

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year C)(21/03/2010)

‘The Catholic Church is obsessed with sex’. I expect you’ve heard that one a few times. Well, let’s look quickly at this accusation. If you want to know what the Church has to say about pretty well anything, the place to start is The Catechism. This covers the whole range of Church teaching, and it contains 2865 paragraphs; about 120 of those paragraphs, that is 4%, are concerned with human sexuality, marriage, and sexual behaviour. That doesn’t sound much like an obsession. The truth is that it is not The Church that is obsessed with sex, it is people who are obsessed with it. Just watch the news, or listen to the radio, or read the newspaper. We are bombarded with stories about the sex lives of celebrities and sports personalities; sex is used to sell pretty well anything from clothes, to food, to cosmetics. Look at the television schedules; look at the cinema box office successes. A report was recently (Linda Papadopoulos; February 2010) produced for the Home Office which looked at the increasing sexualisation of children and young people. Here is an extract:

“A dominant theme in magazines seems to be the need for girls to present themselves as sexually desirable in order to attract male attention. Worryingly, there is also a trend for children in magazines to be dressed and posed in ways designed to draw attention to sexual features that they do not yet have. At the same time, advice on hairstyles, cosmetics, clothing, diet, and exercise attempt to remake even young readers as objects of male desire, promoting premature sexualisation. In the case of boys, ‘lads’ mags’ contain a high degree of highly sexualised images of women that blur the lines between pornography and mainstream media. The predominant message for boys is to be sexually dominant and to objectify the female body.” (p. 7)

I could go further, but I don’t think it’s necessary. The simple fact is that, at least in this country, there is an increasing and all-pervading obsession with sex. No aspect of life is untouched by this. Because people are constantly thinking about sex, they are constantly asking questions about it, and who is there that can give them any answers? Who is there that has an integrated vision of the truth and meaning of human sexuality? Plenty of people are happy to give out information on the mechanics of sex, but who will talk about what it all means, what it is all about. There are not many places to turn.

Once people have got beyond the stage of ‘The Church is obsessed with sex’, the next thing they say is ‘The Church is against this, or that’. It seems that they believe Christian morality is all about a long list of ‘don’t do that’; The Church as a sort of Joyce Grenfell figure. Once again, we are letting other people set the agenda, and we need to turn this around. The Church does have a distinctive idea of the meaning of sex, of what part it plays in human relationships, in promoting human flourishing. The starting point is not what we are *against*, but what we are *for*. We have to be pretty firm here, and insist on starting at the beginning (what is a human being, what is a man, what is a woman, what are two people saying to each other when they make love). If we begin at the end (why can’t I do this, why can’t I do it with him, with her, with them) then we are lost. Sexuality is reduced to mechanics and it then becomes destructive and dull, leaving people thinking ‘surely there must be more to it than this?’

So, let’s be positive. Where should we begin? Lets begin with the creation: ‘God created man in his own image...male and female he created them’ (Gen. 1.27). More than this, God is by his nature a communion of persons, the Trinity, so it is in the

nature of human beings, made in his image, both to give and to receive love. All people are, by their nature, created for love. That love takes many forms. It begins with the love we experience, one hopes, from our parents. We then begin to learn about friendship, and the love that friends share, and hopefully we will then also begin to discover that it is in our nature to love not just those we know, but all our fellow humans. Within this context we become aware that we feel a real physical attraction to some individuals: we want to be with them, we want to enjoy their company, even to enjoy their bodies. This in itself is not love, of course, but it is in the nature of the human being to seek another to whom they can give love, from whom they can receive love, and with whom they can share in God's creative work by having children. So, I find someone with whom I feel some sense of mutual attraction, some sense of starting from a shared approach to the world; there is already some sense of unity between us. I must then make a decision about what happens next. Do I feel able to give myself totally to this other person? Will they give themselves totally to me? Will each of us be overawed by the wonder of this gift, able to treasure it, to nurture it and to nourish it? This is not about feelings, it is about the will. It is a decision I must make in my mind. Am I prepared to commit myself irrevocably and for ever to this other, to growing more and more united with them, to seeking their fulfillment and even their sanctification? These are the great questions that lie behind the decision to marry. If I decide that this is what I do, freely and in full knowledge, choose to do, and they choose to reciprocate, the foundation is laid for marriage. Within marriage we choose to give ourselves totally, irrevocably and exclusively to each other, and that gift which we promise at the wedding is expressed in what the Church somewhat coyly refers to as the marital act. Our bodies speak, and the words they say will be 'I am yours, yours alone, and totally yours, nothing is held back'.

From this marital act a child may, or may not, result. Whatever may be the outcome of any particular occasion, there is no doubt that such an act is 'ordered' to the creation of new life – that is, the natural end of it, the purpose which the bodily organs in combination fulfill, is the creation of a child. The act itself is, at least potentially, a source of pleasure for both those who participate in it, but that is not its fundamental aim. The fundamental aim is the creation of new life. The Church's vision of sex is that it is a wonderful and glorious thing, an act which by its nature expresses total mutual commitment and is ordered to the creation of new life. What better way of producing new life than within an act whereby two people commit themselves to just such a total, complete and permanent self-gift that is best suited to the nurture and flourishing of a child?

Of course, we human beings are weak and prone to self-indulgence. We are all too prone to grabbing at the pleasurable side-effects while trying to avoid the fundamental purpose. So we have, over many centuries, set about trying to separate the pleasures of sex from its fundamental aim. In our own culture such a separation has become almost taken for granted, but it has been at a terrible cost. Widespread acceptance of contraception and abortion have produced a culture where children are seen as a burden to be avoided rather than a blessing to be welcomed. This means we see our children in a very different way, and they know it. There is a definite sense of hostility between the generations. Of course contraception has had positive outcomes for some people; women have been able to have sex when they wish as well as having a career; couples have been able to have sex when they wish without the fear of having to feed large families. But there is always a price to pay for frustrating the

natural aims of human actions. What looks like freedom quickly becomes a new and vicious sort of slavery. When sex has no apparent physical consequences, we can seek it when we like, as often as we like, with whom we like. Promiscuity, infidelity and compulsive behaviour are the inevitable outcome. Half the world is desperately seeking pleasure and gratification through successive encounters; the other half is desperately longing to find someone who will really love them, and these two desperations feed off one another, but are unable to satisfy each other. Remember, in the sexual act our bodies say “I am totally yours, yours forever”, but if our minds are thinking “I never intend to see you again” our bodies are lying, and the damage done to those who habitually lie, and are habitually lied to, in this way is immense. Imagine an analogy: a scientist invents a pill or a device that means you can eat whatever you like, but without ever putting on weight. At first it is rather an appealing thought, but it would quickly pale. Our obsessive search for gratification, cut loose from its natural outcome, would start to envelop us and our lives would begin to be consumed with the search for more and different and bigger and better food.

The Church’s vision shows us that sex, by its very nature, belongs within the marriage relationship, and is open to children. Where either part of that is frustrated a delicate balance is shifted, and it becomes more about self-gratification than about self-gift. One of the great lies of the age is that no-one can live without sex. This is absurd, but all the same it has deeply infected our culture. People confuse needs with wants. People want burgers chips and popcorn, say, but they do not need them – they need food. People similarly claim that they need sex, but this is not so; they want sex, what they need is love. The Church is very clear: people can live without sex, although they cannot live without love. I think this distinction lies at the heart of many of today’s problems. For many people it is just taken for granted that everyone needs to be having sex, so they set about ordering a world based on that assumption, and any indication to the contrary must be rejected. This is why we hear the repeated claim that the Church’s opposition to the use of condoms puts people at risk of dying from AIDS; people simply will not accept that in some cases the best thing to do is to be chaste. So they will ignore evidence that suggests countries that promote abstinence do better at reducing infection rates than those that promote condom use, and they will ignore, too, the words of the director of the AIDS Prevention Research Project at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, who said this time last year:

“We have found no consistent associations between condom use and lower HIV-infection rates, which, 25 years into the pandemic, we should be seeing if this intervention was working.”

Looking at the way people live their lives, and a walk through any large town on a Friday night should give you enough to be going on with, one has to ask, who is in charge here? When it comes to sexual behaviour, are people’s actions governed by rational choices and decisions, or are they governed by lust and passion. If it is the latter, they have surrendered freedom and allowed themselves to be enslaved. If they choose to reject the Church’s vision of human sexuality, what vision will they adopt instead? How do they decide what is right or wrong? On what occasions will someone decide ‘I feel very powerfully that I want to do this, but I choose not to, because it would be wrong?’ Is there any more to sexual morality than consent alone – anything goes as long as those taking part consent; because real consent requires full knowledge, freedom, and equality of power, which may be rare in sexual encounters.

Indeed, one could say that if people do not really understand the full depth of what they are doing in the sexual act, their consent to it is at best imperfect.

There is so much more that could be said, if there was more time. As it is I would just like to end with a brief look at recent scandals concerning sexual abuse of minors by priests. There seems to have been an avalanche of coverage over this in recent weeks – even in recent years. What on earth has been going on? The first point to make is that we are reading now about events which, for the most part, took place many years ago. The Church, at least here in England and Wales, operates child protection procedures that are second to none. The second point is to make it clear that any abuse of children is always appalling, shameful and shocking. The Pope has described this as a grave sin, a heinous crime, a grave betrayal of trust worthy of unequivocal condemnation, and this he is absolutely right. The third point is that where bishops or priests have deliberately covered up offences, those facts must be brought to light and the people concerned must explain themselves. It is hard to see how they could remain in position if they deliberately sought to frustrate the law. There is still among many bishops and clergy an obsession with secrecy, which leads to bad decision-making, and now is the time to turn our backs on this once and for all. The fourth point is that we should not be disheartened. In spite of all the media coverage there is no evidence that this problem is worse among Catholic clergy than among Protestants, in fact if anything it may be the reverse. A recent study in the US also observed that the problem is far worse among teachers than among clergy [Comments to United Nations Human Rights Council Sept. 22 by Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See's permanent observer to the United Nations in Geneva, and sources cited by him: http://www.ncregister.com/blog/vatican_sets_record_straight_on_sexual_abuse/]. It is absolutely right that the Church should put its house in order, and deal with past problems once and for all, indeed more than that we should be leading the way. As long as we are the story we are distracting attention from other stories, from hidden dangers, not least the continued and insidious sexualisation of our culture and our children which was my starting point.