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SEX IN THE CITY OF GOD

by

Diana Macalintal

277 Tradewinds Drive #8
San José, California 95123

A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Theology.

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

April 10, 2006

This Paper was written under the direction of

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Chris McConnell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "C".

Signature of Director

Maxwell E. Johnson, Ph.D. / Christian McConnell, Ph.D.

Diana Macalintal
has successfully demonstrated the use of
Spanish
in this paper.



Signature of Director

Christian McConnell, Ph.D.

August 21, 2006

Date

SEX IN THE CITY OF GOD

The Church does not canonize saints; it canonizes causes, lifestyles, and attitudes. This is increasingly evident in the causes for lay people, especially married couples. Although it has made recent strides toward a more balanced theology of sexuality, the Catholic Church will not be comfortable canonizing happily married, sexually active couples until Mary is valued as a disciple and not exclusively as a virgin. Through an examination and evaluation of the explicit and implicit theology of sexuality as found in Scripture, Church teaching, and the canonization process, this paper will propose a new theology of sexuality based on a re-visioning of the image of Mary.

This paper may be duplicated.



Signature of Student Writer

April 10, 2006 / August 3, 2006

Date

The Church does not canonize saints; it canonizes causes, lifestyles, and attitudes. This is increasingly evident in the causes for lay people, especially married couples. What is the Church teaching about sanctity when, in the span of one thousand years, only seventy-six laypersons have been canonized, most of whom were unmarried? What is the Church endorsing when the two married couples whose cases are active lived most of their married lives as celibates? What is the Church consecrating when its paradigm for discipleship is a married virgin? Although it has made recent strides toward a more balanced theology of sexuality, the Catholic Church will not be comfortable canonizing happily married, sexually active couples until Mary is valued as a disciple and not exclusively as a virgin. Through an examination and evaluation of the explicit and implicit theology of sexuality as found in Scripture, Church teaching, and the canonization process, this paper will propose a new theology of sexuality based on a re-visioning of the image of Mary.

Scripture

First, a brief review of the Church's attitude toward sex will give historical background to the recent beatifications and canonizations of lay persons and married couples. The attitude toward sex and marriage in Scripture is widely varied.

Sex is willed by God: Not from dirt but from man, himself, is woman created. "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one

body.”¹ This has traditionally explained the sexual attraction between men and women and the divine origin of marriage.²

Sex is mandated: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.”³ Thus there was intercourse between Adam and Eve;⁴ Cain and his wife;⁵ Jacob and Leah;⁶ Jacob and Rachel;⁷ Jacob and Bilhah;⁸ Judah and Shua;⁹ Boaz and Ruth;¹⁰ Elkanah and Hannah;¹¹ and Ephraim and his wife.¹² All these indeed led to pregnancy, seen as a blessing by God. However, when sex did not prove fruitful, it was seen as disfavor or even cause for punishment, as with Onan and Tamar: “Whenever he had relations with his brother’s widow, Onan wasted his seed on the ground,”¹³ thus offending God who killed him.

Lawful sex is holy: David had sex with Bathsheba, another man’s wife,¹⁴ which spurred God’s condemnation and ended in the death of their child (although this punishment also may have been the result of David’s less than honorable way of making Bathsheba a widow in order to lawfully marry her). Once David and Bathsheba were legally wed and David had repented, their sexual act was blessed with the birth of Solomon whom God loved.¹⁵

Erotic sex is praised: “Your very figure is like a palm tree, your breasts are like clusters. I said: I will climb the palm tree, I will take hold of its branches...your mouth like an excellent

¹ Gen 2:24. All Scripture quotes are taken from the New American Bible.

² Richard J. Clifford, S.J., “Genesis,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 12.

³ Gen 1:28.

⁴ Gen 4:1, 25.

⁵ Gen 4:17.

⁶ Gen 29:23, 30:16.

⁷ Gen 29:30.

⁸ Gen 30:3-4.

⁹ Gen 38:2.

¹⁰ Ruth 4:13.

¹¹ 1 Sam 1:19.

¹² 1 Chr 7:23.

¹³ Gen 38:8-9.

¹⁴ 2 Sam 11:4.

¹⁵ 2 Sam 12:24.

wine—that flows smoothly for my lover, spreading over the lips and the teeth;”¹⁶ and sexual desire represents the longing between human and divine: “I belong to my lover and for me he yearns.”¹⁷ However, it also characterizes humanity’s faithlessness, as in the parable of Oholah and Oholibah whose harlotry symbolized Samaria and Jerusalem’s idolatry.¹⁸

Marriage is a blessing and an image of heavenly union and bliss: “He who finds a wife finds happiness; it is a favor he receives from the Lord.”¹⁹ Even Christ takes on the role of bridegroom, ready to unite himself to “a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”²⁰ However, widowhood is deemed more desirable than marriage: “If [a wife’s] husband dies, she is free to be married to whomever she wishes, provided that it be in the Lord. She is more blessed, though, in my opinion, if she remains as she is.”²¹ Yet, for some widows, marriage and the “disciplined structure of the Greco-Roman household” may be a way to avoid sin:²² “So I would like younger widows to marry, have children, and manage a home, so as to give the adversary no pretext for maligning us.”²³

Finally, there is the puzzling appearance of the brothers and sisters of Jesus in the Scriptures.²⁴ Does this mean that Mary and Joseph engaged in marital sex after the virginal birth of Jesus? If they did, would it have been a “less than holy” act despite Mary’s sinlessness? Scripture does say that “[Joseph] had no relations with [Mary] until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.”²⁵ Official Church teaching of Mary’s perpetual virginity (in 451) and its dogmatic declaration (by Pope Martin I in 649) notwithstanding, the footnote to this verse in the New

¹⁶ Song 7:8-9, 10.

¹⁷ Song 7:11.

¹⁸ Ezek 23:1-49.

¹⁹ Prov 18:22.

²⁰ Rev 21:2.

²¹ 1 Cor 7:39-40.

²² Robert A. Wild, S.J., “The Pastoral Letters,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 898.

²³ 1 Tim 5:14.

²⁴ Mt 12:47; 13:55-56; Mk 3:31-32; Lk 8:19-20; Jn 2:12; 7:2-10.

²⁵ Mt 1:25.

American Bible opens the door to the possibility of a Marian model for holiness that is not based on her virginity but on her full and complete participation in human life. For as the footnote states: “Until she bore a son: the evangelist is concerned to emphasize that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. The Greek word translated ‘until’ does not imply normal marital conduct after Jesus’ birth, nor does it exclude it.”

Church Teaching

Based on these few but significant Scripture references, one cannot easily argue that participation in sex is a reason for one to be excluded from sainthood. Yet the early Church fathers fostered a growing discomfort with the body, contempt for sex, and an increasing preoccupation with virginity to the point that they created in Mary an exemplar of saintliness based on a repudiation of the body rather than on truly holy and human living. The controversial Catholic theologian, Uta Ranke-Heinemann, argues this very point:

While he was still in Rome, Jerome had an argument with a layman named Helvidius, who talked about Jesus’ brothers and sisters in the context of the New Testament (Mk 6, Mt 13). In 383 Jerome wrote a piece “Against Helvidius on the Perpetual Virginity of Mary.” The reasons and exegetical considerations that Jerome cites against Helvidius are essentially the same as those the Catholic Church advances to this day. According to Jerome, Mary laid the foundations of virginity for both sexes, and the moral superiority of virginity becomes clear in her person. The reality was the other way around: Virginity was not prized because Mary was always a virgin; rather Mary was made a perpetual virgin because virginity was so highly prized.²⁶

Virgins were the most valued of disciples and were accorded the highest place in the hierarchy of perfection—virgins and virgin martyrs being the most perfect followed by celibate widows. Married women were placed at the bottom tier of holiness.²⁷ This disapproving attitude toward

²⁶ Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality, and the Catholic Church* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991), 8 April 2006 <<http://theology1.tripod.com/readings/ranke-heinemann.htm>>.

²⁷ Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500-1100* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 128.

sex and marriage was shaped by the neo-Platonist Greco-Roman culture that believed human perfection lay in regaining control of the flesh by the spirit, the human state of being in the earthly and heavenly Paradise. Humanity's fullest nature was expressed most perfectly in virginity, and this spiritual perfection became the saint's greatest quest.²⁸

Ironically, this praise of Mary and virginity was coupled with an almost abusive scorn of women: "You are the devil's gateway; you desecrated the fatal tree...you destroyed the image of God, Adam. You are the one who deserved death, and it was the Son of God who had to die."²⁹ Because of this, patristic writers believed that the female sex had an "unfortunate biological nature" which needed to be transcended through the "repudiation of their own sexuality and espousal of virginity,"³⁰ the goal of which was "perfect manhood."³¹ (Does this mean Mary was the "perfect man"?) This complete disdain toward women and sex and the visceral fear of the corruption of one's body even led some of the patristic fathers to teach that "[i]n persecutions it is not lawful to commit suicide except when one's chastity is jeopardized."³²

Despite this astonishing teaching, the Church did denounce these Gnostic, Montanistic, and Marcionistic ideals and announced marriage as an acceptable though still lesser state than perpetual virginity. 1500 years later, we see that, at least in the Church's writings, marriage is no longer considered second best: "The Lord, wishing to bestow special gifts of grace and divine love on [marriage], has restored, perfected, and elevated it."³³ Sex is even encouraged, since this human and divine love "is actually developed and increased by the exercise of it."³⁴

²⁸ Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990) 338.

²⁹ Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*, II. I. 1., cited by *ibid.*, 337.

³⁰ Schulenburg, *Forgetful*, 128.

³¹ "[A]s long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, she will cease to be a woman and will be called man." Jerome, *Commentarius in Epistolam ad Ephesios*, III, v (658), cited by *ibid.*, footnote #6, 453.

³² Jerome, *Commentariorum in Jonam Prophetam liber unus*, PL 25:1129, cited by *ibid.*, 131.

³³ *Gaudium et spes*, #49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

As opposed to the earlier understanding that marriage was a “concession to human weakness”³⁵ or that its one goal was the “prevention of debauchery and lust,”³⁶ marriage and sex within marriage become another way to perfection:

Marriage, then, is far from being the effect of chance or the result of the blind evolution of natural forces. It is in reality the wise and provident institution of God the Creator, whose purpose was to effect in man His loving design. As a consequence, husband and wife, through that mutual gift of themselves, which is specific and exclusive to them alone, develop that union of two persons in which *they perfect one another*, cooperating with God in the generation and rearing of new lives.³⁷

No longer is the epitome of holiness the “perfect man” unmoved by human passion, or the heroic virgin, impenetrable and “forgetful of her sex.” Rather, “husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul and together attain their human fulfillment.”³⁸

Although “[m]arriage and married love are by nature ordered to the procreation and education of children,”³⁹ these are not their only purposes. For “[t]he sexual activity, in which husband and wife are intimately and chastely united with one another...does not, moreover, cease to be legitimate even when, for reasons independent of their will, it is foreseen to be infertile. For its natural adaptation to the expression and strengthening of the union of husband and wife is not thereby suppressed.”⁴⁰ John Paul II went even further in reclaiming the sanctity of married sex for the unique intimacy and experience of God it provides: “The gift of love, acting as God does, expressed through the body, touches the central mystery of the human person in a way in which most of our other acts do not.”⁴¹

³⁵ Ranke-Heinemann, *Eunuchs*.

³⁶ Chrysostom, *De virginitate*, 19, 19, cited by *ibid*.

³⁷ *Humanae vitae*, #8, emphasis added, 18 February 2006 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, #9.

³⁹ *Gaudium et spes*, #50.

⁴⁰ *Humanae vitae*, #11.

⁴¹ Richard M. Hogan and John M. LeVoir, *Covenant of Love: Pope John Paul II on Sexuality, Marriage, and Family in the Modern World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985) 41.

The intimate connection between the human, bodily expression of love and the transcendent encounter with the divine is even more evident in the current pope's teachings on love. Benedict XVI helped counteract the historically Christian dichotomy between *eros* (bodily, possessive, ascending love) and *agape* (spiritual, oblation, descending love) when he stated: "Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united....Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness."⁴² When the turning point of Christianity is God becoming flesh, one can no longer reject the holiness of the body, the locus of encounter with the divine. The complementary aspects of Christian existence—human and divine, material and spiritual—like the two natures of Christ, cannot be separated. If they were, "the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life."⁴³ Thus, it is no longer the integrity of a piece of skin but the integrity between *eros* and *agape*, body and soul, earthly and heavenly nature that is the criterion in judging one's integrity before God. For "biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it."⁴⁴

This new dimension found in the human search for love and revealed by faith reflects the sacramental nature of married love. The Church prays in the marriage rite: "We see [our] high

⁴² *Deus caritas est*, #5, 1 April 2006 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, #7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, #8.

destiny in the love of husband and wife, which bears the imprint of [God's] own divine love."⁴⁵

Whereas before, married union served to prevent one from even greater sin, the union of husband and wife now serves to reveal the dynamic, total, and unmerited self-giving of God to humanity.⁴⁶

Recent Examples of Saints

If marriage and sex are such blessings and are reflections of God's *eros-agape* for humanity, why then did the Church, in its 1987 synod on the laity, canonize a married man who abandoned his wife and family to unwittingly do missionary work and an unmarried doctor who took a vow of chastity at the age of seventeen?

Lorenzo Ruiz became the Philippines' first saint on October 18, 1987. Among the sixteen martyrs canonized that day, he was the only married person. Living in the Philippines in the early 17th century, Ruiz married and raised three children. He seemed to have lived a simple life, working as a calligrapher and assisting his local Dominican parish in keeping records. In 1636, for unknown reasons, he was associated with a murder. To protect him, the Dominicans sent him to do missionary work. With their help, he fled leaving behind his wife and children. Thinking he was bound for Taiwan where his Chinese lineage would allow him to start a new life, he found himself, instead, in Japan where the persecution of Christians was strong. At one point during his torture at the hands of his captors, he was ready to renounce his faith. Later, he found his conviction and stated, "I am a Catholic and happy to die for God. If I have a thousand lives to offer, I will offer them to God."⁴⁷ It is regretful, however, that he could not give one of

⁴⁵ *Rite of Marriage*, #117.

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI also used this matrimonial metaphor to express the dynamic action that takes place in the Eucharist. Cf. *Deus caritas est*, #13.

⁴⁷ "San Lorenzo Ruiz: The Most Improbable of Saints," *Philippine Post Magazine*, 9 April 2006 <http://www.philpost.com/0900pa_ges/sanlorenzo0900.html>.

those thousand lives to his wife and children. Yet, for his “faithfulness,” he was lauded by John Paul II as one who “calls families to grow in dignity, in harmony and responsibility as the ‘domestic Church,’ where each one learns to be at the service of all, witnessing to the sanctity of human life at every stage and in every condition.”⁴⁸

At the same synod on the laity, Giuseppe (Joseph) Moscati was the first lay Catholic since 1968 to be canonized individually. He lived in the late 19th century in Italy and was a renowned doctor and biochemist. He studied and worked in secular institutions and excelled in his vocation as a physician. He was known not only for his medical skill but also for his consoling nature and his gentle, holistic care of his patients. He told a young doctor “that you must treat not only bodies, but also souls, with counsel that appeals to their minds and hearts rather than with cold prescriptions to be sent in to the pharmacist.”⁴⁹ When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 1906, he risked his own life through falling ash and collapsing roofs to save others. He seemed to be a fine model of the lay apostolate in which the matters of faith and discipleship intersect with work, civic duty, and family life. “He was, it seemed to me, exactly what John Paul II had often said Catholics should look for in a lay saint: a man who integrated faith with professional competence and zeal in ‘collaboration with the creative and redemptive plan of God.’”⁵⁰ Even John Paul II said that he was “a concrete realization of the lay Christian ideal.”⁵¹ But Moscati was not canonized for being an exemplary lay person. Rather, he was elevated to sainthood for his vow to chastity made when he was seventeen and his dedication to living as a celibate monk in the secular world.

⁴⁸ Address delivered by Pope John Paul II to the Filipino pilgrims in a general audience after the canonization rite of Blessed Lorenzo Ruiz, 9 April 2006 <<http://www.stlorenzoruiz.com/JPII%20Adress%20to%20FIL.pdf>>.

⁴⁹ Michael J. Miller, “Joseph Moscati: Saint, Doctor, and Miracle-Worker,” *Catholic Educator’s Resource Center*, 9 April 2006 <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/catholic_stories/cs0067.html>.

⁵⁰ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 343.

⁵¹ Catholic Doctors Association of Victoria, 9 April 2006 <<http://www.catholicdoctors.asn.au/stjoseph.htm>>.

Despite its own teachings, the Church continued to canonize unquestionably holy people for questionable reasons:

- The heroicity of virtue of Victoria Rasoamanavivo was that she endured her husband's drunken fits of rage and refused to divorce him, saying, "I gave my life to this man and through him to God."⁵² For her endurance in a bad marriage, she was beatified in 1988.
- Benedetta Cambiagio Frassinello was married for two years, with her husband's permission left to join a convent, then after two years returned to live with him as brother and sister.⁵³ The unspoken theology of her beatification in 1987 says that love of God takes precedence over love of spouse. Yet the spoken theology says otherwise: "Human love, since it is to be a reflection of God's love, must also be faithful forever....Anything less than total surrender of oneself for the other is...a violation of the requirement of love."⁵⁴

To the credit of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, in the cause for Catherine Marie Rodriguez who had been married for fifteen years then became a nun after her husband died, the postulator was instructed to present more evidence from her married life for the proving of her heroic virtue.⁵⁵ In general however, the theology of sexuality taught by these examples is that saints are not happily married and that sexual intimacy is to be avoided, or, at best, endured for procreation.

This theology is seen in varying levels in two other recent causes involving married couples. In 1974 the joint cause for Louis and Azélie Guérin Martin was introduced. After failed applications into religious life, a reluctant betrothal, and ten months of celibate marriage, a priest convinced them that their call was to raise children for God. Raise them they did! They

⁵² Woodward, *Making Saints*, 344.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 344-345.

⁵⁴ Hogan, *Covenant of Love*, 43-44.

gave God five cloistered nuns, one of whom became Thérèse of Lisieux. They ran their domestic church like a convent and sheltered their family from the outside world, implanting in them the virtues of religious over married life. Woodward calls Louis and Zelig “misplaced monastics...[who showed] no hint in their lives of mutual pleasure or passion, no sense that, apart from producing children, their being ‘two in one flesh’ was something they understood as a source of grace or even happiness.”⁵⁶ Despite all the written theologies of Vatican II and recent papal teachings, the Martins’ case demands us to ask: is *this* the model the Church wants to raise for Christian parents and married couples to imitate?

One school of thought believes that “canonization provides models for holiness and gives us some insight into the citizenry of heaven, instructing us to whom we can ask to intercede on our behalf.”⁵⁷ This makes the saints distant, divine benefactors with Mary being the ultimate “go-to” person when a favor is needed.

Yet a different way to understand the saints is to see them not simply as remote benefactors but intimate companions on this earthly journey who walk with us, who face our daily struggles with us and revel with us in our joys. We encounter this model vividly in some of our contemporary liturgical environments. In these churches, such as the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles, the saints do not stand statically against a wall looking stoically down upon us. Rather, they turn with us to face the focus of our attention—the Word and Sacrament. They are dynamic participants not only in the heavenly liturgy but in the earthly liturgy of our lives. Especially in the tapestries at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, we know the saints to be intimate friends who look like us and who can understand what we are going through. This connection with the saints is not simply a transaction of supplication,

⁵⁵ Woodward, *Making Saints*, 345.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 351-352.

⁵⁷ “The Saints of John Paul II: A Way to Counter Secularism within the Church?” Zenit.org, 17 February 2006.

intercession, and response. It is a dynamic relationship, an intimate communion that unites us into one holy people so that we can stand side by side with the saints, like those twelve unnamed figures in the Los Angeles tapestries who represent “the many anonymous holy people in our midst.”⁵⁸

A living example of this relational model of sanctity might be found in another recent case which offers a bit of hope for married couples who want to enjoy their marriage and raise somewhat typical children. On October 21, 2001, Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi were the first married couple to be beatified. They raised four children; only three entered religious life, the fourth never married. Their children remember their parents as living “a simple life, like that of many married couples, but always characterized by a sense of the supernatural,” while Cardinal José Saraiva Martins, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, said that they “made a true domestic church of their family, which was open to life, to prayer, to the social apostolate, to solidarity with the poor and to friendship.”⁵⁹ Luigi was a lawyer, holding several influential positions in the Italian State. Maria loved music and was a professor and writer on educational topics. They seemed to have a normal engagement and had their first child one year after they were married. Seven years later they had their last child (a difficult and nearly fatal pregnancy), and—this is what seems most hopeful—for twelve years after that they continued to have sex. Then, as *L’Osservatore Romano* reported, “they undertook a programme for their total response to any call from God, which in the end was the ‘difficult vow of the most perfect,’ offered to the Lord in humble obedience to their spiritual father.” After twenty years of marriage, they made this “difficult vow” and renounced marital relationship, choosing to live celibately together. *L’Osservatore Romano* continues, “They were a couple who knew how to love and respect each other in the ups and downs of married and family life. They found in the

⁵⁸ Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, 9 April 2006 <<http://www.olacathedral.org/>>.

love of God the strength to begin again. They never lost heart despite the negative part of family life: the tragedies of the war, two sons as chaplains in the army, the German occupation of Rome, and lived to see the reconstruction of Italy after the war as they moved forward with the grace of God on the way of heroic sanctity in ordinary life.”

Mary and Sexual Saints?

So what does the doctrine of Mary have to do with sex and the saints? I propose, everything! As the first of all the saints and the premiere member of the People of God, Mary is our model *par excellence* for heroic virtue. However, one form of Marian piety has emphasized solely those virtues that conform to the implicit theology of sexuality seen in the Martin’s and Quattrocchi’s causes—that of a neo-Platonic “apophatic” mystical kind of non-sexuality. Granted, a spiritual union, such as the “sacramental mysticism” referred to by Benedict XVI can “[lift] us to far greater heights than anything that any human mystical elevation could ever accomplish.”⁶⁰ Yet, an extreme apophatic approach can lead “to life-denying and anti-incarnational distortions”⁶¹ as that of the suicide virgins of Jerome’s day. How has this distorted Marian devotion contributed to the denigration of the body, sex, and marriage?

As “Virgin,” Mary is honored for her uniqueness in having conceived virginally, that is, as Elizabeth Johnson describes, “for the non-use of her sexuality vis-à-vis a man.”⁶² Johnson argues that the image of Mary as “Bride of Christ” has created a “false assumption, namely that the relationship between Jesus Christ and Mary in theological interpretation should serve as the model for the relationship between concrete historical men and women in the sociological and

⁵⁹ L’Osservatore Romano, 10 October 2001, 1 July 2002 <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/mary/luigmari.htm>>.

⁶⁰ *Deus caritas est*, #13.

⁶¹ Gerald May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*, 1 July 2002 <<http://www.oregonvos.net/~jflory/apophatic.htm>>.

⁶² Lawrence Cunningham, ed. *The Catholic Faith: A Reader* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1988) 106.

interpersonal spheres.”⁶³ Thus, her immaculate, virginal, and pure relationship with Christ is the model for the Church’s relationship with Christ, which in turn is the model for a wife’s relationship with her husband.⁶⁴ Lastly, Mary’s motherhood is “the *raison d’être* of a woman’s life, the one divinely approved accomplishment, rather than the gospel proclamation that Mary’s blessedness consists in hearing the Word of God and keeping it.”⁶⁵

These are not simply long gone medieval ideas. In his encyclical letter for the Marian Year, 1987-1988, John Paul II dwelt heavily upon Mary’s virginity,⁶⁶ using her “self-giving to God” as a means to exalt celibacy over marriage.⁶⁷ Her Divine Motherhood, the womb-font that birthed new life into the world was now a hiding place to which one fled for protection in times of peril and need.⁶⁸ Her distinct mediation that was meant to express her unity with all humanity and her “in the middle”-ness between God and the world has now made her into a wonder-worker, a pestering and controlling mother over her Son,⁶⁹ and for some, a substitute for the mother one never had.⁷⁰ Finally, in comparison to the honest and practical considerations found in Paul VI’s apostolic exhortation, *Mariialis cultus, Redemptoris mater*’s treatment of the role of women today in relation to Mary is pitiable. If, as suggested, “by looking to Mary, [women] find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and achieving their own true advancement,”⁷¹ then according to the deified, sterilized, and minimized image of Mary that John Paul II presented, women are to defend and preserve their virginity as the Church defends and preserves its faith;⁷² women are to recognize that their advancement comes simply through

⁶³ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁴ Cf. Eph 5:32.

⁶⁵ Cunningham, *The Catholic Faith*, 113.

⁶⁶ *Redemptoris mater*, #39.

⁶⁷ Ibid., #43.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., #21.

⁷⁰ Ibid., #45.

⁷¹ Ibid., #46.

⁷² Ibid., #43.

their being women and not because they fearlessly call for the fulfillment of Mary's canticle; and finally they are to be content in their passive role as "vessels" and "arks" in the Church since God "entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman."⁷³

Fortunately, the first encyclical by John Paul II's successor presents a much more balanced, human image of Mary.⁷⁴ Benedict XVI calls Mary "[o]utstanding among the saints...and mirror of all holiness." His first citation of her shows her in a form of *diaconia*—"engaged in a service of charity to her cousin Elizabeth." During her visit, she expresses the humble theme of her life in the song that only the courageous can sing. Thus "Mary's greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself." In her song, she expresses belief in the promise of God and waits joyfully for God's salvation, for she is a woman of hope. Elizabeth confirms God's choice of this woman of faith by blessing Mary "who believed that what was spoken to [her] by the Lord would be fulfilled."⁷⁵ None of these laudable characteristics of Mary posed by Benedict XVI have anything to do with her virginity, her sex, or even her ability to bear children, but they have everything to do with the out-pouring of her life in the service of those in need. She is a companion who participates deeply in the lives of the people around her and stands with them through their own joys and pains.

Our Lady of Guadalupe

More than 250 years earlier, another Benedict introduced to the Church's liturgy a Mary who stood with the people and was visibly one of their own. *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* appeared to an Indian in Tepeyac in 1531, and she appeared on the Church's liturgical books in 1754, placed there by Benedict XIV. The story of her appearance is met with either deep piety

⁷³ Ibid., #46.

⁷⁴ *Deus caritas est*, #41.

⁷⁵ Lk 1:45.

or skepticism, and she stands for some as their lifeline to faith and to others as a concoction of a patriarchal society. First, her story as told by Virgilio Elizondo:

According to legend, as Juan Diego, a Christianized Indian of common status, was going from his home in the *barriada* near Tepeyac, he heard beautiful music. As he approached the source of the music, a lady appeared to him. Speaking in Nahuatl, the language of the conquered [indigenous tribes by the Spaniards], she commanded Juan Diego to go to the palace of the bishop of Mexico at Tlateloco and to tell him that the Virgin Mary, “Mother of the true God through whom one lives,” wanted a temple to be built at Tepeyac so that in it she “can show and give forth all my love, compassion, help, and defense to all the inhabitants of this land...to hear their lamentations and remedy their miseries, pain, and sufferings.” After two unsuccessful attempts to convince the bishop of the Lady’s authenticity, the Virgin wrought a miracle. She sent Juan Diego to pick roses in the place where only desert plants existed. Then she arranged the roses in his cloak and sent him to the bishop with the sign he had demanded. As Juan Diego unfolded his cloak in the presence of the bishop, the roses fell to the ground and the image of the Virgin appeared on his cloak.⁷⁶

Some theologians interpret this story to be simplistic legend or, worse, clerical propaganda made up to prove their equal social status with the ruling class: “[O]nce again, the male hierarchy found veneration of a goddess handy for their own self-aggrandizement, and the oppressed people of the land, all the Juan Diegos, were manipulated to support the desires of the upper class.”⁷⁷ Yet, for others, “despite what historians may or may not conclude about the origins of the Guadalupan events and image, theological interpretation and liturgical celebration must take into account not so much the historicity of the events but the continued presence and role that the Virgin of Guadalupe plays.”⁷⁸ For those unafraid to seek her in the ordinariness of life, she continues to appear “in the sense of an abiding or accompanying ‘presence’ in the lives of many.”⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Virgilio Elizondo, “Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Cultural Symbol,” in *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) 120.

⁷⁷ Gail Ramshaw, *Under the Tree of Life: The Religion of a Feminist Christian* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1998) 20-21, cited by Maxwell E. Johnson in a Saint John’s University 2002 class handout of pre-press edition, *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Theological Reflections of an Anglo-Lutheran Liturgist*, iii.

⁷⁸ Johnson, *The Virgin*, vi.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

It was in one of these ordinary moments in his childhood that Bishop Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B., bishop of Las Cruces, first experienced the full beauty of Guadalupe and her gentle hand of faith. In the home of his tia Petra, surrounded by extended family members gathered to begin the *Novena a Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, he encountered her image. He had known these surroundings before and had often seen the *altarcito* in the corner of his tia's house. But something about this night made him look deeper:

Esta vez un par de velas estaban encendidas enfrente de la imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, y todavía recuerdo los cuadros de las cuatro apariciones en cada esquina del altarcito. También recuerdo a mi tía Petra,...una mujer con una sonrisa pronta y siempre tenía una palabra de aliento. Esa noche, sacó un viejo libro negro con páginas amarillentas y hechas jirones que se caían a cada rato....Yo estaba totalmente extasiado con la escena entera; primero miraba la imagen con las velas vacilantes en frente, luego miraba a mi familia, concentrándome en lo que decían con la vista fija en la imagen de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe.⁸⁰

Later that night, walking back home with his grandparents under a star-filled sky, Ramírez was given his own “sign” from Guadalupe. For no reason at all, save for love, his grandfather unexpectedly lifted him onto his shoulders. Then he noticed a million stars against the black sky. *“Fue en ese momento que sentí una presencia especial del Alguien que hizo esas estrellas, y de manera infantil, supuse que todas esas estrellas habían sido hechas para mí. Fue en ese contexto de devoción a Guadalupe, intimidad familiar y la sensación de grandeza, que sentí que Dios empezó iniciando conmigo una familiaridad por toda mi vida.”*⁸¹

⁸⁰ “This time a pair of candles was lit in front of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and I still remember the pictures of the four apparitions in each corner of the home altar. I also remember my aunt Petra,...a woman with a quick smile and always having an encouraging word. This night, she took out an old black book with yellowing pages and shredded bits that had fallen out over time.... I was completely enraptured by the whole scene; first I looked at the image with the flickering candles before it, then I looked at my family, and I concentrated on what they said as they fixed their gaze on the image of our Lady of Guadalupe.” Ricardo Ramírez, “La novena de tía Petra,” *Así Es: Historias de Espiritualidad Hispana*, ed. Arturo Pérez, Consuelo Covarrubias, Edward Foley (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994) 32-33.

⁸¹ “It was in this moment that I felt a special presence of the One who made these stars, and in my childish way, I thought that all these stars had been made for me. It was in this context of devotion to Guadalupe, familial intimacy, and the sense of something bigger that I felt that God began initiating with me a close relationship to last throughout my whole life.” *Ibid.*, 33.

That night, Ramírez had a revelation of the divine through his ordinary encounter with the things of his daily life—candles, pictures, family, stars, book, smiles. Upon mystagogical reflection of that night, Ramírez concludes that “[l]a fe es la comunicación de Dios con nosotros por medio de mediaciones ‘sacramentales’ tales como personas o grupos de personas, símbolos sagrados, sonidos, imágenes visuales, emociones y la grandeza de la creación. Todos estos elementos estaban presentes al ocurrir mi primer acto de fe.”⁸² Before seminaries and catechisms, even before liturgy, God spoke to him through his relationships with the persons and the things he loved. Drawn by the beauty and wonder of Guadalupe and all that surrounded her that night, Ramírez understands now: “...sé que era un encuentro en la cumbre de la montaña con el Dios invisible por vía de su madre visible.”⁸³

Ramírez’ story and the story of Guadalupe “refleja[n] la trascendencia/inmanencia de la revelación divina.”⁸⁴ They model the necessary balance between *eros* that draws us to the persons and things of our daily life and *agape* that reveals them to be sacramental if we are open to receiving them as gift and not possession. The people of the Americas, especially Latinos/as, fluidly live this balance so that the divine and the profane constantly permeate one another. From their childhood to their deathbed, the material, sensual, even carnal things of daily life have the possibility of revealing God. The goal, however, is not to indulge in the things of life simply for the sake of pleasure. Rather, one lives deeply in the moment so as to be present, to accompany the other, and in that *espiritualidad de acompañamiento*, they find delight. Our Lady of Guadalupe wanted to be present to her people to share their sorrows and to be part of their lives. There is an intimacy in that desire that does not try to shield itself out of fear but remains always open to the other, desiring to enter the life of the other. For Latinos/as, “[p]ara

⁸² “[f]aith is God’s communication with us through ‘sacramental’ mediation such as persons or groups of persons, sacred symbols, sounds, visual images, emotions and the beauty of creation. All these elements were present at the moment of my first act of faith.” Ibid.

compartir la propia espiritualidad, uno debe de ser íntimo; ser íntimo es experimentar la vida y sentirse vulnerable.”⁸⁵ Intimacy and vulnerability to the other are necessary if one is to encounter God: “*Estoy consciente de que la manera en la que oro es estar en la presencia del pueblo de Dios, especialmente los que sufren y los desposeídos.*”⁸⁶

Yet the story of Guadalupe does not stop with her desire to be present to her people, for she teaches us that intimacy and companionship have an even greater purpose. After the flowers had fallen and her image appeared on Juan Diego’s cloak, the bishop, and eventually, the society, changed. “The story’s purpose was to convert the bishop, the symbol of the new Spanish power group, and to turn the attention of the conquering group from amassing wealth and power to the periphery of society where the people continued to live in poverty and misery.”⁸⁷ Those who experienced the event of Guadalupe were opened by the intimacy and presence that she offered to them and were given a new vision that allowed them to let go of their fear and doubt, their stubbornness and preconceptions. “It was through the presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe that the possibility of cultural dialogue began....As at Bethlehem when the Son of God became man in Jesus and began the overthrow of the power of the Roman Empire, at Tepeyac Christ entered the soil of the Americas and began to reverse the European domination of the people in those lands.”⁸⁸

⁸³ “...I know that it was a mountain-top encounter with the invisible God through his visible mother.” Ibid., 34.

⁸⁴ “reflect the transcendence/immanence of divine revelation.” Ibid., 35.

⁸⁵ “to share one’s spirituality, one must be intimate; to be intimate is to experiment with life and feel vulnerable.” Olga Villa Parra, “La espiritualidad de un matrimonio hispano,” ed. Arturo Pérez, et al., *Así Es*, 47.

⁸⁶ “I am aware that the way I pray is by being in the presence of God’s people, especially the suffering and the dispossessed.” Yolanda Tarango, C.V.V.I., “La espiritualidad de una mujer hispana,” ed. Arturo Pérez, et al., *Así Es*, 14.

⁸⁷ Elizondo, *Beyond Borders*, 122-123.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 123.

Conclusion

Perhaps, then, devotion to Mary is giving us the “possibility of cultural dialogue.” Perhaps, Marian piety will reverse the domination of our preoccupation with virginity. However, some may claim that these devotions to Mary/Guadalupe that make up a large part of popular religiosity have nothing to teach contemporary society, nor could they possibly provide a new vision for sexual saints. This is true if we continue to use their images “to legitimize and maintain the *status quo*. However, “[they become] liberating when used as a source of unity and strength in the struggle for dignity and subsequent change against the powerful of society.”⁸⁹

The dearth of married, sexual saints, and the recent examples of newly-minted lay blessed and saints show that the Congregation for the Causes of Saints has chosen to maintain the *status quo* by essentially “beatifying” and “canonizing” a one-sided image of Mary, that of virgin, bride, mother, meek, distant, untouchable, vessel. Missing from the Church’s sanctified models of holiness are the bold and courageous Mary found in the Scriptures and the passionate, intimate Guadalupe found in the popular religiosity of the Hispanic people. Yet, “[a] theologian’s task is not the canonization or rejection of the religious symbols of the people, but a continuous reinterpretation of them in relation to the whole Gospel.”⁹⁰ Therefore, let us find those common sources of unity and strength in the images of Mary handed down to us and reinterpret them in the light of our whole tradition and experience of faith.

The image of Mary as we see her in Scripture and as we know her from our liturgy is that she acted, she responded, she plunged herself completely into the mystery of Christ and the Church. This is how she prayed and offered thanks to God, this is how she lived and followed Christ to the cross, this is how she kept faith when all hope was lost—faith in the Holy Spirit that from her *fiat* made the impossible possible. If the Church ponders seriously *this* image of Mary,

⁸⁹ Ibid., 122.

then we too can enter fully, consciously, and actively into the liturgy of the everyday tasks, joys, sorrows, crosses, empty tombs, and upper rooms of our earthly life, without fear of “defilement.” From this headlong, intimate, fully-present participation in the Paschal Mystery in our lives, the Church will discover new images of Mary: as priest entrusted with the Body and Blood of Christ that is the Church; as wife passionately in love with her husband; as co-worker in the daily scattering of the mighty from their thrones.

Finally, the images of Mary that I see embodied in marriage beds is the Mother of the Incarnate Word, Giver of One’s Body, Singer from the Soul and Spirit. The Mary that sits at kitchen tables is Provider and Confidante, the Partner who asks how your day went, and the Parent who helps with your homework. She is the *Stabat Mater* by your bedside singing you to sleep and the woman at the party unafraid to ask for more wine. She is a model for those everyday saints who wear curlers rather than haloes, who ponder in their hearts the previous night’s lovemaking, and whose same hearts are pierced by the silence of an empty nest.

When these images of Mary are raised up alongside the Virgin, the Bride, and the Mother, then might the Second Vatican Council’s hope for marriage be realized: “Authentic married love will be held in high esteem, and healthy public opinion will be quick to recognize it.”⁹¹ Yet there is more that must happen if married couples are to find saints like them in the heavenly City of God. We must first understand that sexuality is more than just sex or the absence of it. Next, our Eucharistic theology must align itself with a broader understanding of the Incarnation of Christ, so that the reverence we show the Body and Blood of Christ, we offer to all humans, especially those who have been marginalized for sins of the body. We must also dare to shed the philosophical and existential gymnastics that have narrowed our theologies of ordination and marriage. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, married couples must tell their

⁹⁰ Ibid., 124.

story and give witness to how their lives proclaim the Paschal Mystery. “[If] Christian spouses give outstanding witness to faithfulness and harmony in their love, if they are conspicuous in their concern for the education of their children, and if they play their part in a much needed cultural, psychological, and social renewal in matters of marriage and the family,”⁹² then might a new face of Mary be seen in our homes and new models of holiness be raised to the altar of the Church.

⁹¹ *Gaudium et spes*, #49.

⁹² *Ibid.*

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