

Comment

On not talking about sex

We all know that plenty of Church documents are important not only for what they say but for what they do not. A quarter of a century ago, on 7 December 1965, the day before Vatican II closed, the Council issued its last four documents: on religious liberty (the conciliar text most heartily detested by Archbishop Lefebvre and his followers), on missions, on the life of priests (rather an afterthought, that one), and, finally, on the Church in the modern world—*Gaudium et Spes*. What in *Gaudium et Spes* helps to make the document important by not being too much there?

Let's first say a word or two more about the whole text. It is easy to pick holes in it. We cannot read its sizing-up of the 'modern world' as if it were written today. In 1965 there was no talk of greenness and global warming, nobody guessed that Islam would so quickly grow so powerful or that the Eastern bloc would so quickly crumble. Also, by today's standards, the Council's perceptions were much too male, too European, too anthropocentric. Yet, as the first attempt of what had been a fearful and exclusivist Church to enter through a conciliar document into dialogue with the wider world about that world's great issues, *Gaudium et Spes* was astonishing. It was not the exercise in trendiness that its detractors have made it out to have been. On the contrary, its basic justifications for being written—that 'nothing that is genuinely human' fails to find an echo in the hearts of Christ's followers (n.1) and Christ is history's Lord (n.10) had deep theological roots. The idea of 'dialogue' was theologically respectable.

That did not, of course, mean dialogue was going to be easy. As anybody would realise who followed the debate on the priesthood in the Synod of Bishops which has just closed, we are as far away as ever from the answer to the most urgent and pervasive question in *Gaudium et Spes* (n.56), the question behind all this last quarter-century of Church debate: namely, how far can new cultural developments be absorbed without destroying traditional values; in short, just how 'open' can a religion afford to be?

Here we come back to our first question. What helped to make *Gaudium et Spes* important was the absence in it of that obsession with sexual questions which has made so much of the material that has come out of the Vatican since then so hard to absorb. Mind you, at the time some critics felt that not *enough* was being said in it about sex. The Council had not been allowed to pose the birth-control question in the section on the Family. The point being made here is that, as it stands, this

section does not dominate and so distort the whole text.

Why trouble to mention this here, though? Because from at least the beginning of the second century one of the ways in which the Church has defined itself against the world has been by its teaching on sex. It would be a mistake to dismiss the innumerable pronouncements on sex which have come from the Church leadership, particularly in this last quarter-century, as 'some sort of crypto-Manichaeism'. The origins and functions of this teaching have been much more complex than that, as Peter Brown showed in his fascinating book *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Faber 1989, now in paperback — £7.99). Sexual renunciation was not only to do with world-rejection or 'an anxious striving to maximize control over the body'. In Late Antiquity it was also, in Brown's words, 'connected with a heroic and sustained attempt ... to map out the horizons of human freedom' (p. 442).

The fact that what today the Church leadership has to say on sex hardly touches anybody in the West is not proof that the Vatican is hopelessly 'wrong'. After all, the Church does not belong to one particular age and the late 20th-century Western sexual norms are certain not to last forever. But, whatever the passing changes, Galen's teaching on sexuality will never never come back and the role of marriage in the West has in some ways changed irrevocably. More importantly, fewer and fewer people—even practising Catholics—any longer see a connection between their sexual behaviour and 'world-acceptance' or 'world rejection'.

Surely what we badly need is a for a while in the Church is some reticence about sex, if only to give the Church time to think? Even *Gaudium et Spes* presented Catholic teaching on sex as a series of unchanging givens to which the wider world ought to conform. There should be a shift away from the interminable repetition of isolated and largely unexamined precepts to, first and foremost, a rediscovery of what the basic objects of the teaching really are. This would not be a rejection of orthodoxy. It would not even be a flight into relativism. It would be an effort to bridge a dangerously widening gap between Church and world.

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