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ST AUGUSTINE'S INTERPRETATION OF 1 COR 7:1-6: AN EXPOSITORY STUDY

Abstract

The various aspects of Christian Liberty and of the life of the Christian in the world are linked in a singular way in Paul's pronouncements on marriage, as is found in 1 Cor 7:1–7 ff. Our choice of St. Augustine in the numerous contemporary scholarly attempted hermeneutics of 1 Cor 7:1–7 is that he adopts and elaborated an already existing tradition on sex and marriage. Moreover, this text in the New Testament is the only one that speaks explicitly of the significance of conjugal intercourse. The interpretation of this text or passage has to an extent determined the development of the church's tradition. Thus, the importance of the passage has to be considered. In Cor 7:1, Paul starts answering the questions the Corinthians put to him. Verse 1 reads: "*Now concerning the matters about which you wrote*". The first of these questions concerns marriage. According to the superscription of this work, Augustine's interpretation of 1 Cor 7:1–7 has implications for Christians in the contemporary world. In as much as it raises numerous problems to our contemporary understanding of marriage and sexuality, the problem of sexuality characterized our society today.

Key words: liberty, Christianity, tradition, marriage, sexuality

Introduction

Daily, we hear of rape cases, sexual harassment. There are problems of homosexuality, lesbianism, contraceptives and bestiality, and the issues of abortion facing the modern Christian.

Likewise, the social background of the text reveals that Corinth was a highly religious city with several temples dedicated to different gods. It had more than three temples to the Greek goddess Aphrodites, whose worshippers

practiced religious prostitution. These numbered up to a 1000 prostitutes that were connected with the temple of Aphrodite. Corinth had a reputation for sexual license. According to Morris¹ the Greek verb "*Korinthiazein*: to live like a Corinthian – came to mean living a promiscuous life. In other words, the practice of sexual immorality or "go to the devil.

Little is known about Paul's sexual experience. However, if Rom 7:7–25 is read as Pauline autobiography that will mean that his sexual desire awoke at the onset of puberty. All we know and are sure of is that Paul was single (1 Cor 7:7–8), but whether as a widower (1 Cor 9:5) or as one who never married or whose wife left him to remain single without suffering from inordinate sexual desire (1 Cor 7:8). It seems that the greater reference to sexual issue by Paul more than the gospels shows somehow the laxer sexual moves of Hellenistic societies.² He shows the incompatibility between a life of sexual license and the kingdom of God for no immoral, impure person has inheritance in God's Kingdom (Eph 5:5).

Since Corinth from the foregoing had a reputation for sexual license, Paul had to prevent the Christian community at Corinth from giving in to the debauchery existing there. On the other, as the commentators on the epistle affirm, Paul reacts against the Gnostics and in our text especially against the extreme right current of the ascetics (the Encratites) who condemned marriage as such. In their letter to Paul the Corinthians gave a summary of an encratist position: "it is well for a man not to touch a woman" (vs. 1). Paul does not reject this assertion in as much as it proclaims the dignity of virginity: "To the unmarried and widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do" (vs. 8). Nevertheless, he reacts against the condemnation of marriage. He advises people to marry in order to avoid promiscuity (*porneia*): "But because of the temptation to immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband" (vs. 2). Concerning sexual intercourse in marriage, Paul emphasizes a real mutuality in the sense that husband and wife have the same right. In other words, he stresses the equality of both in this respect: "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body but the wife does" (vs. 3–4). Paul

¹ Maris, L., *The first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1983), p. 102.

² Marsh, P. W., *The International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1986), p. 71.

uses a juridical language to suggest that the husband is to give his wife what she has the right to expect and vice-versa, he uses the expression “*ten opheilen apodidonai*” (Vulgate: *debitum redder*) which he also uses in Rom 13:7 to enounce juridical relations “Pay all of them their dues *apodote tas opheilas* taxes to whom taxes are due”.

The fundamental idea of Paul here is clear: the reciprocity and equality of husband and wife in the matter of marital intercourse. Concerning sexual life in marriage, Paul is not opting for abstinence, on the contrary, he cautions against the dangers of a prolonged continence. As he writes in V. 5: Do not refuse one another except by (1) mutual consent (2) for an agreed time (3) to devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again lest satan tempt you through lack of self control. The basic reasons for Paul’s opinion seems to be that they (husband/wife) might individually identify their union with Christ and exercise their right and privileges in communion with God³: Our investigation is enhanced and of great importance by the following sentence (V 6–7) a false interpretation bore heavily on the theological tradition: “*I say this (touto) by way of concession (kata sungnomen)* which means concession; permission in the Vulgate: *Secundum indulgentiam*) not of command (*kat’epitagen*) which means precept, command, rite vulgate: *secundum imperium*). I should like everyone to be like me, but everybody has his special gift (charisma) from God, one of one kind; and one of another”. This (*touto*) relates to Paul’s exhortation to marriage and to regular intercourse in it the content of his answer to the question of the Corinthians). This idea that he wished all men be like him is probably that he wished the parousia will be at once and time is too short to allow any physical or earthly thing, no matter how pleasurable, to distract one’s attention, even sexual activities⁴.

That this is a suggestion, not a rule appears firstly, from the fact that Paul wishes that all were virgins as he himself is and secondly, from his preference of virginity expressed in the following part of 1 Cor 7, in the context of his eschatology: “the appointed time has grown very short (1cor 7:229).

Paul’s answer to the Corinthians with reference to 1 Cor 7:1; tells us that in general marriage is the best solution because the bodies of believers as members belong to the body of Christ and a believing man cannot at the same time be one body and one flesh with a prostitute⁵. As such, one evades the tempta-

³ Gaebelein, F. E. and Douglas, J. D.: „1 Corinthians” in *Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1973) p.

⁴ Barclay, W., *The Letter to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1956) p. 65.

⁵ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An outline of the Theology* trans by John Richard De Witt, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B Eeramans Publishing Company, 1975) p. 307.

tion of immorality (*v. 2*) secondly relation to sexual intercourse husband and wife have equal rights and duties. Thirdly, that because of the lack of self-control prolonged abstinence is dangerous (*vs. 5*).

Disturbing procreation as a purpose of intercourse, which latter traditions in theological circles consider as the “end of marriage” as we shall see with St. Augustine. Paul is silent as to sexual pleasure, contraception, intercourse during menstruation; pregnancy and in old age. These are issues confronting us today in the contemporary era. It is with these and other concrete questions that the tradition of the first centuries was concerned. To answer them, the Christians incorporated what they considered the best elements of moral doctrine in their historical and cultural situation. From the writers and their writings, they quote implicitly or explicitly, it appears they were especially influenced by the stoics and Neo-Pythagoreans⁶ regarded here as pagan sources and by Jewish heritage.

In concluding this lengthy introductory section, we can say that from the above explanations, it could be noted that Paul understood the natural sexual instinct in man so well that he would not advice anyone to remain unmarried. Marriage is permitted by concession though he wishes all men were like him – an itinerant evangelist; missionary who could not probably carry a woman along in such a rough and rigorous work; moreover as someone who has the gift (charisma) or continence. To him, both marriage and celibacy are gifts from God. One can have this or that, that is, either of the two. Factually, there might be some married couples in Corinth who abstained from intercourse on the ground of mistaken asceticism. To those involved, he wrote that only limited pre-planned and agreed period of abstinence is permissible. Clearly then, procreation is not the sole of intercourse. Actually, seasons of deep humiliation require abstinence from lawful pleasures. Couples are only exposing themselves to danger by either defrauding one another or abstaining for too long attempting to perform what is above their strength, and at the same time not bound on them by any law or by God.

⁶ These generally considered the purpose for sexual intercourse in its biological functions: sexual intercourse is only for the sake of procreation Distrusting bodily pleasure, they suspected passion in marriage, as love was considered as passion and emotions. For them as vividly expressed by Seneca and Musonius Rufus in his work *Reliquiae*, ed by O. Hense (Leipzig, 1905), teaches that marital intercourse is morally right only if its purpose is procreative and that intercourse for pleasure within the limits of marriage is reprehensible.

Augustine's interpretation of I COR 7:1–6

We shall expose Augustine's interpretation of this text in the context of his reactions to Julian of Elcanum⁷. According to Augustine, Julian does not admit concupiscence as an evil and a disease as consequence of the fall. Furthermore, Julian permitted married persons to have intercourse performed for the sake of pleasure. According to him, the desire for sexual lust is only sinful when is sought in adultery or outside of marriage or when in marriage carnal lust is immoderate or obtained in an unnatural act like contraception⁸. But as such, desiring and seeking sexual pleasure in marriage is legitimate, since Paul in 1 Cor 7:1–6 proposes marriage as a remedy for sexual desire⁹. It is worthy to note that Augustine's own interpretation of our text is as a result of Julian's recourse to the text of 1 Cor 7:1–6 as a basis for his teaching concerning marital intercourse. Augustine affirms on the contrary that procreation, not pleasure, has to be the purpose of intercourse¹⁰ sexual intercourse within marriage for other than procreative reasons is "indulgence beyond what suffices for generating offspring" Augustine concluded.

How did Augustine interprets the same text 1 Cor 7:1–6 which Julian of Elcanum invoked to show that within the limits of marriage the pursuit of moderate sexual pleasure is not sinful, since the text proclaims marriage to be a remedy for sexual desire; chrysostom's interpretation of the passage was of the same kind. However, as earlier mentioned, it is, indeed evident that the text does not even mention the purpose of procreation, but considers marriage as the obvious way to avoid immorality and promiscuity and warns against the danger of a prolonged continence.

In vs. 2 Paul advises marriage to prevent immorality. Augustine recognizes that this assertion calls marriage a remedy for concupiscence¹¹. However, in his Judgment this function does in no way prevent the procreative purpose from being the only admissible in intercourse. What is conceded to in continence when one marries, is compensated by the generation of children, the only legitimate

⁷ See, *Augustine's Against Julian*, 11, 7 PL 44, 687.

⁸ *Against Julian*, 111,14, PL 44, 716.

⁹ *Against Julian*, 111, 13 PL 44; 715; *Against Julian* 111, 15, PL, 44, 717.

¹⁰ "Quod sine Libidine fieri non potest, sic tamen fiat ut non propter Libidinem fiat". *Ibid*, V,9,35; PL 44, 805.

¹¹ "infirmittatis remedium" in *De bono Viduitatis*, 8, 11, PL 40, 437, "aegrotis remedium" in *De Genesi ad Litteram* ix, 7, 12, PL 34, 397.

purpose of intercourse¹². In other words, the natural finality of marriage is procreation, but the values (*bona*) of marriage are manifold and among them we may reckon its aptitude to be a remedy for concupiscence in as much as the service of the only procreative purpose¹³.

In v 3-4 Paul uses a legal or juridical language “to give to the partner his or her right” (*ten opheilen apedidote*) to emphasize the mutual and equal right of both spouses concerning intercourse. The translation of this verse in Latin uses the expression “*redder debitum*” – to redder the conjugal debt. Stretching the meaning of the expression, Augustine makes the distinction between “rendering” the conjugal debt and “exaction”, “demanding” it beyond the need for generation. He declared that by virtue of the duty of fidelity, a married person ought to join in intercourse *redder debitum*, when the partner demands it, in order to protect him against the danger of adultery¹⁴. For him, this obligation of faithfulness is imperative to such an extent as to render illicit a promise of complete continent without the agreement of the partner¹⁵. But this is not the negation of the only procreative purpose of intercourse, for he adds that the spouse who demands or exacts intercourse beyond the need for generation commits a venial sin¹⁶. Therefore he blames the wives who force their husbands to render the carnal debt, even when the husbands prefer to be continent, not out of a desire of children, but using their right immoderately out of ardent concupiscence, as much as the husbands who are incontinent to such an extent as not even to spare their pregnant wives¹⁷. Nevertheless, when spouses demand intercourse beyond the need for procreation, although exceeding the limits of the conjugal pact (*egredientur metas matrimonii pacti*) as it is described in the marriage tablets, they sin only verily, since they do not exceed the limits of fidelity (*non egridianturmetae coniugalis thori*) as it is done in adultery¹⁸, so he maintains that only intercourse for the sake of procreation is without sin. Beyond this limit, at least one of both spouses commits a venial sin, that is, the partner demanding intercourse.

¹² *De Coriugiis adulterinis*, 11, 12, 12, PL 40, 478–479.

¹³ *De bono coniugali*, 10, 11 and 11, 12, PL 40, 387–382.

¹⁴ *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, 11, 32, 34, PL 44, 468.

¹⁵ *De bono coniugali*, 6, 6, PL 40, 377–378.

¹⁶ *De bono coniugali*, 7, 6, PL 40, 378 reads “*Reddere debitum coniugala nullius est criminis, exigere autem ultra generandi necessitate, cupae venialis*”.

¹⁷ *De bono coniugali*, 3 and 6, PL 40, 377.

¹⁸ *Sermo* 51, 13, 22, PL 38, 345.

In verse 5, Paul manifestly speaks of regular intercourse and of the danger of prolonged continence, without mentioning procreation. St. Augustine admits that this is the real meaning of the sentence. But he says that we have only to read what follows in V.6: Paul calls this non-procreative intercourse sinful. In fact, Paul opposes concession (*secundum indulgentiam*) to command (*secundum imperium*), another way of saying to marry and to have intercourse in it is not an order (he wishes that all could be as himself celibates), but only an advice or a suggestion. Augustine read in his Latin translation not “*secundum indidgentiam*”, but “*secundum veniam*” (which can be synonymous with *indulgentia*) and he understood *venia* as pardon, forgiveness and concludes that having intercourse without the purpose of procreation must be a sin, otherwise it would not require pardon, not by commandment. *And now who will deny this be a sin, when admittedly those who do this have only a concession made an apostolic authority to excuse them?*¹⁹ In some other texts Augustine writes

since copulation with the intention of generation is not culpable, as it is proper to marriage, what does the apostle concede by way of pardon, except this: that married persons, not containing themselves, demand the debt of the flesh from the partner, not from a wish of progeny, but from the pleasure of lust²⁰.

In a simplified formula, Augustine concludes: No one could doubt that it is greatly absurd to say that those who receive forgiveness would not have sinned²¹. Augustine concedes that the married Christians his acquaintance fails to observe the rules

Never in friendly conversation have I heard anyone who is or who has been married say that he never had intercourse with his wife except when hoping for procreation²².

Augustine seems not to regard the experience of the faithful as a relevant datum, and he grants that complete continence in marriage is easier than limiting marital intercourse to the need for procreation. To put it quite plainly, by St. Augustine’s interpretation of 1 Cor 7:1–6 as we have seen above, Paul is effectively turned against himself to establish the stoic rule: that marital inter-

¹⁹ *Enchiridion*, 78, 21, PL 40, 269.

²⁰ *De nuptiis et concupiscencia*, 1, 14, 16, SCEL 42, 229, PL 44, 421–423.

²¹ *De bono coniugali* 10, 11, PL 40, 381; *Sermo* 51, 13, 22, PL 38, 345.

²² *De bono coniugali*, 13, 15.

course is morally right only if its purpose is procreative and that intercourse for pleasure within the limits of marriage is reprehensible.

The early 1960s' and 1970s' witnessed the advocates of the "new sexuality" which reproached the Judeo-Christian *western* tradition, influenced by Augustine's conceptions. He maintained that the views of the early centuries of Christian teachings were negative and repressive attitude to sexuality²³. However, *the personalistic view of the 2nd Vatican council document is no. 51* can be used to answer their oppositions *since therein there is reaction against the biological view of natural view* from Augustine's interpretation of 1 Cor 7: 1-5, and by general reflections on marriage and sexuality, we can play safe to say that Augustine had a dualistic conception, as he juxtaposes two definitions of marriage, which he did not succeed in unifying them. On the one hand, marriage as it is founded on the sex difference is an institution for procreation. Sexual intercourse for the sake of its biological finality, that is, the generation of children. This is natural law – the order established by God's eternal law or creating will. That Augustine considers sexual intercourse only as a biological act for the sake of procreation is apparent from his affirmation that children are not the fruit of the conjugal communion, but of sexual intercourse²⁴. In a different text Augustine asserts that a child is the fruit of the flesh, and that the spouses do not have the obligation to produce it (*non quaerentes ab invicem fructum carnis*), since marriage as a community of conjugal charity is real and genuine without carnal intercourse and this spiritual union becomes the more vigorous the more sexual desire is kept down²⁵ yet elsewhere Augustine notes that children are a good (*bonum, value*) not of marriage, but of nature (*hoc non coniugii bonum est, sed naturae*), for God made nature in such a way that procreation can be the result of whatever canal intercourse, conjugal as well as adulterous; licit as well as immoral.²⁶ On the other hand, Augustine teaches that marriage as a spiritual community of husband and wife is the first manifestation of man's social nature. He writes in the introduction of *De Bono Coniugali* that:

²³ See for instance, W. Young; *Eros Denied: sex in Western Society*, (New York: Grove Press, 1964); H.A. OHO (ed) *The New Sexuality* (Polo AHO; California; science and Behaviour Book, 1971). E. Kennedy *The New Sexuality. Nyths; tables and Hang-ups* (Grand Rapids: Eerdinans, 1972).

²⁴ *De bono coniugali*, 1, 1, PL 40, 373.

²⁵ *Sermo 51, 13, 21, PL 38, 344.*

²⁶ *De sancta Virginitate 10, 10, PL 40, 401.*

Since every man is part of the human race and human nature is something social and possesses the capacity for friendship as a great and natural good (*magnum et natural bonum*), God for this reason willed to create all men from one, so that they might be tied together in their society, not only by the similarity of race, but also by the bond of blood (*cognationis vinculo*). In fact the first link of the natural human society is husband and wife...²⁷.

From this text, (though not quoted in full) it appears Augustine connects marriage as a natural human society, or according to a formula of Roman law adopted by him, as a community for man and woman with man's social nature. As a community of souls in friendship, marriage is for him the first realization of our social character. This spiritual community has its own value and is essential for marriage to such an extent that the spouses are not bound to intend procreation. He maintains that the spouses may abstain from all sexual intercourse. (*Sine corporum commixtione possunt esse coniuges*)²⁸ Hence, for him marriage has a dual value of being honest, not only as an institution for procreation, but also as a natural society of husband and wife, with their children, who are not the fruit of the community of conjugal charity, which is only a spiritual reality, but only of a biological act (Intercourse).

Evaluation

From our exposition of Augustine's interpretation of 1 Cor 7:1–6, It is obvious that his teachings on sexuality and marriage are based on a static Natural Law theory. That is a reasoning anchored on a philosophical and theological analysis of the nature of the human person not adequately considered. It attempts to isolate one of man's dimensions, for instance, human sexuality by itself apart from the rest of the body. According to *Gaudium et spes, nos 51*, "human sexuality is specific to man and woman. As such cannot be reduced to merely the physical as in animals. Hence, a biological norm is not enough. Furthermore, *Guadium et Spes* (no 49) considered as the first official document of the Magisterium (under the influence of the married members of the sub commission) affirms that sexual intercourse is an expression and promotin of conjugal love, up to and including the joy the spouses give to one another and receive

²⁷ *De bono coniugali 11, 1, PL 40, 373.*

²⁸ *Contra Julianum, V, 16, 62, PL 44, 818.*

from one another. The implication of this is that sexual intercourse in marriage goes beyond the procreative objective that Augustine ascribes to it. Given the *fact that* ovulation does not occur all the time in the month in the life of a woman, the suggestion of abstinence is a dangerous suggestion. Unless one is not married, the person would not understand the place of sexual intercourse in marriage. It is not just pleasure. Thus, it is only in the context of a personalistic view of conjugal love and sexuality that is possible to justify pleasure in the sexual act as being part of giving and taking in mutual love. Hence, there is a strong connection between marital love and sexual intercourse. St John Chrysostom (350–407) a contemporary of Augustine had earlier canvassed similar idea. Making reference to 1 Cor 7:1–5. He writes:

This is confirmed by Paul when he says that every man should have his own wife because of the temptation to immorality (porncia) and further Paul advises husband and wife to come together, not in order to have many children, but why? Lest satan tempt them through lack of self continence²⁹.

Consequently, marital intercourse is lawful, even procreation is not intended or not possible.

Conclusion

I conclude this expository study of Augustine's interpretation of 1 Cor 7:1–6 by making this suggestion. An anthropological basis for sexuality and marriage is required. A sexual revolution has taken place. New concepts have been presented and yet a correct understanding is necessary. It is proper to say that sexual does not mean "genital" alone as Augustine tends to suggest. Human beings are sexual even if they never exercise their genital capacities. In sexual ethics, considered from the view of natural law, there is *no* parity of matter. Acts are always seriously against the "essential order of creation". Intrinsic finality of sexual acts is procreation, why is procreation not realized most of the time?

²⁹ *De Virgitate*, 19, PG, 48; 547. See also his Word of the Apostle: On account of Fornication, PG, 62;426 and his Homily 5 on 1 Thes, PG, 62:426.

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