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Sex and Christian Love: Love and Sexuality

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SEX AND CHRISTIAN LOVE

LOVE AND SEXUALITY, A Christian Approach, by Mary Perkins Ryan & John Julian Ryan. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1967. xii, 196 pp.

This study of love and sexuality in the wider context of Christian love will certainly not cause the stir which Mrs. Ryan's previous book on the Catholic school system in the United States aroused. The reason for this is that most, if not all of the opinions espoused by the authors, a husband and wife team, have already been on the market of public discussion for the past few years, and on practically each topic mentioned, several longer articles or works could be cited as sources.

What the authors have attempted to do in the very short scope of this book, is to give a more practical application to the general principle of all Christian morality, namely that it is founded on the gospel of love which Christ preached and lived. Thus in a much less profound fashion, this book essays to study the role of the affective drive in the human spirit and the Christian vision of love in the light of modern psychological insights. The second part of the book takes up the problem of loving as sexed persons, whether men or women, and the effort needed to put sexuality at the service of love, and that this ought to be the norm of moral behavior rather than the negative one of "pleasure deliberately indulged in."

The first three chapters attempt to outline a basic positive approach to the affective drive and the total outlook of man. It rightly seeks to orient sexuality toward the finality of mature love. In this it brings out very clearly the personalistic emphasis of modern philosophy and shows very well how these newly found insights can be a positive help to an understanding of the gospel which then becomes not something inhuman in its demands, but rather a challenge to be fully and completely human. Thus the authors set up a positive criterion for sexual morality based on the value of a positive love for the other. This criterion is applied to various examples of inter-personal values which affect moral decisions, e.g., in the area of pre-marital sex and later on in the book, in the use of sex in marriage. The fusion of Christian purpose with this deeply personal awareness is revealed in the summary on p. 63, which underlines the call of the gospel as essentially a call to break out of the imprisonment of self-love and reach out for others.

In almost all the questions concerned with the use of sex in marriage, the authors, working out from the principle of love, tend to espouse what would be classed as the 'progressive' opinion in matters currently under dispute among moralists.

Thus allowance is made for direct sterilization by double vasectomy if apart from any physical necessity, this is necessary to maintain a peaceful and ordered homelife (p. 97). The treatment of the need for many friendships with persons of both sexes as a necessity for development is well treated (p. 114 ff). The aim is ever to bring the affective life and sexuality into the service of love, rightly understood.

In the same vein, Chapter 7 treats of the vocation to love in the single life. This is an interesting development of an area yet to be fully explored. It is not shown so clearly here just how sexuality is conformed to the ideal of love in this state. There is a clear distinction given between the priestly life and celibacy as vocations and in the current controversy on clerical celibacy, the authors are clearly in favor of a change in the present law of the Latin Church (p. 113 ff.) The formal and external marital consent in a publicly acknowledged act is classified as mainly a matter of social order. The implication is given that it is not of too great a value. But is this also not part of man's social and loving nature? And is it not intrinsic to his nature to be such? There is a shadow of contradiction to the possibility of divorce in certain Christian marriages (p. 156-7) here.

In subsequent chapters, favor is shown to a more open attitude. The efficacy of rhythm as a method of controlling conception is called into question precisely on the grounds of its psychological inadequacy (p. 161). In some instances marriages could be entered with the deliberate intention of not having children (p. 160), thus denying the need of this value as central in every marriage, at least by intention. In speaking of the relation between the widespread use of contraceptives and abortion, it is inferred, without any statistical proof, that the wider use of contraceptives will lessen the incidence of abortion. (p. 167). However certain statistics from many other sources would seem to indicate that the opposite is the case.

In taking up the problem of particular friendship and community life, it would seem that the problem is not gone into in depth and perhaps the authors too easily overlook the social inhibitions of tradition which often exist in certain cultures quite apart from the exigencies of community religious life.

The authors cover almost all the controversial points now under discussion in the life of Christian love. Undoubtedly this positive emphasis and search for a better moral norm than the negative one of 'don't,' is worthy of commendation. However the treatment of none of these subjects is profound. Conclusions are taken mostly from modern authors. Neither in the text nor in the annotated bibliography which concludes this volume, is there any reference to the classic

modern work on the Christian norm of love in moral conduct. I refer to G. Gilleman's work: *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology*.

For a summary of modern opinions on many controversial moral topics connected with sex and marriage, projected against the theme of Christian love, this is an interesting book, full of many valid and inspiring insights. It will be of help to the counsellor and speaker. But it is too shallow to hold the interest of the professional. Positions are stated glibly, but hardly argued conclusively.

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