and constructive as it is scientific of such questions as the problems of adolescence (masturbation), of intersexuality (the marriage of hermaphrodites, plastic surgery, etc.), of homosexuality; and, on the part of the theologian-contributors, a truly theological approach, matter-of-fact, sensitive, always creative—the larger issues, the ultimate ends, never lost sight of in concern for the immediate moral judgment.

What help can be given to those weighed down by such problems? (There are of course people who are quite happy about their own particular sexual tendencies and have no moral scruples about finding the requisite outlet for them: we are not concerned here with them, but with those for whom these things are indeed a problem and who need help and ask for it, sometimes desperately.)

In the case of adolescent masturbation one might have thought that at least the evil days of scaremongering tactics, of the threat of insanity and so forth, were over; but the editor of the translation of this book makes it clear that at any rate in some places this is not so. Even if it were, however, there would still remain the type of 'treatment' which consists in alternately thundering about the moral evil and degradation involved, and feeding to the young (to quote the editor again) that sort of 'pious literature which extols the virtue of holy chastity in poetic and floral terms'—a literature which as he rightly says 'does not appeal to modern youth and offers therefore no help in their difficulties'.²

It is just as important to make it clear that masturbation is 'natural' for a boy, in the popular sense of the word, as which should have been translated. Of the matter itself, apart from one or two statements which seem questionable or to call for qualification, it is difficult to speak too highly, though the contributions are not all of equal value. What one would really like to see—and what would be of inestimable practical value—is a much smaller, and cheaper, book made up of the best of the first two studies, so that these might be more readily available to all who have to deal with young people or have the cure of souls. The Mercier Press have already put us in their debt by making available Baron Frederick von Gagern's excellent *Difficulties in Married Life* in a six-shilling edition: they would increase the debt immensely if they produced a companion volume made up of some of the essays from this present book.

² *op. cit.* pp. 4-5.

it is to explain that it is not natural in the philosophical sense of the word. Both things are equally necessary. It is 'natural' for him because he has become conscious of new potentialities in himself with which he wants to experiment, and, having experimented, wants to continue enjoying the satisfactions they afford, at a moment in his evolution when he is not yet capable, even though he is well informed theoretically, of seeing and feeling these things as part of the much bigger and greater mystery of human love, for he is still in his auto-erotic stage of development. Later, if he passes into a homosexual phase as so often happens, it will similarly be 'natural' for him to share his satisfactions with his friends. You have to make it clear then at the very beginning that he is not a freak or a pariah (if he is in any danger of thinking so) and that you realise that what he is doing is (again in the popular sense) 'natural enough': without this, anything else you can say will fall on deaf ears; the old insupportable tension between the Church's (apparently) arbitrary *fiat* and what seems reasonable will be set up in his mind.

Having made this clear, you can then go on to show how sex, not because of some ecclesiastical or religious *fiat* but in the nature of things and by common consent of all humanity, is to be regarded as perfect in itself only when it is an element in something much greater: that total and unrestricted mutual self-giving which we call love. 'It is admitted by the majority of sexologists that full personal realisation is found, when there is a sexual relation, only in complete and real love, with its carnal and psychological components fully respected. . . . It is for us to show [the adolescent], with Hesnard, that "sexual pleasure is indeed simply an increase of being . . . a source of true joy only when it has ceased to be partial and aberrant, when it has been raised to a love capable of altruism and tenderness".'³ Thus he may be brought to see that auto-eroticism is *not* natural in the true sense of the word precisely because it is the isolation of one element from its human totality and is therefore, even from the point of view of sexual pleasure itself, partial, imperfect.

But even if all this is acknowledged the difficulties may

³ *op. cit.* pp. 8, 18.

well continue? Yes, and here the essential thing is to underline the fact that this is one difficulty, to be dealt with bit by bit, among a host of others—laziness, lying, dishonesty, greediness and so on—and that growth in the Christian life as a whole does not depend on an instant or even a quick solution of this particular problem any more than on that of any other moral problem. An appalling number of young people cease practising their religion because they cannot 'conform' in this matter: but as we have seen, if they ended this struggle there would still be many others, for struggle is the condition of life—and would they leave the Church simply because they could not control their tempers, their curiosity, their greeds of one kind or another? Put this particular problem thus into a more general setting, a more reasonable light, and then, but only then, you may hope to break the vicious circle⁴ by getting rid of the anxiety bred by the sense of guilt. 'To exaggerate the importance of common-place masturbation at the time of puberty is to compromise its disappearance and to invite complications which favour obsession. On the contrary, this occasion—I would almost say fortunate occasion—when masturbation is avowed, ought to be seized on to show the subject that there is here a manifestation of a sudden development of his sexuality which must only be transitory if he wishes to become, as he aspires to do, a man in the full sense of the word.'⁵

All this is very far from saying that the moral significance of masturbation is to be brushed aside as unimportant: on the contrary, its importance will be underlined the more the importance, the value, the mystery, of the sexual life in its fullness is stressed. But if the priest for his part realises, distinguishing as always between objective and subjective, how small the measure of responsibility, of deliberation and malice, may be, he will set himself at all costs not to 'overwhelm the sinner. Indeed, he would thus only increase the sentiment of inferiority of which masturbation is often merely the symbol. On the contrary, the psyche must be consolidated and strengthened, the heart must be opened, respect for self

⁴ Failures produce anxiety: the anxiety itself produces further failures.

⁵ *op. cit.* pp. 14-15.

developed and confidence in the possibility of self-conquest re-established.⁶

The same sort of approach is still more necessary where there is question of sexual aberrations such as homosexuality which cause profound distress and produce problems which seem insoluble. As Père Charles Larère remarks: 'The first condition of effective spiritual cure rests in the *greeting*. It is a very difficult moment for the invert when he faces up to admitting his inversion. The priest must therefore be very understanding, but discreet and considerate, in his first questions, awakening confidence before going on to speak of spiritual remedies. With many patients, the fact of being able to speak of it openly for the first time without seeing the pharisaic look or the look of naïve astonishment on the face of his listener is already the beginning of a cure.'⁷

The root cause of many tragically unsuccessful encounters of this kind would seem to be that the one from whom help is sought has never been taught the absolutely essential distinction between psycho-sexual deviations on the one hand and the sexual sins to which they may or may not give rise on the other. There is nothing at all disgraceful, still less morally reprehensible, about homosexuality: and the invert can justly point to the long list of great inverts—philosophers, statesmen, warriors, painters, poets—so many of whom have done so much to benefit humanity. But in the second place, even where there is sin, though objectively

⁶ *op. cit.* p. 41. One would like to quote far more fully this magnificent paper on 'Masturbation and Grave Sin' by Père Snoeck, which says with such wisdom and balanced judgment what needs to be said: an invaluable guide for all who have to help young people in these matters. There are excellent things, moreover, in the paper on 'Medical Aspects' by Professor J. G. Prick and Dr J. A. Calon, concerning the sort of regulation which is not repressive but liberating, the importance of education towards heterosexuality, and of education (in the wide, cultural sense) generally: 'In the light of ideas discovered by the child in the domain of religion, morality, aesthetics, social relations, the value of sexuality becomes *relative*, which causes it to lose gradually its tyrannical power'; 'one must not consider the fact of onanism in isolation; on the contrary, one must attempt to assist the whole personality to rise to a higher level, using for this purpose all the indications with which nature herself furnishes us'.

⁷ p. 116.

speaking when it is homosexual it is graver, because more unnatural, than when it is heterosexual, still from the pastoral point of view there should be just as much sympathy for the homosexual who from weakness falls into his particular sin as for the heterosexual who falls into his.

We are not concerned with the various different forms of homosexuality ('there is no such thing as homosexuality as such') nor with its etiology. From the pastoral point of view, the important distinction will be between the invert who wants to be cured of his inversion and the invert who does not and cannot. In the first case the priest will co-operate with the psychiatrist by doing his best, as Père Larère points out, to break down in the subject the 'idea of the fatalism of his vice, an idea which usually obsesses him', and by encouraging him not to waste his energies brooding over the extent to which he is responsible for his falls—'If the question is a legitimate one . . . any answer which tends to finality is useless'—but gradually to 'cultivate and strengthen the grip of conscience'.⁸

What of the second case? It may well prove necessary at the beginning to try to cure the invert of self-pity. It is unjust, he will often argue, that through no fault of his he should be debarred as a Catholic from all sexual life. It must be pointed out that many heterosexuals are in like case—men, for instance, who cannot marry the woman they love—and perhaps in worse case, for at least no moral principle debar the homosexual (as circumstances may debar the heterosexual) from the companionship of the one he loves, or indeed from such outward manifestations of affection as are neither sinful in themselves nor productive of sin.

That balance once established it remains, as with the

⁸ p. 117. In cases where the penitent is suffering from a real obsession, e.g. some form of sexual fetichism of obsessional force, it is useful to help him make a clear distinction in his own mind between acts which are thus plainly determined—in which case he should try not to brood over them afterwards but on the contrary at once turn his mind resolutely to other things—and other similar acts which however are freely chosen: it is these that he must seek to eliminate. And it may well be wisest for him to direct his sense of guilt, not on to these acts, of either kind, so much as on to his sinfulness in general, his lack of love and faith and zeal.

problems previously considered, to give him confidence and a sense of creative achievement. He may need much encouragement where repeated falls are in question if, as so often happens, he is tormented by his sense of guilt and failure. The story of the woman taken in adultery can be put to him in terms of his own life, and the seventy times seven, and the whole idea of struggle as outlined above. He is the victim of a bad habit, but every ordinary Catholic is the victim of some bad habit or another—and in the last resort which is worse, his own failing, in which there may at least be a great measure of love and self-giving, or, for instance, the black-hearted spite and hatred and denigration of others which is sometimes to be met with among the *bien-pensants*?

He must be encouraged to receive the sacraments as often as possible; to give some time every day to mental prayer, and especially to try to live in God's presence—to 'practise the presence of God' as the usual phrase has it—and in general to concentrate on the positive task of trying to love God more deeply, to understand more deeply God's mercy and to share as far as he can in the daily redemptive work of Christ in the world. He must be made to see his love, not as something condemned, but on the contrary as something which can be of great value to him in helping others of his own sex, giving him as it does an insight and understanding and patience in his dealings with them which he would otherwise lack. He may need help in finding some creative outlet, without which he must necessarily be frustrated and unhappy, for if he can be brought to see that, 'according to the fine formula of Maranon, who cannot be accused of pursuing a metaphysical aim, "true sexual activity is neither sexual deviation nor the union of the sexes but creative work in the case of the man and maternity in the case of the woman",'⁹ he may be able, not merely to find peace and happiness himself, but to do much to bring peace and happiness to others.

He will do much more than that if he can be helped to pour his whole life, deliberately day by day, into the great descending flood of Christ's redemptive pity for mankind.

⁹ p. 18.

'I emphasise', writes Père Larère, 'the sufferings of these souls, often endowed with great wealth of feeling and real spiritual understanding. . . . And if there are few among them who can long sustain such tension of their whole being and accept the constant effort towards spiritualisation to dominate this divorce between mind and body, it sometimes happens that souls are met with who have gained magnificent spiritual profit from such a struggle. Indeed, when once they have recognised the gravity of this deviation and accepted the painful struggle that has no ending, it happens that this anomaly becomes, for these men, the occasion of a very exalted spiritual life.'¹⁰

NOTICE

The next issue of *BLACKFRIARS* will include the third article of the series by Gerald Vann, o.p., and an article on the problem of Communism in Italy, by Kenelm Foster, o.p.

¹⁰ p. 120.