



Why the Catholic Church Is So Conflicted about Sex

BY DANIEL KOHANSKI • 27 DECEMBER 2018



"The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man" (1617) by Peter Paul Rubens (figures) and Jan Brueghel the Elder (Wikimedia Commons)

AMONG THE QUESTIONS that have been asked in the wake of the latest sex abuse scandals involving Catholic clergy is one that has been asked many times before, and for good reason: What is their problem with human sexuality? Why, since the beginning of Christianity, has the church been so fixated on controlling people's sexual behavior, often to traumatic ends?

The answer starts with a look back into history, to the early days of Middle Eastern civilization and the Hittite Empire of the second millennium BCE. The Hittites were generally open about sexual activity, but they also believed that it made a person ritually unclean and that the Hittite gods were "fussy" about that, to use the Hittite scholar Trevor Bryce's term; he describes how a Hittite priest who had sex with his wife and presented himself to the gods without spending the night purifying himself first would forfeit his life.

The ancient Israelites had similar ideas, though they also had less drastic remedies. For example, during their years in Sinai, a man who had a "nocturnal emission" had to leave the camp for the day, then thoroughly wash himself before returning that evening. It's hard to envision how this rule might have been enforced (though the image of freshly bathed teenagers hanging around the edge of the camp waiting for sunset would make a great movie scene). Josephus does tell the rather embarrassing story of the high priest who had a "conversation" with his wife in a dream on the night of Yom Kippur, and who then had to be hurriedly replaced by a substitute priest for the morning service.

The Hittites' extreme method of enforcement notwithstanding, these were laws of ritual purity and cleanliness, not accusations of sin. Israelite men were required to come before Yahweh absolutely clean and pure, with no trace of sexual activity upon them. But what they did at other times was their business. The Hebrew scripture can be rather blunt about its characters' sex lives; the opening chapter of First Kings is the story of King David in his old age unable to get an erection, and how his servants scoured the country for a beautiful virgin who would "heat him up." (According to the text, it didn't work.) And of course, there is the Song of Songs, an open paean to physical love as something to be enjoyed, with lines like "His mouth is delicious, and all of him is delightful."

There was, however, a small sect in late Second Temple days that was known for its discomfort with sexuality: the Qumran community of Dead Sea Scrolls fame, almost certainly a branch of the Essenes. Josephus, Philo, and Pliny the Elder all describe the Essenes as preferring celibacy to marriage. We do know from the Qumran Scrolls that they did allow their initiates to marry, but they imposed severe restrictions. If a man continued to have sex with his wife after he knew she was pregnant, for example, he was to be expelled from the community and never allowed to return. Sex was strictly for procreation, not for pleasure. Whether any of the Essenes were completely celibate is a matter for scholarly debate, but Geza Vermes, who thought that at least some Essenes did maintain celibacy, argued that it was because they saw themselves as purer than the priests and "wholly consecrated to worship." Thus, while the priests of the temple only had to abstain from sex just before a service, these Essenes would have had to abstain all the time. It was the Levitical (or Hittite) law writ large.

This practice of lifetime celibacy is otherwise foreign to Jewish thinking, and it's not surprising that the Essenes were unable to attract a large following. They did, however, attract John the Baptist, who lived at Qumran for several years, though he declined to become a full initiate. And it does appear that Essene uneasiness over sex made its way through John to Christianity. Jesus himself had almost nothing to say about sex, but what little he did say parallels, if it does not copy outright, the Qumran ideal of celibacy. "It is better not to marry," he says in the gospel of Matthew, and he implies that the highest status is that of eunuchs "who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." Most likely he simply meant they stayed celibate, though there is a story (probably not true) that the third century theologian Origen did castrate himself because of this verse. And while Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians mentions in passing that some of the apostles were married, there is no evidence that Jesus ever was.

The apostle Paul, coming from outside Judaea, may have known little or nothing of the Essenes, but many scholars, such as Niko Huttunen and Paula Fredriksen, have shown how his thinking was influenced by the Stoic philosophers—not surprising since Tarsus, where Paul was born, was a center of Hellenistic Judaism. Many of

these philosophers held to an ascetic ideal, one not as extreme as the Essenes, but which tried to minimize, even ignore, the demands and desires of the body in favor of a life of contemplation. Paul himself would boast of his celibate state (perhaps otherwise unheard of for a Pharisee, which Paul claimed to be), though for all his difficulties with human sexuality, he was pragmatic enough to allow that "it is better to marry than to be aflame." Still, like Jesus, he saw little point to it since they would all be going to heaven any day. They would have new spiritual bodies there, not their old physical ones, and these would be sexless, just like the angels.

And this is the critical point to keep in mind if we are to understand anything about the early Christians: they were expecting the return of Jesus and the establishment of the kingdom of God at any moment, to include a judgment day when the righteous, dead or alive, would ascend to heaven. Why bother continuing to populate the world when there would shortly be no need for new human beings? And why bother to get married when there would be no sex in heaven?

These questions became more troublesome toward the end of the first century CE, as Christians gradually conceded that the Second Coming was going to be delayed and that they needed to get on with the business of living while they waited. This included, naturally, providing for future generations, but the ascetic theology promoted by Paul and by the evangelists made this problematic. Theologians for the next three centuries would debate this problem, generally holding that celibacy was the ideal state, if not always a feasible one. Finally, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, came up with a solution: he called sex original sin.

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As a young man studying in the city of Carthage, Augustine had acquired a mistress, which was typical in those days for men of his age and station. This woman, whom he never names, lived with him for around fifteen years, moved with him to Italy, and bore him a son. Augustine only put her aside when his mother told him to, as she was trying to arrange an advantageous marriage for him. And even then, while the engagement negotiations were ongoing, Augustine found himself a new girlfriend. But then he decided to abandon both mistress and marriage and to become a priest—a celibate one.

There are many who hold that from this point on, Augustine hated sex, but, as is often the case with Augustine, the matter is more complicated than that. Augustine felt called to serve his God by becoming a priest, which in his view required him to be celibate, and he was torn between that and the marriage he was looking forward to, sex and all, as James O'Donnell says. He could have had both; clerical celibacy was not firmly established at that time. Julian of Eclanum, who would become one of Augustine's fiercest opponents, was the son of a bishop (whom he later succeeded) and was once married to the daughter of another bishop. But Augustine took a similar position to that of the Essenes (though he probably knew nothing of them) that sex, indeed all earthly desires, interfered with his need for constant communion with God.

But that only explains Augustine's position on clerical celibacy, not on sex in general; that was the product of a related theological question. Augustine had read in Paul's letter to the Romans that Paul blamed Adam for passing sin, and with it death, on to his descendants; he was the "one man...in whom all have sinned." That meant that whatever sin Adam had committed somehow automatically made all his descendants sinners—including infants who had yet to have any chance to commit sins of their own. When Augustine became the Bishop of Hippo, he encountered for the first time the practice of infant baptism and had to wonder why. He concluded that sex was the sin.

According to the theology Augustine developed, Adam (and Eve, whom he rarely mentions) were supposed to populate the human race by rational action, producing "desirable fruit without the shame of lust" as he describes it in the City of God. Unfortunately, the snake spoiled things, by inducing Eve and Adam to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. After that, it seems, Adam was no longer able to have dispassionate sex; any act of procreation would be driven by lust. Worst of all, this lust so overwhelmed Adam's mind that he was unable to stay in communion with God. And his sons would have to procreate their sons the same way, through lust. As a result, "whatever comes into being by natural birth is bound by original sin," which explains how Adam's sin is passed on to all his descendants in all generations.

And it is Adam's sin, not Eve's. Augustine has a particular reason for blaming Adam only: he needs to explain how Jesus was born without the stain of Adam's original sin. But Jesus was not Adam's descendant, at least not on his father's side; the Holy Spirit was his father. Anne Stensvold explains that Augustine also relied on the church's understanding of conception which it had taken from Aristotle, that the man's semen is a human being in miniature and one which, properly deposited in the woman's womb, will develop as nature (or God) intended. To use her analogy, it is like a farmer planting a seed in the earth. Because she was merely the passive receptacle, Mary, no more than any other woman, could not transmit Adam's original sin to her offspring. (When science discovered that the



woman's egg played an equal role in procreation, the Vatican revived the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, affirming that Mary also was conceived without original sin.)

A Bishop Saint Blessing (1514) by Vittorio Carpaccio (Wikimedia Commons)

But by defining sex as the universal sin that required a universal savior, Augustine faced a new problem: if the human race was to continue, it could only be through sin. So, he had to allow it, but within very strict limits. Lust "is only to be tolerated in marriage. It is not a good which comes out of the essence of marriage, but an evil which is the accident of original sin," he wrote in *On Marriage and Concupiscence*.

However, the real flaw in his theology is that it was based on a misunderstanding of Paul. In the Vulgate, Jerome's translation of the Bible into Latin, Romans 5:12 reads "in omnes homines mors pertransiit, in quo omnes peccaverunt." The standard English translation, "death passed upon all men, in whom all have sinned," is as awkward as Jerome's Latin. The original Greek is best read as "death spread to all because all have sinned," which is how the New Revised Standard Version translates it. In other words, Paul was saying that once sin had entered the world through Adam, all people committed sins. But Augustine could not read Greek very well and used the Latin text instead. The Orthodox scholar David Bentley Hart calls this "the most sublime 'strong misreading' in the history of Christian thought."

The eastern churches could read Greek and knew that Augustine had read his Romans wrong; this is the reason, Charles Freeman suggests, they never accepted his doctrine of original sin. The Latin Church, however, didn't notice. Nor did they acknowledge Augustine's reliance on a medical misconception that to this day also informs Catholic theology. The only permitted sexual activity, says the Vatican even now, is one that is open to the possibility of procreation. Sex purely for the pleasure of it is celebrating lust rather than tolerating it. (I have to add here that in his letter *Against the Pelagians*, around 420 CE, Augustine did agree that, while "consent to lust for the sake of carnal pleasure alone is sin...it may be conceded to married people with permission.") The Aristotelian misunderstanding of sex and conception is perpetuated, for example, in the mislabeling of homosexual acts as "worse than murder"—the idea that a new human being comes out of each and every male orgasm and will die if not properly placed. (By this logic, wet dreams should be classified as involuntary manslaughter.)

The Augustinian doctrine of original sin suffices to explain Catholicism's discomfort with sex, but not for understanding why the Church insists on total clerical celibacy. Catholics did not always insist their clergy avoid sex. Even six hundred years after Augustine, parish priests were generally married heads of households, writes Norman Cantor, while bishops commonly had mistresses and "nephews" whose interests they looked after. He adds that when Gregory VII became pope in 1073, he tried to put a stop to this not just for theological reasons, but because he wanted priests to give undivided attention to their flock, and bishops to stop practicing nepotism.

The Gregorian reforms took centuries to be fully enforced, and they succeeded mainly in driving clerical sex underground, not in eliminating it. Lifelong celibacy is not a normal condition for human beings; our sexuality is both natural and powerful. In attempting to suppress it entirely among its clergy, and to limit it to procreation within marriage for everyone else (non-Catholics included, it must be noted), the Catholic Church is attempting to deny reality.

Other denominations, other religions, have their own problems with clerical sex abuse, but the Catholic Church is unique in the strength of its hierarchical structure, and in the discipline it exercises over its clerical orders. It used to be that the church claimed the sole right to punish wayward priests—"benefit of clergy" in old English law—and often it still behaves that way, concealing its abusive members and their crimes from the secular authorities. The theoretical ground for its position is that, as the guardian of earthly morals, it occupies a superior moral position, but in reality, it behaves as any long-established bureaucracy does, protecting itself and its members from the outside world. As such, it serves as a stellar example of why no institution can be left alone to police itself—especially one that claims to be able to call on the powers of heaven and to make threats of hell when warding off inconvenient questions.

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It will not be enough for the Vatican to drop its insistence on clerical celibacy. Not that it is likely to; its devotion to the theology of sex as sin will not permit an admission that it is based on Augustine's mistakes and on the same feeling of unease that the ancient Hittites felt about coming before their gods after having had sex. The fight within the Vatican that we are witnessing now is driven not by guilt or shame over the pope's insufficient response to sex abuse charges, but over anger that this same pope is insufficiently condemnatory of those who do not conform to the Augustinian limits on human sexuality. Most likely they're also angry that these limits are increasingly being ignored, even by the faithful; a 2014 study commissioned by the Vatican found that, worldwide, "most Catholics reject [church] teachings on sex and contraception as intrusive and irrelevant."

The conservative Catholics' response to the recent revelations shows that not only are they unwilling to abandon Augustine's "constant doctrine," they are actively embracing the conflict between his theology of sex and the reality of human existence. The Pennsylvania grand jury report is only the latest exposure of their hypocrisy, and they know this to be so, as their response to the report is to attack the messenger rather than the message.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the Wars of Religion that convulsed Europe in the seventeenth century, the Enlightenment, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, all are milestones in the long battle by humanity to free itself from religious hypocrisy. The hierarchy is losing the battle, and they have to know it. A 2017 survey in the United States by the Public Religion Research Institute found that at least two-thirds of white and Hispanic Catholics, and of white mainline Protestants and Orthodox Christians, as well as over three-fourths of Jewish Americans, now support same-sex marriage. Rather than accede to the reality that not only their theology but their politics are mistaken, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops continues to press for changes in the law and the courts on the grounds of "religious freedom"—as though theirs was the only religion whose freedom mattered.

Perhaps the hierarchy of the Catholic Church will never openly admit that their conflicted view of sex is the offspring of an attitude that stretches back to Hittite days, combined with later mistranslations and medical misunderstandings. The conservatives among them, however, do understand that they will only be able to counter reality through guile and subterfuge, not by reason. Indeed, it's one more reason why reason is under attack in our democracy.

Published in [the January / February 2019 Humanist](#) (/magazine/january-february-2019)



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