

# **The Theological and Ethical Dimensions of Human Sexuality**

*Bodija Journal*  
Vol. 15 (2025): 89-111

William Ikre, C.Ss.R  
Saints Peter and Paul Major Seminary,  
Bodija, Ibadan.  
[wtikre@yahoo.com](mailto:wtikre@yahoo.com)

## **Abstract**

*This essay explores the theological and ethical dimensions of sexuality within the Catholic tradition, with particular attention to celibacy, homosexuality, marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Catholic teaching on sexuality is deeply rooted in Scripture, tradition, and natural law, and it emphasizes the sacredness of human life, the relational nature of persons, and the integration of sexual ethics into the broader vision of human flourishing. The essay examines the sacramentality of marriage, the role of celibacy in consecrated life, the Church's teaching on homosexuality, and the indissolubility of marriage alongside pastoral challenges such as divorce and remarriage. Ethical tensions between doctrinal fidelity and pastoral care are highlighted, especially in light of contemporary debates around clerical celibacy, same-sex unions, and family life. By situating these discussions within Catholic moral theology and recent magisterial documents, the essay provides a critical examination of how sexuality is portrayed as both a site of moral discipline and a locus of grace within the Catholic Church.*

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Celibacy, Marriage, Homosexuality, Divorce, and Remarriage.

## 1. Introduction

The Catholic Church has long regarded sexuality as a central dimension of human existence, intimately tied to theology, morality, and the human vocation before God. Unlike secular perspectives that often treat sexuality as a matter of personal freedom or identity, Catholic teaching situates sexual ethics within a broader theological anthropology: the belief that human beings are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and called to communion with God and others. Sexuality, therefore, is not merely biological or psychological but is intrinsically moral and theological in character.<sup>1</sup>

Within Catholicism, the framework for discussing sexuality is shaped by four primary sources of moral theology: Scripture, which provides foundational narratives and commands regarding marriage, celibacy, and sexual morality; Tradition, which transmits the insights of the Church Fathers, councils, and saints; reason, often articulated through natural law theory, which seeks to discern the purposes inscribed in human nature; and the magisterium, which offers authoritative teaching through papal encyclicals, council documents, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Together, these sources present a coherent vision in which sexuality is ordered toward love, fidelity, procreation, and ultimately, sanctification.<sup>2</sup>

A distinctive feature of Catholic teaching is its sacramental vision of the body and sexuality. Marriage is elevated to the status of a sacrament, signifying Christ's union with the Church. At the same time, celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom is exalted as a radical witness to eschatological hope. The body is not morally neutral but participates in God's creative and redemptive plan. Thus, Catholic theology resists both the reduction of sexuality to private preference and the denial of its moral significance. Instead, it insists

---

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 2331–2336.

<sup>2</sup> Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus: Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), 563–567.

that sexuality be integrated into a life of virtue, ordered by chastity, fidelity, and openness to life.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Church's teaching on sexuality has also been a source of controversy, both internally and in wider society. Critics argue that Catholic positions on celibacy, homosexuality, divorce, and remarriage often appear rigid, exclusionary, or out of step with contemporary understandings of human rights and personal autonomy. Defenders, on the other hand, maintain that these teachings safeguard the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of marriage, and the moral integrity of Christian witness. This tension has become increasingly visible in debates over priestly celibacy, the pastoral care of divorced and remarried Catholics, and the recognition of same-sex unions. Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) represents a recent attempt to balance doctrinal continuity with a more merciful and pastoral approach.<sup>4</sup>

This essay will critically examine five interrelated areas—celibacy, marriage, homosexuality, divorce, and remarriage—within the Catholic moral tradition. Each section will analyze the theological foundations of Catholic teaching, trace historical developments, and engage contemporary ethical debates. The aim is not merely to describe Catholic doctrine but to highlight how sexual ethics reflects more profound theological convictions about creation, sin, redemption, and eschatology. Ultimately, the Catholic vision of sexuality emerges as a paradox: it imposes strict moral norms, yet it does so in the service of love, holiness, and human flourishing.

## **2. Theological Foundations of Catholic Sexual Ethics**

Catholic teaching on sexuality rests upon an integrated framework of Scripture, natural law, tradition, and magisterial authority. These sources, taken together, shape the Church's vision of sexuality not

---

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 59–64.

<sup>4</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family), March 19, 2016, nos. 36–38.

as an isolated aspect of human life but as an expression of humanity's vocation to love and holiness. Each of these foundations provides a distinctive perspective, yet they converge in affirming that sexuality is ordered toward communion, fidelity, and fruitfulness.

## 2.1. Scripture

The biblical witness is the foundation of Catholic sexual ethics. The creation accounts in Genesis portray humanity as created male and female, with sexuality ordered to union and procreation: *"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh"* (Gen 2:24, NRSV). This text underlies the Catholic understanding of marriage as both unitive and procreative, a covenantal bond instituted by God.<sup>5</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus reaffirms the indissolubility of marriage: *"What God has joined together, let no one separate"* (Mark 10:9). The Pauline epistles introduce a further theological dimension: marriage as a symbol of Christ's love for the Church (Eph 5:25–32). Paul also praises celibacy for its undivided devotion to the Lord (1 Cor 7:7–8), establishing a dual theological framework in which both marriage and celibacy are vocations, each pointing toward eschatological fulfillment. These scriptural foundations remain the basis for Catholic teaching on both the sacramentality of marriage and the value of consecrated celibacy.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2. Natural Law

Catholic theology holds that sexuality must be understood in light of **natural law**, the rational discernment of God's purposes in human nature. St. Thomas Aquinas articulated this principle in his *Summa Theologiae*, where he argued that the natural ends of sexuality are the procreation and education of children, as well as

---

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:24 (New Revised Standard Version).

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:7–8; Ephesians 5:25–32.

the fostering of marital unity.<sup>7</sup> Acts that deliberately frustrate these ends—such as contraception, adultery, or homosexual acts—are thus judged contrary to natural law.

This approach grounds Catholic sexual morality not merely in revelation but in universal human reason. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that “the natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil” (§1954). Accordingly, sexual morality is not an arbitrary ecclesiastical rule but part of the objective order inscribed into creation. Proponents argue that this framework enables Catholic teaching to resonate across cultures and time periods, as it appeals to both reason and faith.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.3. Tradition**

The authority of tradition deepens and contextualizes the foundations of both biblical and natural law. The Church Fathers offered significant reflections on sexuality, often emphasizing chastity, fidelity, and the superiority of virginity. St. Augustine, for instance, taught that marriage had three “goods”: fidelity, procreation, and sacrament, but he also considered virginity and celibacy higher states of life because they more directly anticipated the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup>

Over the centuries, Church councils and papal teaching elaborated these themes. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) affirmed the sacramentality of marriage and condemned the idea that celibacy was unnatural, thereby reinforcing the dual vocation model. Later magisterial documents, such as Pope Pius XI’s *Casti Connubii* (1930), articulated marriage as a covenant of love and procreation, while also condemning contraception as a violation

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.154, a.2.

<sup>8</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1954–1960.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* (On the Good of Marriage), in *Saint Augustine: Marriage and Virginity*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 37–45.

of natural law.<sup>10</sup> These traditions continue to inform contemporary Catholic teaching, showing both continuity and development in moral theology.

## 2.4. Magisterium

The magisterium—the teaching authority of the Church, exercised by the pope and bishops—provides the most authoritative articulation of Catholic sexual ethics. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) offers a comprehensive summary, emphasizing chastity as the virtue that integrates sexuality into the person (§2337). Pope Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* (1968) reaffirmed the inseparability of the unitive and procreative dimensions of marital love, while John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* expanded on the nuptial meaning of the body as a sign of self-giving love.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) highlighted the pastoral dimension, urging that doctrine be applied with mercy and discernment in cases such as divorce, remarriage, and non-traditional family structures. This marks a significant development: while the magisterium continues to uphold traditional norms, it also acknowledges the need for pastoral sensitivity in addressing the complex realities of modern family life.<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Celibacy in Catholic Theology and Ethics

Celibacy occupies a unique place in Catholic moral theology, embodying both a countercultural stance and a profound theological symbolism. Unlike marriage, which is ordered toward procreation and family life, celibacy is a renunciation of sexual intimacy and marriage “for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven”

---

<sup>10</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* (Encyclical on Christian Marriage), December 31, 1930, nos. 11–34.

<sup>11</sup> Paul VI, (Encyclical on the Regulation of Birth), July 25, 1968, nos. 9–12; John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 157–161.

<sup>12</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 293–312.

(Matt 19:12). In Catholic teaching, celibacy is not merely the absence of sexual activity but a positive vocation that witnesses to the eschatological destiny of humanity in union with God.

### **3.1. Biblical and Theological Foundations**

Jesus himself affirmed the legitimacy of celibacy as a vocation: *"There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can"* (Matt 19:12). The Apostle Paul further elaborated this theme in 1 Corinthians 7, where he described singleness as a way to remain "anxious about the affairs of the Lord" rather than the affairs of a spouse (1 Cor 7:32–34). These scriptural passages ground the Catholic view that celibacy is a form of undivided devotion to God and the Church.<sup>13</sup>

Theologically, celibacy signifies the total self-giving of the individual to Christ and the anticipation of the eschatological state where, as Jesus taught, people "neither marry nor are given in marriage" (Matt 22:30). As such, celibacy is understood not as a rejection of sexuality but as a radical reorientation of sexual desire toward God and service to the community of faith.<sup>14</sup>

### **3.2. Celibacy in the Priesthood and Religious Life**

In the Catholic Church, celibacy is most visible in the lives of priests, monks, and nuns. The Latin Rite of the Catholic Church requires priestly celibacy as a discipline, not a dogma, though exceptions exist (e.g., married priests in certain Eastern Catholic Churches or Anglican converts). The rationale is theological and pastoral: celibacy enables priests to devote themselves fully to their ministry, mirroring Christ, who was celibate, and serving as a sign of the total dedication required of the shepherd of souls.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:32–34.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1618–1620.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests), March 25, 1992, no. 29.

Religious orders, such as the Benedictines, Dominicans, Redemptorists, and Jesuits, also include vows of celibacy (chastity) as part of their consecrated life. This vow is seen as a gift that allows for radical availability, freeing the individual from exclusive attachments so that they can devote themselves wholly to God's mission. The Second Vatican Council described celibacy as "a special gift of grace" that enables the priest or religious to remain "more easily undivided in mind and heart" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* no.16).<sup>16</sup>

### 3.3. Ethical Significance

From an ethical perspective, celibacy embodies both discipline and freedom. It demands a rigorous self-mastery, since it requires the integration of sexual desire through the virtue of chastity. At the same time, it expresses freedom for service, since the celibate person is liberated from familial obligations to be fully available for ministry. The Church frames this not as a denigration of sexuality or marriage but as an alternative mode of embodying love, one that points beyond earthly realities to the heavenly kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

Celibacy also serves a prophetic function. In a culture often preoccupied with sexual fulfillment, the celibate witness challenges the assumption that erotic love is the highest form of human flourishing. By renouncing marriage and family, celibates testify that ultimate fulfillment is found in God, not in human relationships. In this sense, celibacy is a radical sign of faith and hope, embodying what Catholic theology calls the "eschatological reserve" of human life.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests), December 7, 1965, no.16.

<sup>17</sup> Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus: Difficult Moral Questions* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997), 645–652.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Mary Thurneysen (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 221–225.

### **3.4. Contemporary Challenges and Debates**

Despite its theological richness, celibacy has become a contested practice in modern Catholicism. Critics argue that mandatory priestly celibacy contributes to a shortage of clergy and isolates priests from the experiences of the laity.<sup>19</sup> Others suggest that the discipline may have exacerbated the clerical sexual abuse crisis by fostering unhealthy attitudes toward sexuality. While the Church has firmly rejected the idea that celibacy causes abuse, the scandal has intensified calls for reevaluating the discipline, especially in regions facing acute priest shortages.<sup>20</sup>

Pope Francis reaffirmed the value of priestly celibacy but has also expressed openness to limited exceptions, particularly in the Pan-Amazon region, where the shortage of priests threatens sacramental access. The 2019 Synod on the Pan-Amazon region raised the possibility of ordaining *virī probati*—older, married men of proven virtue—. Still, Pope Francis ultimately refrained from endorsing the change in *Querida Amazonia* (2020), while leaving the door open for further discussion.<sup>21</sup>

Another contemporary challenge is the growing recognition of lay celibacy outside religious life. Many Catholics, including LGBTQ+ persons who wish to remain faithful to Church teaching, find themselves called to celibacy without formal vows. This raises ethical and pastoral questions about how the Church supports individuals living celibate lives in a secular culture that often marginalizes them.

## **4. Marriage in Catholic Theology and Ethics**

Marriage holds a central and exalted place in Catholic theology as both a natural institution and a sacrament. Unlike celibacy, which points to the eschatological future, marriage manifests God's

<sup>19</sup> Donald Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 78–85.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 62–66.

<sup>21</sup> Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation), February 2, 2020, nos. 87–88.

covenantal love in the present, sanctifying the bond between husband and wife as a visible sign of Christ's love for the Church (Eph 5:25–32). In Catholic teaching, marriage is not merely a private contract between individuals but a sacred covenant, elevated by Christ to a sacrament, through which spouses participate in God's creative and redemptive work.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4.1. Biblical and Theological Foundations

The Catholic understanding of marriage begins with Scripture. The Book of Genesis presents marriage as part of the divine order of creation: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (Gen 2:18). The two "become one flesh" (Gen 2:24), signifying both union and procreation. In the New Testament, Jesus affirms the indissolubility of marriage, declaring: "What God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt 19:6). St. Paul deepens this theology by identifying marriage as a "great mystery" that reflects the union of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:32).<sup>23</sup>

Theologically, Catholic tradition views marriage as both a natural covenant rooted in creation and a sacramental covenant renewed in Christ. St. Augustine of Hippo identified the three "goods" (*bona*) of marriage: fidelity (*fides*), offspring (*proles*), and sacrament (*sacramentum*), which together express the permanence, openness to life, and sacredness of the marital bond.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas later refined Augustine's teaching by highlighting the dual purposes of marriage: the procreation and education of children, as well as the mutual support of spouses in their shared pursuit of holiness.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 2:18, 24; Matthew 19:6; Ephesians 5:25–32.

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 2:18, 24; Matthew 19:6; Ephesians 5:25–32.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *De Bono Coniugali* (On the Good of Marriage), in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, trans. Ray Kearney (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 19–22.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., q.41–49.

## **4.2. Sacramentality and Covenant**

In Catholic doctrine, marriage is one of the seven sacraments instituted by Christ. The Catechism describes it as “a covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life,” ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring (CCC §1601).<sup>26</sup>

The sacramentality of marriage means that the marital covenant is not simply a human but a divine reality. The exchange of vows between husband and wife becomes the outward sign of the inward grace that binds them together in Christ. Marriage is thus indissoluble—not merely by human law but by divine institution. The Second Vatican Council affirmed this covenantal understanding, teaching that marriage “is rooted in the conjugal covenant of irrevocable personal consent” and “is confirmed and consecrated by a special sacrament” (*Gaudium et Spes* §48).<sup>27</sup>

## **4.3. The Twofold Purpose: Unitive and Procreative**

The Catholic Church emphasizes the inseparability of the **unitive** and **procreative** dimensions of marriage. The unitive aspect refers to the intimate communion of life and love between spouses, while the procreative dimension highlights their openness to the gift of children. Pope Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* (1968) reaffirmed this inseparability, teaching that marital love must remain open to life and that every marital act must retain its procreative orientation.<sup>28</sup> This teaching is ethically significant because it grounds Catholic opposition to artificial contraception. The Church argues that separating the unitive from the procreative functions reduces sexuality to self-gratification and undermines

---

<sup>26</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1601.

<sup>27</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, no. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (Encyclical on the Regulation of Birth), July 25, 1968, nos. 11–12.

the integrity of marital love. Natural Family Planning (NFP) is upheld as a morally licit way of responsibly spacing children, since it respects both dimensions of marital sexuality.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.4. Ethical Dimensions of Marriage

Ethically, marriage in Catholic teaching embodies several virtues: fidelity, mutual self-giving, openness to life, and permanence. It is seen as a school of holiness, where spouses grow in charity through the daily practice of sacrificial love. John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) describes the family as a "domestic Church" and marriage as the context where it becomes the primary place of evangelization and moral formation.<sup>30</sup>

Marriage also carries social and ethical responsibilities. Because the family is regarded as the "fundamental cell of society," Catholic social teaching emphasizes the duty of states and communities to support stable marriages and protect the family as an institution.<sup>31</sup> This has practical implications for public policy on issues such as divorce law, same-sex marriage, and reproductive technologies.

### 5. Contemporary Challenges and Debates

Modern Catholic discussions on marriage confront a range of challenges. The rising rates of divorce, cohabitation, and declining sacramental marriages in Western societies raise urgent questions about how the Church can effectively transmit its teaching. Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) acknowledged these realities while maintaining the Church's doctrine, urging greater pastoral sensitivity and accompaniment for families in irregular situations.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, nos. 16–17.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family), November 22, 1981, nos. 11–13.

<sup>31</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), nos. 209–211.

<sup>32</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 38–42.

Another pressing ethical debate concerns the meaning of marriage in light of secular redefinitions, particularly the legalization of same-sex marriage. The Catholic Church insists that marriage is by its nature a union of man and woman, intrinsically ordered to procreation. While calling for respect and dignity toward persons with same-sex attraction, the Church maintains that homosexual unions cannot be equated with sacramental marriage.<sup>33</sup>

Technological advances also raise new dilemmas: assisted reproductive technologies (ART), surrogacy, and genetic engineering pose challenges to the Catholic understanding of marriage and procreation. The Church opposes practices that separate procreation from the marital act, emphasizing instead the integrity of natural conception within the marital bond.<sup>34</sup>

## **6. Divorce and Remarriage in Catholic Teaching**

Among the most contested issues in Catholic sexual ethics is the question of divorce and remarriage. While modern societies increasingly normalize divorce as a dissolution of marital contracts, Catholic theology insists on the **indissolubility of sacramental marriage**. This teaching creates both a theological clarity and a pastoral tension, especially when addressing Catholics in “irregular unions.”

### **6.1. Biblical and Doctrinal Foundations**

The foundation of Catholic teaching on divorce lies in the explicit words of Christ. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus rejects the Mosaic permission for divorce, affirming: “*What God has joined together, let no one separate*” (Matt 19:6). He adds that remarriage after divorce constitutes adultery (Matt 19:9).<sup>35</sup> St. Paul reinforces this

---

<sup>33</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons* (Vatican City: CDF, 2003), nos. 4–8.

<sup>34</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Vitae* (Instruction on Respect for Human Life), 1987, II, A–B.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 19:6, 9.

in his letters, instructing married couples not to separate, and if separation occurs, to remain unmarried or be reconciled (1 Cor 7:10–11).<sup>36</sup>

Doctrinally, the Church teaches that no human authority can dissolve a valid, consummated sacramental marriage between baptized persons. The Catechism states: “The marriage bond has been established by God himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved” (CCC no.1640).<sup>37</sup> This makes Catholic teaching on marriage far stricter than that of many other Christian traditions.

## 6.2. Annulments and the Question of Validity

Because sacramental marriage is indissoluble, the Church does not recognize divorce as ending a valid sacrament. Instead, it allows for the possibility of a **declaration of nullity** (commonly called an annulment). An annulment does not dissolve a marriage but declares that a true sacramental bond was never validly established, often due to a lack of consent, psychological incapacity, or an impediment to marriage.<sup>38</sup> Canon law outlines these grounds carefully. For instance, Canon 1095 specifies that those lacking sufficient use of reason, grave discretion of judgment, or the ability to assume essential obligations of marriage are incapable of contracting marriage validly.<sup>39</sup> Annulments have thus become a pastoral means by which the Church can uphold the principle of indissolubility while recognizing situations where a valid marriage may not have existed.

---

<sup>36</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:10–11.

<sup>37</sup> **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, no.1640.

<sup>38</sup> John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green, eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 1257–1265.

<sup>39</sup> *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 1095.

### **6.3. The Pastoral Challenge of Remarriage**

The most significant pastoral issue arises when divorced Catholics remarry according to customary or civil law without an annulment. The Church teaches that such persons are living in an ongoing state of adultery, since their new union contradicts the indissolubility of the first marriage.<sup>40</sup> As a result, they are not permitted to receive the Eucharist or other sacraments until they regularize their situation. This discipline has generated profound pastoral challenges, especially in regions where divorce is widespread. Many Catholics feel alienated from the Church, while pastors struggle to balance fidelity to doctrine with compassion for those in difficult family situations. John Paul II addressed this tension in *Familiaris Consortio*, calling pastors to accompany divorced and remarried Catholics with care, while affirming that they could not be admitted to the sacraments without annulment or continence.<sup>41</sup>

### **6.4. Contemporary Debates: *Amoris Laetitia***

Pope Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) reopened the debate by emphasizing pastoral discernment and the "law of gradualness." Pope Francis argues that not everyone in an irregular marriage situation is entirely guilty before God, since moral responsibility depends on personal knowledge, freedom, and circumstances. While the Church's teaching on marriage remains unchanged, pastors are called to discern each case carefully, recognizing that some people may be living in God's grace even in objectively irregular situations. Francis emphasizes mercy, conscience, and gradual growth toward the fullness of God's plan, affirming that the Church must uphold moral truth while accompanying people with compassion and understanding. (nos. 301–305).<sup>42</sup> This pastoral approach has been controversial. Supporters argue it embodies Christ's mercy and recognizes the complexity of modern family life.

---

<sup>40</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1650.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 84.

<sup>42</sup> Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 301–305.

Critics, however, fear it undermines the doctrine of indissolubility by creating exceptions in practice, even if not in theory.<sup>43</sup> The debate continues within the Church, with bishops' conferences worldwide implementing *Amoris Laetitia* differently, reflecting both its flexibility and its ambiguity.

## **7. Homosexuality in Catholic Theology and Pastoral Practice**

The question of homosexuality occupies a delicate and contested place in contemporary Catholic sexual ethics. The Church has consistently distinguished between homosexual orientation (a tendency that is not in itself judged sinful) and homosexual acts (which the magisterium has judged morally disordered). Yet pastoral responses to persons with same-sex attraction have evolved in emphasis and tone over recent decades, generating significant theological, pastoral, and ethical debate. This section examines the doctrinal basis for the Church's teaching, explores the reasons given for its moral conclusions, and surveys contemporary pastoral initiatives and theological critiques within Catholicism.

### **7.1. Magisterial Teaching: Orientation versus Acts**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church sets out the standard formulation that guides magisterial teaching. It distinguishes between the inclination and the moral evaluation of acts: while homosexual persons "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity," homosexual acts are described as "intrinsically disordered" because they "close the sexual act to the gift of life" and do not proceed from "a genuine affective and sexual complementarity." The Catechism therefore calls for chastity on the

---

<sup>43</sup> For a critical perspective, see Robert Dodaro, ed., *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 145–176.

part of homosexual persons and insists on their pastoral care and inclusion in the Christian community (CCC nos. 2357–2359).<sup>44</sup>

Complementing the Catechism, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) articulates and defends this position. A 1986 CDF letter to bishops on the pastoral care of homosexual persons stresses both the call to respect and the need to uphold moral teaching. Later, the 2003 CDF “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons” reiterated that legal recognition of same-sex unions would “negate the plan of God” for marriage and family and would exert an adverse effect on society’s understanding of marriage. These magisterial statements underpin the Church’s pastoral and doctrinal approach: compassion and welcome without altering the moral norms that define sexual morality in Catholic teaching.<sup>45</sup>

## **7.2. Theological Rationale: Natural Law, Complementarity, and Teleology**

Catholic arguments against homosexual acts generally invoke natural law and the teleological ordering of sexual acts. From this perspective, sexual acts are morally evaluated by reference to their natural ends—particularly procreation and the unitive complementarity of man and woman. Since homosexual acts cannot achieve the procreative end and are not ordered to the complementarity rooted in sexual difference, they are judged contrary to the natural ordering of sexuality. This reasoning follows the classical Thomistic account of natural ends and has been repeatedly articulated by magisterial documents.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nos. 2357–2359.

<sup>45</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986); Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*.

<sup>46</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q.94–q.100 (on natural law) and II–II, q.154 (on sins against chastity); see also *Catechism*, nos. 2396–2398 (on natural law and sexual morality).

A second theological argument appeals to the sacramental symbolism of conjugal love, as marriage between a man and a woman uniquely signifies Christ's spousal relationship to the Church (Ephesians 5). The Church reasons that male–female complementarity has a sacramental significance that same-sex unions cannot fulfill in the same way. For defenders of the traditional position, these theological and anthropological claims form an integrated case for distinguishing orientation from moral culpability while upholding the normative ideal of conjugal marriage.<sup>47</sup>

### 7.3. Pastoral Emphases and Developments

While doctrine has remained essentially stable, pastoral approaches have shown development in tone and emphasis. Since the 1970s and 1980s, Church documents have increasingly emphasized the importance of respectful accompaniment. The Catechism's injunction to treat homosexual persons with "respect, compassion, and sensitivity" is echoed in episcopal and parish pastoral guides. In 1997, the U.S. Bishops published *Always Our Children*, urging support and respectful pastoral care for families and young people with same-sex attraction and calling for dialogue rather than condemnation.<sup>48</sup>

Pope Francis has further shifted pastoral language in ways many interpret as a warmer tone. His famous, often misunderstood remarks — "Who am I to judge?" (2013) — and his emphasis on accompanying people in their concrete situations have encouraged pastors to emphasize mercy, listening, and integration while not altering doctrinal teaching. Pope Francis has repeatedly called for pastoral sensitivity and condemned unjust discrimination against

---

<sup>47</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), esp. chs. 6–10.

<sup>48</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* (1997).

LGBTQ persons. Nonetheless, he and the magisterium have not changed the Church's moral teaching regarding sexual acts.<sup>49</sup>

#### **7.4. Theological and Pastoral Critiques within Catholicism**

A significant body of Catholic theological work questions either the moral conclusions or the pastoral sufficiency of magisterial teaching. Some theologians argue that the natural law case needs re-examination in light of contemporary understandings of human sexuality, biological sex, and affective orientation; others propose that the teleological account of sex should not be the sole arbiter of moral legitimacy. Scholars such as Lisa Sowle Cahill and others have argued for a greater emphasis on justice, mutuality, and committed love as morally weighty criteria, suggesting that stable, loving same-sex relationships might display many of the goods the Church seeks to protect in marriage.<sup>50</sup>

Pastoral theologians and some priests (as well as movements of lay Catholics) press for rites of blessing for faithful same-sex couples, more robust inclusion in parish life, and reconsideration of canonical and sacramental exclusions. Conversely, conservative theologians warn that altering pastoral practice in ways that seem to legitimize same-sex unions risks doctrinal confusion and harms the Church's witness to natural law-based teaching. This intra-

---

<sup>49</sup> Pope Francis, interview with *La Nación* and *El País*, July 2013, and miscellaneous homilies and addresses (see e.g., *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 210–214). See also general comments in *Amoris Laetitia* on pastoral accompaniment (2016).

<sup>50</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 5, 21–25 (on liberal critiques of procreation and gender), etc; see her work on justice, mutuality, and sexual ethics.

Church debate remains active, intense, and often regionally variegated.<sup>51</sup>

### 7.5. Ethical Tensions and Practical Questions

Several ethical tensions arise in pastoral application. How should the Church balance fidelity to doctrine with the imperative of pastoral mercy? What forms of recognition and inclusion are possible without redefining the sacrament of marriage? How should the Church address civil rights, anti-discrimination laws, and the protection of religious liberty in pluralistic societies? These questions require prudential judgment, contextual discernment, and, according to many Catholic commentators, a renewed capacity for pastoral accompaniment that honors both truth and mercy.<sup>52</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Sexuality in the Catholic tradition is inseparable from the Church's broader theological anthropology, which holds that human beings are created in the image of God, called to communion, and ordered toward love. Across the diverse dimensions of celibacy, marriage, homosexuality, divorce, and remarriage, Catholic teaching has sought to balance fidelity to Scripture and tradition with pastoral care for real human lives. Celibacy is honored not as a rejection of sexuality but as a radical gift that witnesses to the eschatological Kingdom. Marriage, by contrast, is understood as a sacrament of covenantal love, a participation in divine creativity and fidelity.

---

<sup>51</sup> For representative conservative critiques, see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations* (2003); for progressive pastoral proposals and theological critique, see pastoral statements by various national bishops' conferences and theologians such as James Alison and others. James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001), ix-xi.

<sup>52</sup> For discussions of law, conscience, and pastoral practice, see Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), and the varied episcopal responses following its publication.

At the same time, the moral questions of homosexuality, divorce, and remarriage continue to challenge the coherence of Catholic doctrine and pastoral practice. Official teaching, especially since *Humanae Vitae* and the Catechism, frames sexuality within natural law and procreative complementarity. Yet, voices from within the Catholic tradition — theologians such as Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Alison, as well as many pastoral ministers — press for a re-examination of these categories in light of justice, mutuality, and the lived experiences of believers. The tension between magisterial teaching and theological critique reveals the dynamic character of Catholic moral reasoning: tradition is not static, but always in dialogue with culture, human sciences, and the unfolding of history.

Ultimately, the Catholic vision insists that sexuality is never merely private but profoundly communal and spiritual. How the Church addresses questions of celibacy, marriage, homosexuality, and divorce will continue to shape not only ecclesial identity but also its public witness to human dignity. The challenge is to maintain fidelity to tradition while providing authentic pastoral care, recognizing that the credibility of Catholic teaching lies not only in doctrinal precision but also in its capacity to convey God's mercy. In this sense, the Catholic ethical tradition on sexuality remains unfinished, calling the faithful into deeper discernment, humility, and openness to the Spirit's guidance in every generation.

## **References**

- Alison, James. *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*.
- Augustine. *De Bono Coniugali* (On the Good of Marriage), in *Saint Augustine: Marriage and Virginity*. Translated by Ray Kearney. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999.
- von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *The Christian State of Life*. Translated by Mary Thurneysen. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983.

- Beal, John P., James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green, eds. *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*. New York: Paulist Press, 2000.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle. *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*. Vatican City: CDF, 2003.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Donum Vitae* (Instruction on Respect for Human Life), 1987.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986).
- Cozzens, Donald. *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000.
- Dodaro, Robert ed. *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014.
- Francis. *Querida Amazonia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation), February 2, 2020.
- Francis. *Amoris Laetitia* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family). March 19, 2016.
- Grisez, Germain. *The Way of the Lord Jesus: Difficult Moral Questions*. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1997.
- Grisez, Germain. *The Way of the Lord Jesus: Living a Christian Life*. Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993.
- Jenkins, Philip. *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- John Paul II. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests), March 25, 1992.

- John Paul II. *Familiaris Consortio* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family). November 22, 1981.
- John Paul II. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.
- John Paul II. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.
- Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae* (Encyclical on the Regulation of Birth). July 25, 1968.
- Pius XI. *Casti Connubii* (Encyclical on Christian Marriage). December 31, 1930.
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004.
- Second Vatican Council. *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). December 7, 1965.
- Second Vatican Council. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests). December 7, 1965.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* (1997).