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Celibacy in an Age of Sexual Freedom

Recently when renewing my licence, what Catholics call a faculty, I had to complete a Confidential Lifestyle Questionnaire during a private interview with my bishop. Each page had to be initialled in his presence. He had to tick a few boxes and sign the last page. Practising due diligence, he'd already consulted the Archbishop's Professional Standards Unit, to see if anything untoward was on my file. The signed questionnaire was put in an envelope, sealed and locked away. It will only be opened if any risks around my priesthood need to be managed. At the end of what was for me a positive pastoral experience, I came away feeling good. The process was well thought out, like confession, only more bureaucratic. Now the onus is on me to behave. I'm sure I can. I'm not sure who else cares in our age of sexual freedom. Christians must have this conversation and arrive at a consensus consistent with the Bible as God's word.

The questionnaire was extensive and probing. Questions were grouped under headings: child protection, employment history, professional conduct, personal life, sexual conduct, financial status, criminal history. Have I ever watched, made or sold porn, including child porn? Have I ever been charged with a sex crime, or any crime, or been addicted to prescription or prohibited drugs, or alcohol? Do I have a gambling problem? Have I ever dabbled in the occult? Have I ever been involved in any homosexual activity or relationship? Have I ever engaged in bullying, verbal abuse or violence within my family or with others? Friends professed shock when I told them about it. They face-palmed about invasions of my privacy, to which I replied: Privacy? Am I allowed a private life incompatible with biblical values? Give me a break, I said. We're all hypocrites, to some degree, but there's a limit to how much hypocrisy I can process.

Let's do a visualisation, I said. Close your eyes and imagine scenes from your life, past and present, that you don't want broadcast on *Sky News*, reported in the *Australian*, or subjected to God's judgment.

This drama, about merging our private and public lives, has a uniquely Western aspect to it. Since the 1960s, the West has equated human freedom with sexual expression and insisted that all sexual expression, hetero or homo or bi, is normal and necessary like digestion and breathing. Yet sexual behaviour has social consequences: unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual accidents, trips to Emergency, bad art, terrible theatre, wicked social policy. If all people are equal, not all sexual behaviours have good outcomes. We no longer think about the bad outcomes as much as we used to, because society has changed. We hold others responsible for them. Blame conservatives. It's their fault.

If politics is downstream from culture, culture is downstream from science and modernity. Let's do another visualisation. What would the impact of third-wave feminism be had women not been able to control their fertility, had the Pill not been invented, had abortion not become a back-up form of birth control? What would the impact of gay liberation be had a cure not been found for sexually-transmitted diseases such as syphilis? What would the same-sex-marriage debate look like had a treatment for HIV infection not been available from the mid-1990s? In the latter case, the 2017 postal survey would in all probability have returned an overwhelming No vote. The point here is simple yet complex. Social tolerance depends on the population remaining free from health threats.

Each battle in our culture wars, including our gender experiments, is an innovation of Promethean science dedicated to the destruction of all grand narratives involving Christianity. As a result, we've lost any sense of how the biblical prohibitions around sexual behaviour functioned as ancient health warnings: Don't have anal sex, you'll get sick and die. Reminding the world of this ancient fact, once called truth because once true, is now forbidden by identity politics. The myth of safe sex ignores the riskiness of all sex.

Speaking of identity politics, the American

philosopher and celebrity humanist Martha Nussbaum has developed a capability approach to human flourishing, which includes ideas previously absent from welfare economics. For Nussbaum, human flourishing means intuiting a dignified human life where all are capable of pursuing their conception of the good in co-operation with others. As always, the devil is in the detail. Before this utopia can happen, there must be consensus about how the good is defined and measured, what intuiting what a dignified human life means, what co-operation with others involves, how co-operation will be compelled, and who pays for this humanist utopia. Nussbaum's message is seductive until you realise it's studiously packaged as a highly intellectual, immensely caring, deeply felt alternative to Christianity.

In an ambitious book, *From Disgust to Humanity* (2010), Nussbaum considers how a "disgust based morality" and the "politics of disgust" have been used throughout history to legislate human behaviour and deny citizens both "humanity" and "equality before the law", in ways that have caused profound social harm to minorities. In place of this "politics of disgust" she advocates a "politics of humanity" which removes any legal restrictions on behaviour originating in the "politics of disgust". This includes removing: the exclusion of sexual orientation from anti-discrimination laws, sodomy laws against consenting adults, constitutional bans against same-sex marriage, any regulation of sex-on-premises venues, bans on sex in public parks and toilets, bans on polygamy, and bans on some forms of incestuous marriage, say, between brothers and sisters.

In *Aging Thoughtfully* (2017), Nussbaum creates a thoughtful wish-list for human flourishing. On the list are the sexual needs of geriatrics in institutions, including those of the cognitively impaired. As with many bright ideas, one wonders where to locate this in the hierarchy of unmet demand, since implementing it requires more than curtains and screens. As a retired health bureaucrat, just thinking about what's required to implement this sexual aged-care version of the green new deal makes me want to become a Trappist monk.

Western civilisation has consecrated recreational sex by ideologically sanctioning and medically facilitating it. The libidinous theatre of sexual personae is everywhere we look, performing the inversion of masculine and feminine roles, the tragedy of thwarted human will, the comedy of frustrated

human desire. Its actors perform feminism's alternative narrative, insistently, until its message sinks in: Paganism is Good. The anthropology of this alternative narrative has a history in classical philology that's easily summarised: Christianity erased a truth anterior to itself, a life of sexual wholeness, a right to public orgasm. The logic behind that message is powerful but flawed. The average target of the message doesn't know enough about its history to contextualise it. The Church has yet to develop the resources to counter an obvious reality: sexual pleasure will always trump personal responsibility until its consequences need to be managed.

In the West, conservative Christianity has become a scapegoat for whatever ails the body politic. In the rhetoric of sexual freedom, conservative Christians are straw men blamed for every real or imagined barrier between human sexuality, gender identity and their utopian expressions. According to feminism's alternative narrative, conservative Christians are responsible for subjugating women and persecuting homosexuals. These two groups are now clichés of Western narcissism; performance indicators of human flourishing; totems of Western freedom pointed obsessively like witch-doctors' bones at the unfree beyond the West.

I'm not interested in hearing progressive Christians rehearsing the reasoning behind their enlightenment. I'm concerned with my experience as a layperson, who went to seminary, got ordained, and found myself in a libidinous and licentious Church. I'm not concerned with goodness, or even holiness, but with keeping evil at bay, focusing on what Scripture teaches about Christ, and trying to do what Christ asks his followers to do.

Whatever point I'm making here will inevitably get lost in the virtuous rhetoric about "humanity" one hears from progressives like Nussbaum; a classical scholar dedicated to making ancient Greece seem intellectually and morally superior to ancient Israel. Ultimately, being Christian isn't about "humanity", as intuited by the ancient Greeks, who by reliable accounts weren't as "humane" as Nussbaum suggests. It's about encountering Christ and following him. In this mystery, the believer must negotiate many paradoxes, since what Jesus simplifies in one text he complicates in another. In Luke 14 all are invited to the wedding feast, including the poor, maimed, lame and blind. In Matthew 22 the wedding invitation is extended to all, bad and good, but those who don't wear the right garment are cast into

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the outer darkness to weep and gnash their teeth.

Like all celebrities seeking to add layers of “humanity” to our corporate life, Nussbaum has received many gold stars and brownie points. She looks virtuous occupying her moral high ground on history’s right side. It’s easy, invoking lofty ideas about “humanity” and weaponising them against the Other. It’s cheap, weeping crocodile tears while lamenting the Other’s lack of “humanity”. Conservative Christianity has always been a soft target for such tactics, forms of false witness performed on a gigantic scale by the media, governments, leftist ideologues and the Church’s enemies whenever it suits their purposes. Success depends on how these enemies manipulate the optics through gotcha journalism, media commentary and other forms of propaganda, which become obvious once the techniques of manipulation are uncovered.

The questions progressive Christians must ask Scripture are more basic than celebrity humanists like Nussbaum want them to seem. If progressive Christians are confident about the questions they ask and the answers they intuit, if they believe their progressive agenda really is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, if they believe gender politics really does participate in Christ’s risen life, if they believe same-sex marriage really does reflect the mystical union between God and humanity, they must do more than manipulate optics. Conservative Christians don’t have to defend traditional orthodoxy standing firmly on the rock. The onus is on progressive Christians to argue their case for rebuilding the Church on the sands of their progressivism.

Currently Australia is having a national conversation about religious freedom. In the 2017 same-sex-marriage postal survey, the overall response rate was 79.5 per cent of those eligible to vote, of whom 61.6 per cent voted Yes and 38.4 per cent voted No. A higher response rate might have resulted in a higher proportion of No votes. In all probability the Yes vote would have prevailed, anyway, with a lower margin. If a referendum had been held, instead of a postal survey, the required two-thirds majority would not have been achieved, which is presumably why the Turnbull government chose the postal survey method.

Apparently, the national conversation is motivated by a political need to re-engage with the high percentage of No voters in Western Sydney electorates predominantly held by Labor. Also, among Australians there’s a widely held minority view that all religion is a dangerous form of irrationality; therefore, freedom *from* religion is just as important as freedom *of* religion. Given the degree to which, and the pace at which the Church is evaporating

before our eyes, the national conversation is an opportunity for Christians to think about the faith they profess. Following Martha Nussbaum isn’t the same as following Christ. One cannot follow both.

Christianity teaches that personhood is greater than sexual behaviour or gender identity. Christians are called to love others in the world but also to keep themselves separate from the world. This means thinking more about our responsibilities to Christ than the rights flowing to us from high-minded humanists who look at ancient Greece through rose-coloured glasses.

The idea that disciples have responsibilities is poorly understood. Even the Apostles took a long time to understand theirs. Once the penny dropped, off they went. The language of the Kerygma, the Good News, isn’t the language of Nussbaum’s humanism, or any other humanism, which is why the Kerygma has gradually been isolated within Western discourse, and why it’s targeted for so much hostility and derision.

When we say Christian responsibilities come from Christ, what does that mean? On the one hand, Jesus said he had freed his followers from the Torah. On the other, he also said he came to fulfil, not to abolish, and under him the Torah remains intact. This Jesus of the Gospels is bold, unique, demanding, confounding. As Benedict XVI says: the Jesus who makes everything okay for everyone is a dream, not a real figure. In our hedonistic culture we recoil from the biblical Jesus because he isn’t *nice*. Yet Christianity isn’t about virtue, or ethics, or being *nice*. It’s about something more shockingly revolutionary. In the words of Bishop Robert Barron, it’s about an earthquake and witnessing to the power of that earthquake.

Christians have a long history of paying lip service to the earthquake and its power. They’re famous for compromising their values and adapting them to the zeitgeist in ways that must ultimately fail because they are objectively wrong. While Paul uses the term *porneia* to describe the immorality of the Corinthians, the real focus of his letter isn’t *porneia* but what God has done for “humanity” through the Cross and Resurrection. Sadly, *porneia* has successfully replaced the West’s moral vision. As the Church slowly heats up, like the frog in the kettle, it tries to buy itself time by accommodating secular trends. As a result, the gospel is diluted and cheapened. Rather than witnessing to the earthquake and its power, the Church has become *porneia*-graphic in a relatively short period of time. In other words, the Church is now governed by Corinthians for Corinthians who want it to become a sacramental version of *Friends* or *Will and Grace* or *Sex and the City*.

In *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937), Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a distinction between cheap and costly grace:

cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.

Cheap grace is to hear the gospel preached thus: “Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness.” This line of thinking contains no demand for discipleship. At best cheap grace is *nice*; at worst it’s meaningless. Bonhoeffer contrasts cheap grace with costly grace, which:

confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: “My yoke is easy and my burden is light”.

In the West, cheap grace has become a default preference of progressive Christians, because it complements what human flourishing looks like now, in an age where celebrity humanists like Nussbaum occupy the moral high ground while studiously making those who disagree with them seem lacking in “humanity”. This process is described comprehensively in Philip Rieff’s seminal book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966). The only consensus we can manage, in the modern West, is to see the Christian past as a terrible place where our forebears believed things we’re too enlightened, too knowing, too “humane” to believe any more. This isn’t a recipe for human flourishing.

When I was a child the Oedipus Complex was widely accepted as true. Whatever it once explained is forgotten, whatever utility it once had is gone. During my working life I absorbed a myriad of psychosocial theories and psychometric tests via personal growth and professional development courses. The science behind most of these has aged badly, or been proven false, including the plague of repressed memories. In my retirement, that plague has returned as gender dysphoria, which now has all the signs of a contagious social psychosis. Conscious of their public image, worried they aren’t taken seriously, psychologists constantly invent things, like fashion designers and clairvoyants. Watching diagnostic codes appear and disappear is instructive. In 1994 Asperger’s was given its own code, as a form of

high-functioning autism. The code was removed in 2013. Another diagnosis has bitten the dust.

The Me generation is obsessed with the evils of Christian fundamentalism, which it confuses with the fundamentals of Christianity. This is unfortunate because the world needs more Christians, not fewer, witnessing to the fundamentals of their faith. A desire to avoid being labelled a Christian fundamentalist has created a grammar of disdain, paralleling the politics of disgust, which provides progressive Christians with a common identity, a herd mentality, a groupthink that opposes conservative Christians and creates a space for celebrity humanists like Nussbaum to signal their virtue in the nimbus of their “humanity”.

As an Anglo-Catholic I’m deeply familiar with this grammar of disdain. Every verbal transaction I have with my co-religionists reinforces in my mind the myriad ways we depend on the grammar of disdain for the formation of our identity. It’s rare for an Anglo-Catholic to say *anything* that isn’t simultaneously an act of false witness against the Other, mostly against Evangelicals. So great is our disdain, so ingenious our use of non-sequiturs, we can even turn conversations about the weather into sardonic comments about the Other. We do this unconsciously, like breathing. If we couldn’t do it, I doubt we’d have any Christian identity at all.

No doubt this grammar of disdain originates in Anglo-Catholicism’s gin-and-lace history, the high-camp aspect of its noble tradition of catholic renewal and social justice. It once provided a welcoming refuge for homosexuals, before the sexual revolution, but something went awry. The more homosexuals were tolerated the more emboldened they became. While the fight for gay equality was a tremendously successful reversal of a terrible historic injustice, there was always another side of the story no one wanted to talk about because it was morally indefensible and pervasive.

I’m not talking about child sexual abuse, primarily, although that will always remain part of the conversation, as long as most victims are boys or adolescents and most perpetrators are men. That dark corner is now managed, partly, by the redress scheme set up after the royal commission. I’m talking more about a culture of unwanted sexual advances among adults, particularly men. This thorny issue puts the Church at odds with a civilisation of recreational sex, which pretends to care about the age of consent, but doesn’t really.

I don’t go to Church for sex. I was shocked the first time a gay couple tried to seduce me, as an impressionable layperson, although I now see they’d been grooming me for some time. There have been

other unsuccessful attempts, over the years, from clergy as well as laity. Being in my early thirties at the time, at the height of my sexual awareness, I must accept responsibility for any mixed signals I may have sent.

Recognising this is a matter of personal growth and learning about healthy boundaries, which can easily seem counter-intuitive in these sexually liberated times. It's about self-awareness, learning to appreciate someone else's attractiveness without treating them as a libidinous object. It's about embracing clerical celibacy for the protection of the clergy and everyone else. In my case, this isn't a

burden, it's a gift.

If this makes me a traitor to someone else's progressive cause, the Church must discuss that cause openly. The focus of the discussion shouldn't be sexual liberation or human rights. It should reflect the heart of the Good News, the Christian understanding of Love as willing the good of the Other. This is the opposite of what Nussbaum proposes, everyone pursuing their individual conceptions of the good.

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Climber

Since a steep winter walk crocked my left knee
the leg's stopped talking to the rest of me:
nerves, muscles, brain—they hear its pains

but muffled, like the wires are frozen.
Stiff, it braces itself through daily paces,
lets its fellow, its right-leg man and master,

hustle it home with a stick, a step behind,
the sound of one foot walking, one dragged,
grudgingly lies down in tandem; but in sleep

becomes its own limb again,
goes off for holidays on its own,
shins up the Eiger or Matterhorn.

I dreamed, modestly, of conquering Coot-tha
or, fifty years back, Scaffell, the Peaks, Lyke Wake.
My leg has other ideas. One night

left-field toenails rip a blizzard through the sheets,
dig a pit in the bed deep enough
to bury us—senses, sinews, mind and all—

under pillows of white, too deep to hear
the cramponed foot kick away compasses,
markers and maps, or to feel winter

creeping like hemlock past my thighs
and everything nerveless, numb, packed in ice.

Derek Wright