

CHAPTER 1

PROLOGUE

In the recent past, the belief that love was born in the poetry of the High Middle Ages remains commonplace. By love is meant here, of course, not just sexual or familial love, nor that of friendship, nor the love of God or the Christian *caritas* that has roots in the eternal as well as temporal good of one's neighbor; but that refinement and exaltation of the erotic passion since known as *romance*.

Popular notions of romance and sexual fulfillment

The love that is romantic, the theory goes, had little enough to do with God and less with marriage and society as a whole: it involved lover and beloved exclusively. It bled the man and divinized the woman. It was sexual but never brutal, having the innate quality of *courtoisie*. It could bide its time in patience, but the longing for fulfillment, sexual fulfillment, was always there and would eventually assert itself, whatever the laws of Church or State dictated to the contrary. One thinks of the myth of Tristram and Isolde, sprung full-grown and vibrantly alive in the twelfth century, but also of tales of other contemporary star-crossed lovers like Lancelot and Guinevere, Troilus and Criseyde, Paolo and Francesca, and a host of others who fed the medieval imagination and fascinate, and dominate, us still.

While this scrutiny of romance and marriage may seem both remote and academic the very opposite is true. Even if we confine ourselves to concern for civic society, neglecting entirely the eschatological, we must still conclude that the intimate relations of the sexes is of the utmost importance. The primordial community of an individual man and woman is the cornerstone of the larger communities in which life is lived. Thus family, village, city, state are all in part determined by the nuances of

sexual relationships and so affect our ability to lead happy, peaceful and productive lives.

Living as we do in an age which desires to alter the relationship of the sexes, to topple a foundational pillar of Western civic society, it would be wise to discover the true nature of what is slated for destruction. The loss of respect for the 'primordial community' has surely contributed to the increase in divorce, cohabitation, and single mother families. In turn there is anecdotal and scholarly evidence that the dysfunctional family is in some measure responsible for the declining fertility and social disorder in Western societies – what Francis Fukuyama has labeled the "Great Disruption."

The term *amour courtois*, or Courtly Love is of modern origin, having been coined in 1883 by the French medievalist Gaston Paris to designate "this new form of love which makes such a decided break with previous forms and which appears for the first time in Europe among the Troubadours of twelfth century Provence." It is "a love which both as a literary theme and as a social ideal is something entirely new on the European scene, and from which our modern notions of romantic love derive in large measure"¹

Henri Davenson will not allow that the particular kind of love the troubadours celebrated was a new "creation" –'only God can bring something out of nothing; we humans always work with materials already at hand,' but he does find it novel. It was a love "*tout autre chose que la pure sexualité*" and "*tel amour n'a pas toujours existé.*" There was something else new about it. Hitherto, in the earlier medieval literature, it was the woman who loved and languished, and was off somewhere to the side. But "*un beau jour, tout est change: c'est l'homme maintenant d'aimer et de languir,*" and the woman was now center stage. The "bright day" was when William IX of Aquitaine, the first of the celebrated troubadours, began to write his love poems.²

In the popular mind and indeed in the minds of many specialists the medieval Church opposed any and all manifestations of such love even within the marriage bond. The critics say, in the doctrine and preaching of the Church romance was disdainfully ignored, the love play of passion forbidden outside of marriage and barely tolerated within it, and the use of sex "excused" only when conjugal procreation was the intention. As St. Paul had put it, it was better to marry than to burn. All "burning" before marriage was evil, and afterwards, hopefully, the marriage would by its very nature extinguish it altogether!

It was generally agreed that so deeply rooted was this teaching that it endured till the last ecumenical council when the Church *almost* finally caught up with the rest of the world and acknowledged that there is more to love and marriage than the begetting and rearing of children. Of course, the more extreme of these views entertained a certain cognitive dissonance since wedding ceremonies and exchange of vows only signaled a true Christian marriage where the couple later achieved consensual sexual union.

In addition to explicit criticisms the fundamental basis of Christian marriage has been a conundrum in the popular mind and to many scholars. The widespread dualistic view of the human person was put forward by Rene Descartes, whose sobriquet is ‘father of modernity.’ In this understanding: as persons, “there is nothing entirely in our power but our thoughts” thus the body is an instrument of the mind. This made the teaching of Jesus –a man and woman that became “not two but one flesh” –difficult to grasp. A union of the flesh is impossible for ethereal minds and hardly necessary for the Cartesian mechanico-chemical bodies that were seen as mere instruments.³

The popular Catholic historian Thomas Cahill epitomizes the negative views of Christian love, sex, and marriage. In his analysis he does not point a finger at Christian theory in itself. Rather he suggests that the spirit of classical civilization was defeated when the Latin Church adopted Saint Augustine’s ‘abhorrence of the feminine and fear of the sexual function.’⁴ Although Cahill’s work drew adjectives such as exuberance, freewheeling, playful—not words for a *summa cum laude* in history – from the reviewers; nevertheless his book became a notable popular success. Earlier a Catholic scholar, John Noonan, who was to become well known for his views, appears to indict ancient Christian attitudes. He proposes that not until the late fifteenth-century did Martin le Maistre –a layman theologian at the University of Paris –make the ‘modern’ breakthrough to the role of love and sex in marriage. Being a layman is an important aspect of the censure since deficiencies attributed to Christian theory in this regard are often laid to the door of celibate divines. Noonan concedes a case can be made that late medieval theologians were ‘somewhat in advance of their society in their declarations on the ideal of married love’ but he emphasizes, they failed ‘to incorporate love into the purposes of marital intercourse.’⁵

The purpose here is not to determine what the root causes might be for these commonplace or popular views. Obviously the more extreme views will have fewer adherents and individuals could be influenced by

lack of knowledge, Enlightenment theories, the 'sexual revolution,' and on and on. In what follows right minded persons can form more complete and truthful ideas of the Christian concepts of love and sex in marriage, the relation of poets and priests, and the practice of these Christian virtues.

Difficulties with the popular view

One reviewer, while trying to be fair in her critique of a Uta Ranke-Heinemann book, raises questions about the internal dynamics of her study. She asks, "How do these negative instances relate to and compare with more positive pronouncements by other members of the Church at other times? Were all these incredibly negative statements never contradicted and criticized, or to some extent balanced by teachings on marriage, sexuality and celibacy which show us a Church more understanding and caring, a Church which can be loved rather than hated?"⁶

Such critiques could be applied over and over again. One of the flaws of the scholarship devoted to the history of Christian love, romance, and sex is that too much is treated in too little space. Long periods of time — centuries, even millennia — and many theologians and poets are indiscriminately considered.

Clearly, in two thousand years of history one could find endless scholarly quotes to support almost any thesis. Often, in consequence, little if any attention is paid to context. Texts quoted or referred to are selected according to the conscious or unconscious bias of the historian, while those from other sources are simply ignored; and today's authorities are uncritically summoned.

This critique is not, of course, to be applied indiscriminately. Peter Lamont Brown's study, *The Body and Society*, though it traverses four centuries of the early Church's teaching on sexuality is one of the exceptions. Its detail along with its respect for the context of the lives, as well as teachings, of the Fathers is satisfying. As for the poetry: L. T. Topsfield's *Troubadours and Love* is a splendid example of the variety rather than sameness that is revealed when individual poets are given their whole say and critiqued accordingly.

But how in the space of a few pages can any sort of justice be done to a mind and temper and life as vast and complex and deep as that of an Augustine, an Aquinas, a Dante or a Chaucer? Especially when the matter is itself as vast and complex and deep as love. And how with any

kind of assurance evaluate the teaching of the Church *as a whole* when so much of it is thus distorted and so much else simply ignored?

Thomas Cahill's quote of Saint Augustine to describe Christian attitudes to love, sex and marriage, is a case in point of ignoring the broader context. Cahill recounts the story of Saint Augustine's debate with a certain Bishop Julian, "Julian informs Augustine that he had sex with his wife whenever and wherever he felt like it" Cahill says, "Augustine explodes: 'Really, really: is that your experience? So you would not have married couples restrain that evil –I refer of course to your favorite good? So you would have them jump into bed whenever they like, whenever they feel tickled by desire. Far be it from them to postpone this itch till bedtime: let's have your "legitimate union of bodies" whenever your "natural good" is excited. If this is the married life you lead, don't drag up your experience in debate!"⁷

If this exchange was all that was known of Saint Augustine it would lead to some tentative conclusions. First, Augustine might be taking issue with Bishop Julian for introducing such a private matter into a *debate*. Second, since Bishop Julian in saying, "he had sex with his wife *whenever and wherever he felt like it*" he appears to deny the mutuality of the marriage act and Saint Augustine may be led to think he was promoting lust instead of love. However, there is a clear imputation that Saint Augustine, a Father of the Church, thought as the Manicheans did – that the marriage act was evil.

Outside of Cahill's work Augustine's opposition to the Manicheans is well known and in another place he says, "What does the madness of foulest impiety say to this? What do you say to this, you Manicheans, you who attempt to bring forward to us, indeed as from the apostolic Epistles, two natures without beginning, one of good and the other of evil; and the apostolic Epistles, which correct you from that sacrilegious perversity of yours, you do not want to hear. Just as you read: 'the flesh lusts against the spirit,' and: 'In my flesh no good dwells,' so also read: "No one ever hateth his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as also Christ does the Church.' And as you read: 'I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind,' so also read this: 'As Christ loved the Church, so also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies.' Do not be crafty in using the one group of testimonies of Sacred Scripture and deaf to the other, and you will be corrected in both. For if you accept these latter as they deserve, you will try to understand the former, also, in their truth."⁸

Twentieth century scholarly indictments

Authors abound who when treating of the Church directly with little if any reference to the poetry, find the early and medieval Church narrow and limited in its teaching on love and sex in marriage. There are the early indictments of H.C. Lea which, are still regarded as respectable if not definitive.⁹ E. Westermarck another older but still respected authority in the historical area of human sexuality, is equally severe with the early and medieval Church. Speaking of that Church's exaltation of virginity as springing from "the most perfect indifference to all earthly matters" and, in particular, from contempt for anything sexual, he claims that for the Church, "far from being a benefit to the Kingdom of God by propagating the species, sexual intercourse was on the contrary detrimental to it by being the great transmitter of the sin of our first parents".¹⁰ In its extreme (and uncomfortable!) form, the same indictment appears in Queen and Adams: "... it is plain to see that the early Church viewed sex as vile. It condemned not only fornication, adultery, pederasty, masturbation, and bestiality, but also contraception, abortion, the reading of 'lascivious' books, singing 'wanton' songs, dancing 'suggestive' dances... A sterner code would be harder to envisage"¹¹

Philip Sherrard writes that for Saint Augustine, as for all medieval theologians, marriage may be good but copulation is "sinful and shameful." All marriage could do, says Augustine (as read by Sherrard), "is to make it possible for those who engage in the act of coition to engage in it not to satisfy their lust but as a distasteful duty unavoidable in the begetting of children... By such an argument, then, Augustine and his theological successors (who include practically every medieval theologian in the western Christian tradition) separated the idea of marriage from that of sexual relationship... They [the medieval theologians] had to conclude that the act of coition is necessary to marriage so long as its motive is to produce children; but even this motive did not in their eyes exonerate the act from impurity and shame"¹².

Carrying the same criticism into the 1980's and 1990's are writers like Uta Ranke where she presents texts from antiquity to beyond the Middle Ages that demonstrate, to her thinking, a Church that was, and remains, morbidly anti-sexual.¹³ An example of cursory scholarship Uta Ranke-Heinemann proceeds with patent and *angry* bias against the Church's past and present teaching on love, marriage and celibacy, she heaps negative text upon negative text from the Fathers, theologians, councils, and canon law.¹⁴ Her best selling, impassioned broadside, attack on the

Catholic Church comes up with as bleak a picture of the subject as the staunchest of the Manichees might have invented.

Eric Fuchs, though less immoderate, is essentially of the same mind, and adds that it was the reformers of the 16th century who finally extricated marriage from procreation as its sole justifying motive, and did justice to it precisely as a union of love.¹⁵ Margaret Miles looks to ancient and medieval ecclesiastical iconography as well as written word and finds little if anything in the Church at all favorable to sexual love, even within marriage, or to the "bodily" equality of the woman with the man.¹⁶

James Brundage admits to pluralism in the early and medieval Church's sexology: medieval European society "encompassed diverse views about various kinds of sexual behavior... Christian sexual ethics have been neither uniform nor static". He concedes that prior to the Reformation there were some (unnamed, unmentioned through the whole of his book) who "emphasized sexual relations as a source of intimacy, as a symbol and expression of conjugal love". However, though there were such as these who "commended married love as a virtue," they were rare, and we are not to "fabricate from these scattered and fragmentary references a tradition of Christian tolerance toward sexual desires, much less a school of eroticism, either in the patristic period or in the Middle Ages." Brundage's judgment on Augustine and the medieval penitentials on the question of marriage, at least in its sexual dimension, may stand as his commentary on the whole of the medieval Church: "Sex, Augustine believed, was a shameful, sordid business". The penitentials by and large took a gloomy view of the sexual proclivities of both men and women"¹⁷.

Peter Lamont Brown limits his study to the ancient Church. He is more reserved and tentative in his judgments than those mentioned above, perhaps because his explorations are deeper if not broader than theirs, and he brings to his subject the same compassion he asks of his readers: "the Church Fathers might strike us as unduly severe in the matter of love and marriage, but most of them did much to bring marital love along, to save its 'body' from being etherealized in the spiritualism of Manichaean gnosticism or degraded by an unbridled sensualism." His happy phrase on Augustine tells much about the whole of the early Church, as Brown reads it: "The body was a problem to him precisely because it was to be loved and cherished"¹⁸

The value of modern criticisms

These criticisms of Christian marriage, and the fundamentally dualistic attitudes toward the human person, were addressed in a positive if indirect way by the teaching of John Paul II. The Pope gave a series of 129 lectures at his Wednesday audiences from 1979 to 1984. These were later published in a single work: *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*. In his teaching, the body is not as the Dualist would have, it a mere instrument of the mind; or as Manichæism would have it a source of evil. It is a sacramental sign—a symbol and an effective conduit of Divine grace. On this basis the Pope provides a rich pastoral analysis of masculine and feminine roles and the nature of love, sexual emotion, and sexual excitement within Christian marriage. The Pope discusses Christian and pre-Christian ethics as part of his analysis but does not directly deal with the questions raised here in regard to the Churches position in earlier times.

While present-day historians and theologians have found ample evidence for criticisms and censures in the past two thousand years, what is needed is a critical examination of history to see if such views are valid and to see if Pope John Paul II's analysis is the mainstream of traditional Christian ethics. Has the Church encouraged the ideal as given by what John Paul II describes as “from the beginning”—before sin entered the world? Has the Church been pastoral in the help it offered to fallen nature? It will surely be found that the critical views are not untrue so much as incomplete and untrue only when they are offered as the whole story.

We have noted that in the search for truth it is futile to sift through and select desirable authorities in the two thousand year Christian history. A better approach is to make a broad review of a period that can stand as emblematic of the mind of Christendom. I have chosen to center upon one locale and relatively brief period of time — the England of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. If, as I propose, a certain convergence of both doctrine and praxis in this period is revealed in liturgy and in the writings of iconic theologians, poets, philosophers, and laymen it will show to what extent romantic love was revolutionary or new.

An era emblematic of Christian values

We must remember what the Oxford scholar, Richard Southern tells us, “for those who invented the term [Middle Ages].... it meant the age

of barbarism, superstition, and ignorance, lying between the ages of civilization, ancient and modern.”¹⁹ Not surprisingly the depiction of Christian theory and practice as retrograde when compared to ‘modern’ romantic love often centers on the Medieval Church. For this reason our search for a fuller understanding of Christian theory and practice must also center on the Middle Ages.

Looking beyond the stereotype it will be found that a study of the medieval period is uniquely suited to our purpose. It suffered from the ageless problem of human frailty. It suffered from the problems of the age such as the Church’s conflict with the civil authorities and with Islamic aggression. But the medieval Church was large and its time-span long, as was also the body of theory and poetry, and both were various and complex. Then as now — and perhaps more than now — not everyone thought or felt alike. There were divergent points of view within the Church and society as a whole, and theologians and poets were not shy about expressing them. However, a more attentive reading of the teaching Church and poetry of the Middle Ages will suggest, paradoxically, a wider range of thought and feeling of both Church and poet and a *closer agreement* between them in the matter of love than has hitherto been acknowledged.

It has been necessary to be selective and I acknowledge my bias in this regard. My prime concern has not been to tell the whole truth but to present evidence that may serve to challenge, correct, balance and complete testimony already submitted many times over. My aim is also to suggest and respect fullness of context in which alone any selected extract or instance has its proper meaning. And, finally, I intend that what I offer serve as an intimation that more of the same may be found if looked for.

Why center on fourteenth century England? One reason, certainly, is my intimacy with it. I have long lived with its mystics – the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* Julian of Norwich, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton — and have enjoyed and taught its poetry both secular and religious; and I am at home in the principal theologies alive there at that time in its great universities of Cambridge and Oxford.

The history of this period is relatively accessible having been popularized through books. I think of Barbara Tuchman and her rich and lively history, *A Distant Mirror*, intriguingly subtitled "The Calamitous 14th Century"; Umberto Eco and his *Name of the Rose*, long a best-selling novel (and film) of fourteenth century monkery and mystery;

Donald Howard and his scholarly and marvelously engaging biography, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World*. These and many others assure us that perennial beauty and truth and goodness, together with their opposites, are to be found in abundance in this period.

But a further reason, more apposite to the purposes of our analysis, is that it is in this time and place that the laity begins to match the best of the clergy in knowledge and in ecclesiastical concerns. W. A. Pantin who studied the influence of theology upon the English laity of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the laity's corresponding involvement in the thought and life of the Church assures us, "it was possible for a devout and literate layman, with the help of all the apparatus of religious instruction, sermons, and devotional literature, to take a more intelligent, educated, active, and, so to speak, professional part in the life of the Church"²⁰ Beryl Smalley shares his view. "It was the educated laity", she affirms, "who did much to force the friars and other clergy into better, more engaging and thoughtful preaching." They were, "critical, eager for novelty and hopeful of entertainment, wanting to be stimulated and amused."²¹

Furthermore a review of romance and marriage at a later time would involve the views of Christian marriage when it had retreated toward an older pre-Christian view of marriage as only a civil contract. Certainly the Reformers of the sixteenth century saw the evils possible where the Church laid emphasis on the sacramental aspect of marriage. They accepted marriage as a human contract and insisted on parental consent as the grounds of marriage.

The human contract aspect of marriage was clear in Roman law. G. H. Joyce, discussing the marriage customs of the Germanic peoples Lombards, Franks, Visigoths says "In most of these peoples marriage was normally accompanied by the transfer of authoritative guardianship (*mundium*) over the bride from her parents or natural guardians to the husband... This transfer required the observance of certain prescribed formalities both at the betrothal and at the actual marriage."²² Joyce adds that a sum of money was paid for the "*mundium*" and this was employed as the dowry of the woman and, after the manner of the Romans, the transaction was written up in a *libellus dotis* and was regarded as the distinctive sign of marriage, and a woman's proof that her marriage was a true one.

For the contractual aspects of marriage of North American Indians, Driver and Massey say, "... the parents and other elder relatives of a bride

or groom normally had more to do with the selection of a marriage partner than did either of the principals. Marriage among most primitive peoples is regarded as a contract between two individuals. In general, a bride and groom had more voice in the matter among the economically less advanced tribes... Those areas which were economically more advanced or possessed sib systems tended to give more weight to the opinions of elders."²³

The poets are considered for two reasons. The first is to observe the teaching of the Church on love and marriage in action, albeit "poetic action" as it were — to see if and how that teaching affected the laity in their idealization of love. We must, of course, say "some" of the laity. Some were affected, but it is not possible here to plough so wide, and rough, a field as that of the *de facto* sociology of fourteenth century England. Secondly the finer poets of our period were consciously and conscientiously a part of the Church, often critical of it, but aware that they were as much members of the Body of Christ, and *teachers within it*, as were cleric, priest, and bishop. By the fourteenth century the *auctores*, or classical poets, such as Ovid, Fulgentius, and Virgil, had begun to be classified as ethicists as well as poets and were used by preachers and theologians as such. The more serious of the contemporary poets entered into the same spirit: precisely as poets their job was to teach as well as please.²⁴ Accordingly, *both* Church and poet ought to be consulted if we would know what either was about.

Besides its historical worth an analysis of the fourteenth and fifteenth century England will have current moral value. Much of what the medieval Church and poet had to say about love and marriage is mere chaff and best forgotten. But there remains after the winnowing some fine and precious grain. A new look into the old wisdom may help heal, deepen, and broaden our present capacity for love. At least it may serve as salutary challenge to views in serious need of it.

¹ Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*. p. vi

² Henri Davenson, *Les Troubadours*. p. 96 and p. 101

³ Cf. Rene Descartes *Discourse on Method* and his *Meditations*.

⁴ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. Anchor Books 1996

⁵ John Noonan, *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1965

⁶ Ursula King, *The Tablet*, 7 July, 1990, pp. 858-59. For Ranke-Heinemann, Cf. *Eunuchen für das Himmelreich...*

⁷ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. Anchor Books 1996

⁸ Saint Augustine, *On Continenence*, ch. 9 PL 40:364, trans. Sr. Mary McDonald, O.P., *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, vol. 16, p. 216

⁹ H.C. Lea (*History of Sacerdotal Celibacy*, 1907. His indictments as instanced in many studies to the present day including a 4th ed. of Lea's original work (1966),

¹⁰ E. Westermarck (*The History of Human Marriage*, 1922. (vol. i, pp. 414-15).

¹¹ *The Family in Various Cultures*, 1952, p. 156.

¹² Philip Sherrard (*Christianity and Eros*, 1976). (pp. 10-12)

¹³ Uta Ranke-Heinemann , *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality, and the Catholic Church* (Ger. ed. 1988; Eng. trans. 1990)

¹⁴ Uta Ranke-Heinemann's, *Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*.

¹⁵ *op. cit.*, pp. 135 ff

¹⁶ Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing* 1989.

¹⁷ James Brundage in *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (1987) see pp. 5,81,85,154.

¹⁸ Peter Lamont Brown in his *Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988). p xviii, and p. p. 425.

¹⁹ R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. Penguin Books 1982

²⁰ W.A. Pantin, *The English Church of the Fourteenth Century*. p. 253.

²¹ Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early XIV Century*. pp. 28-29 .

²² G.H. Joyce, *Christian Marriage*, and pp. 48 ff.

²³ cf. Driver's and Massey's "Comparative Studies of North American Indians" in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, New Series, vol. 47, part 2, p. 394. For many other examples of the legal and contractual aspects of marriage see Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage*, *passim*.

²⁴ Cf. Beryl Smalley, *ibid. passim*, and J.B. Allen, *The Friar as Critic: Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 40-41, and *passim*. Cf. also D.W. Robertson on almost any page of his many writings.