1. Sexual Ethics

Kenneth W. Kemp
Department of Philosophy
University of St. Thomas
St. Paul. Minnesota

There is, perhaps, no aspect of Catholic moral teaching that presents a sharper challenge to contemporary behavior, no dogma of Catholic moral theology that is less understood, than sexual ethics. What the Church teaches about these matters is known, of course. One can put the points negatively:

1. All sexual activity outside of marriage is wrong
2. Contraceptive sexual activity is wrong even within marriage.

However, that probably is not the place to begin our inquiry. The contrast with popular beliefs and attitudes is so sharp as to risk simple incomprehension.

1. Three Views of Sex

The place to begin, I believe, is rather with a contrast between three contrasting understandings of sexuality.

The first of these might be called the recreational view. On this view, sexual activity is for fun and as long as the participants enjoy what they are doing, there is nothing wrong with it. Put so crudely, one might wonder if there is anyone who actually holds such a view. But look at our culture. There is hardly a video store or magazine rack in the nation where one does not find this view pushed at you in what would be called, if we weren’t so used to it, sexually explicit form.

The second is a fairly broad family of views that we might call the affectional or commitment view. The essence of this view is that the point of sexual activity is not the pleasure that it promotes but the personal relations that it builds. As long as the couple feel (or perhaps, in the case of unhappy marriages, should feel) affection for or are in some sense committed to one another, then sexual activity is permissible. The adherents of this view differ among themselves over exactly what level of affection and commitment make sexual activity appropriate. Is it a marriage only? Or is open to all people who regard their relationship as relatively permanent (or at least long term) regardless of formal vow or the gender of the individual participants?

The third we might call the procreational view. I would prefer to call it the conjugal view. This would in some ways be more in keeping with some of the Church’s own language, for example the statement in the Catechism that “sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman,” but I think this would incorrectly lead people to think that any sexual acts between married couples are permissible. I would prefer not to call it the procreational view because I do not want to give either of two false impressions. The first false impression that I want to avoid is that there are no other goods than biological reproduction to which sexuality is ordered. The second is that procreation alone is sufficient to justify sexual activity. Such a view would accept sexual acts that are a part of artificial
reproductive efforts (e.g., *in vitro* fertilization) or part of an effort of single people to have children. What I mean by the procreational view is merely the view that emphasizes the essential connection between sex and procreation.

The Church teaches that sexual activity has, by its very nature, a twofold end—procreation and expression of marital love. Procreation is what the reproductive system is set up to accomplish; the close association of marriage and procreation is grounded in the fact that marriage creates the natural environment for children.

This procreational view was the view of all the Christian churches until 1930. In 19th century America, the federal government criminalized the dissemination of information about contraception. I mention this, not to defend this legal solution of a moral problem, but merely to remind you all of the depth of traditional Protestant opposition to contraception. Only in the 20th century did this change. In 1930, the Anglicans, and in the years following many other Protestant groups, broke ranks and went over to the marriage version of the affectional view. Now of course some have abandoned the marriage view for a view that can include homosexual relations also. Many others are engaged in bitter fights over this matter. I think we should not find is surprising that, having made the first switch, they find it hard to resist the second.

2. The Case for the Procreational View

In laying out the outline for this talk, I faced the question, which issue should I take up first, homosexuality or contraception. One answer that occurred to me was to begin with the critique of homosexuality, the case the audience might be more inclined to accept. But I have to argue from principles here and I find it so difficult to state and develop those principles in a way that obscures their obvious relevance to contraception as well as to homosexuality, that it seems almost to show a lack of charity to homosexuals to state the principles in a partial way. In other words, while most people seem to have trouble seeing the connection between contraception and homosexuality, I think that genuine attention to the true grounds for the critique of homosexuality (the grounds found, among other places, in the *Catechism*) make it hard to miss the connection.

So, what is so wrong with the kinds of sexual acts to which the Church objects? Each human power has its proper role to play in the attainment of a good life. Some human powers, in particular the senses, work fairly automatically. As long as our eyes are open, we see things. The only choice we have is whether to open our eyes (and what to look at).

Other human powers are not so automatic. Take the intellect. Seeing may be believing, but with respect to other propositions, whether we believe is, at least sometimes, a matter of choice. Since the proper function of the intellect is knowing (i.e., believing what’s true, and disbelieving what’s false), we have a regulative principle for the use of the intellect—we ought to believe propositions when there is good evidence or authority for their truth, but not when our only reason for believing is the fun of being idiosyncratic or iconoclastic. Believing propositions for which there is not good evidence (e.g., that all homosexuals are promiscuous) is not
just a case of lack of charity; it is a misuse of our minds. It reveals (and reinforces) an intellectual flaw (credulity). It is intellectually wrong.

Similarly with eating. Eating can be pleasurable and going out to eat with someone can be a good way of cultivating or continuing a friendship. But eating is not for pleasure. That is not why we have the power of eating. It is physically possible to cut eating off from nutrition. For example, we could get our nutrition intravenously and then fill up on cake and ice cream. Or, to avoid getting fat, we could eat our fill and then purge ourselves so we could go to lunch again with someone else. We need not eat only nutritious food, but cutting eating off from its natural purpose shows too much concern for eating and its pleasures or a willingness to eat in a way inconsistent with the proper end of eating. It reveals (and reinforces) a character flaw (gluttony). In other words, it is morally wrong.

The same considerations apply to our power of sexuality. Like eating it provides pleasure and like dining with others it plays a role in building (a certain kind of) friendship. But also as for eating, it has a natural function—reproduction. And, also like eating, there are ways of going after the pleasurable or companionable aspects of sexuality, while cutting the act off from its natural function. We need not limit sexual activity to times when it is likely to produce children. But cutting it off from its natural purpose—whether by deliberate obstruction of the natural result (as in contraception) or by using it as a general (i.e., marriage- and procreation-independent) expression of intimacy (as in homosexual sexual acts even between permanent friends)—shows too much concern for sex and its pleasures or a willingness to engage in it a way inconsistent with the proper end of sexual activity. It reveals (and reinforces) a character flaw (lust). In other words, it is morally wrong.

Consequently, homosexual and contraceptive actions are by their very nature morally wrong.

3. The Two-fold Doctrine on Homosexuality

The particular teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality can be summarized in four points, two directed to the person with homosexual inclinations; and two directed to everyone else. The points are the following:

1. Homosexual desires are disordered, but not morally wrong;
2. Homosexual actions are always morally wrong;
3. Homosexuals must not be subject to unjust discrimination; and
4. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.

Having laid out a critique of homosexual actions that judges contraceptive acts also morally wrong, I am going to imbed in the paragraphs that follow, critical remarks about contraception as appropriate. For those that think they can protect

---

1 The similarity between eating and sex as actions which have objective functions (i.e., functions that are identifiable independent of the desires of individuals) should not obscure the fact that there are differences. First, eating (or a substitute) is physically necessary. Sex is not. Second, the sexual urge is in general much stronger than the urge to eat (in the sense that it is more likely to take over our lives). This helps explain why there is greater public concern about homosexuality than about eating disorders.

2 See the Catechism 2357-2359.
contraception from the critique sketched above, I will devote further attention to contraception in the next section of my talk.

a. Respect, compassion, and sensitivity

I want to begin my defense of the Church’s teaching about homosexuality by saying something about the fourth point. Recent public agitation for public acceptance of homosexuality has caused a kind of backlash in which homosexuals and homosexuality are singled out as special objects of opprobrium.

Thus, some people blame homosexuals for the breakdown of the family. This, of course, is silly. A wide array of sins (among the marriage partners, most of whom are heterosexual) leads to family breakdown. Pride makes it difficult for partners to get along; lust leads them to seek new ones. No-fault divorce laws and general tolerance for divorce encourage marriages based on dreamy hopes rather than careful deliberation. They generally make it easier to get a new spouse than to work out problems with the spouse one already has. These problems would exist, I suspect at about the same magnitude, even if no one had homosexual inclinations.

Other people blame homosexuals for promoting promiscuity. This also is hard to take seriously. There’s been a lot of promotion of promiscuity going on for rather a long time; it has come no more from homosexuals than from any other kind of -sexuals. Easier would be to make the case that those with homosexual inclinations are the victims of this trend than that they are the principal perpetrators. When everyone is constantly told that if you’re not having sex, you’re not having fun (and what else is life about?), what does one expect people with homosexual inclinations to do?

Some people just think that homosexuality is a particularly vicious kind of sexual activity, much worse than, say, fornication. This, too, is a mistake. For though homosexuality is worse, as a sexual act, than are some other kinds of sinful sexual activity, those other acts have inherent aggravating factors that make them quite serious, all things considered. Contraception renders the act unnatural. Adultery breaks a vow. Fornication creates the risk of a pregnancy outside of marriage. For the male, then, fornication is a grave injustice to his partner. Would the male be so eager if he faced the risk of pregnancy? In addition, fornication often leads to the killing of the offspring by abortion. I doubt that many of those “unplanned pregnancies” were caused by homosexuals.

There’s not a lot of point to asking which kind of wrongful sex act, all things considered, is the more serious wrong. Given the human tendency to see as more seriously wrong the ones we’re least tempted to commit, one might even say that often the readiness to make such judgments is a near occasion of sin.

One can sum up the first point in the Catholic Church’s teaching on homosexuality in the following way: There is no reason to single out homosexuality, among all the various sins that people commit. People who have homosexual inclinations are entitled to the same kind of love and forebearance that we accord to fornicators, people who practice contraception, people who enter illicit second marriages, and so on. They are entitled to the same kind of love and forebearance
that we expect to be accorded to us despite our bad temper, drinking problem, Sabbath-breaking, or whatever.

b. Unjust discrimination

The question of homosexual rights seems immediately to bog down into confusion about whether the homosexual agenda includes the demand for special rights or just the same rights everyone else enjoys.

There is no controversy over whether they have the right to vote or to appeal to the courts or legislature for redress of grievances. They do and everyone agrees that they should.

They don’t have the right to marry other people of the same sex, of course, but neither do I. They don’t have a right to marry anyone they might want to, but neither do I. I would not, for example, have the right to marry near relatives, even first cousins. I would not have the right to marry someone else’s wife, even if she were not my cousin. As a matter of fact, being married, I don’t have a right to marry anyone at all. Is denying them the right to homosexual marriages denying them a right everyone else has, or according them a special right, or what?

Is denying them the right to include their homosexual lover on an employment-based insurance plan denying them the right that everyone else has? Or is giving them that right giving them a special right when I cannot do the same for my elderly father or disabled and unemployable brother?

More helpful, I think, is to begin with the phrase of the *Catechism*, they are not to be subject to “unjust discrimination” and then to ask what would count as unjust discrimination and what would not. This question must be answered with by attention to the relationship between the individual’s “homosexuality” and the good in question. Not all forms of discrimination are unjust discrimination.

If the purpose of the state in protecting marriage is to promote a natural institution, the proper locus of child-bearing and child-raising, then it will not be unjust to treat other friendships (e.g., homosexual or temporary ones) and other family relationships (e.g., brother-sister households) differently from marriages.

On the other hand, everyone needs a place to live and a job. With respect to employment and housing, there are few if any jobs or potential residences where homosexual inclinations alone, apart from any action on those inclinations, could count as a good reason for refusing employment or housing.

When we turn from the person with homosexual inclinations to the person who engages in homosexual activity or engages in a homosexual lifestyle, the case is somewhat different. If the purpose of a youth group (I have in mind, for example, the Boy Scouts) is to instill in youth a certain view of morality, then there is nothing wrong with excluding from the leadership of such an organization people who lead a life inconsistent with those moral principles. One would hope that they also exclude from leadership roles, those who have live-in girlfriends and the like. If they make similar judgments about homosexual and other forms of illicit sexuality, but exclude only homosexuals from leadership roles, they leave themselves open to charges of unjust discrimination.
c. Homosexual actions

My defense of the procreational view of sexuality earlier in the talk was designed to show just what is wrong with homosexual activity. It might nevertheless be instructive to respond to a few objections on behalf of homosexual activity that might be raised by any residual adherents of the competing views.

So, what’s so wrong with homosexual acts? Aren’t they just a kind of consensual contact between two people? And if those two people want to engage in them, and they don’t affect anyone else, how can they be wrong?

Consent is far too lenient a criterion. Duellists might consent to fight to the death, but no one thinks that killing your rival in love is morally permissible, just because he agreed to trade shots with you on the courthouse square.

“But homosexual acts don’t harm anyone,” someone might add. That, of course, begs the question.

Wouldn’t it be permissible at least as part of a permanent committed relationship between two people? That answer gets what plausibility it has on the basis of a tacit analogy to marriage, but it neglects what is essential to marriage—marriage’s orientation on procreation. Taken on its own, it invites lots of questions. Why just between two people? Why not a permanent committed relationship among three or five? Why a permanent relationship? Why not just long-term? Or even short-term, but intensely felt, as a summer romance or even an unforgettable evening? And what’s so important about commitment? Why should the fact that some people associate sexual activity with commitment make it inappropriate for others to associate it with, say, high spirits?

On the procreational view of sexuality, there is an answer to this question. Any sexual act that, by the nature of the participants, ignores those ends, is illicit. That’s the problem with fornication (no possible expression of marital love) and homosexuality (no possibility of procreation). Similarly with acts such as contraception or marital rape, in which a participant deliberately acts in a way that precludes fulfillment of one of the natural ends of the act. Such acts show a disposition to choose sexual activity of the wrong kind, or for the wrong reasons, or in the wrong circumstances. They are morally wrong because they are choices that are not consistent with the goods of sexuality.

On the affectional or commitment view, there seems to be none. Cutting sexuality loose from the good of procreation—having children—cuts the anchor rope. That cut, it is hard to see what exactly the argument is for the traditional view of sex as appropriate only between a married couple—man and woman.

d. Homosexual desires

In its teaching on homosexuality the Church makes a sharp distinction between homosexual activity, which it holds to be objectively wrong in all cases for the reasons mentioned above, and homosexual desires, which it holds to be intrinsically disordered, but not in themselves morally wrong (or sinful).

This is not a mere conceptual distinction. For example, one might feel homosexual inclinations but (whether out of conviction, social pressure, or lack of
opportunity) not engage in the corresponding activities. Or, one might engage in homosexual activity, not out of antecedent inclination to such activity, but as a way to satisfy sexual urges when no heterosexual opportunities are available.

What does it mean to say that homosexual desires are intrinsically disordered? How can they be intrinsically disordered but not morally wrong?

Underlying these claims is the idea that morality is fundamentally about our character, or, in other words, about our will and the choices we make. The feelings we have are not generally a result of the choices we make, they are the background against which we make choices. They are what make temptations temptations.

For example, like most people, I have no desire to pound on my thumb with a hammer. So, I never have the temptation to do so. Some people, by contrast, do want to engage in such destructive behavior. For them, pounding on their thumbs might well be a temptation. Even though they might have such a desire, we could say that it is a disordered desire; it is not a desire for a real good.

Homosexuality is a disordered desire in a similar way. It is a desire for a kind of sexual activity that is so removed from procreation that we can say of it simply that it is not a real good. The same-sex friendship within the context of which homosexual desires might arise might well be a real good. One of the tasks of Catholics in discussing homosexuality is to insist on precisely this distinction—it is not the same-sex friendships that are the problem, it is the inclusion of sexual activity as a part of those friendships.

But homosexual desires are not the only disordered sexual desires. Many desires of a heterosexual nature are also disordered, for example, the desire to have sexual relations with a person merely on the basis of their appearance. In addition, of course, there are many non-sexual desires that are also disordered. The list of seven deadly sins gives us a pretty good idea of their range.

In saying that homosexual desires are objectively disordered, the Church is saying that they are the desires which create the temptations that some people experience. In saying that they are not themselves morally wrong, the Church reminds us that a person may be praised or blamed only for what is in his control, for what he chooses and does, not for what he feels, for his actions, but not for his desires.

4. The Critique of Contraception and the Acceptance of Natural Family Planning

In homosexuality, it is the very nature of the individuals involved that keeps the action itself at such a remove from procreation that the action must be judged intrinsically morally wrong. In the case of contraception, the problem is somewhat differently located. Here the problem is not that the couples lack the kind of complementarity necessary for procreation. In one sense, things are not that bad. In another, they are worse. For in contraceptive sexual acts, the couples deliberately make themselves less capable of procreation than they would by nature be.

It is this deliberate separation of the sexual act from its natural end, procreation, that makes the analogy to purging oneself after eating appropriate. Such purging was practiced in ancient Rome. We see it, I think, as disordered. This is just a sign of
the partiality we show to the vices of our own society. It is easy for us to see the Roman preoccupation with food as a vice; it is much harder to see our own society’s preoccupation with sex in the same way.

The Church does not teach, of course, that every sexual act must be likely to result in procreation or even that the end of every sexual act, the reason for engaging in it, must be procreation. It requires only that each action by its nature be open to procreation. External obstacles, whether monthly infertility or even permanent sterility are not impediments to this openness. It is even permissible to determine, for example by attention to a woman’s fertility cycles, when procreation is likely and, for a good reason, but not for just any reason at all, to refrain from sexual relations when procreation is likely, but to have sexual relations only when it is unlikely. There is, therefore, no inconsistency in the condemnation of contraception and the acceptance of natural family planning.

As long as the action is an ordinary sexual act that is open to (i.e., not deliberately closed off from) the end of procreation, is for the sake of one of the two goods of sexuality (children and marital friendship), and is not vitiated by some unreasonable circumstance, the action is morally permissible. If it is not so open or if it is done for some other reason, it is morally wrong.

5. Conclusion

The modern world needs to hear the Catholic Church’s message, not just on homosexuality (there should be no singling out here) but on sexuality in general. Some people can’t see the problem with homosexual or contraceptive activity at all. They need one part of the Church’s message. Other people can see the wrongness of one (usually homosexuality) well enough, but somehow have more trouble with seeing what’s so wrong with the sexual acts to which they are inclined. They need the other.