

**LOVE AND SEXUALITY
IN THE WESTERN CHURCH TRADITION**

1. Early period (3rd century - 1000)

Many Christian intellectuals, and ecclesiastical writers, clung from the beginning more on the Greek philosophical ideas than on the biblical view of sexuality. By Philo of Alexandria¹, Platonism was introduced in the school of Alexandria and it also affected Origen, which in turn had an impact on a large part of Christendom. How ascetic rigor can become a drama was shown in the case of the latter, who was self-castrated, although the fact that Paul's advice was the following "those who cannot remain abstinent, let's get married. It is better to get married with someone than to be burnt from desire".²

To excessive ascetic rigor, of montanistic shades, moved and Origen's contemporary, Tertullian, who also brought a tremendous impact on western Christianity.

During this period in the Church develops a struggle between two fronts. On one hand an ascetic spirit that rejects sexuality and on the other liberality, supported by the Gnostics,³ who teach that the spiritual man is above the common laws and that he can never sin, whatever he though does. Faced with this vision come those

¹ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De Paradiso* 2, 11: "namque ante nos fuit qui (means Philo of Alexandria, *De opificio mundi* 59, 165-166) per uoluptatem et sensum praeuarcationem ab homine memorauerit esse commissam, in specie serpentis figuram accipiens delectationis, in figura mulieris sensum..."

² *1 Cor* 7, 9.

³ See S. AGOURIDIS, *Ο άνθρωπος κατά τον Άγιον Ειρηναίον εν αντιθέσει προς την περί ανθρώπου εικόνα των Γνωστικών*, Thessaloniki 1970; P. CHRISTOU, "Ενοφυλία το ιδεώδες των Γνωστικών", *Κληρονομία* 5:1 (1973), 1-16; D. BRAKKE, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, Harvard College 2010.

who feel the need of strict moral discipline. From the 3rd century Christian ethics is dominated by a strong devaluation of sexuality, and they come to their pick with the later view of Augustine (354-430), who argued that by itself sexual desire is sin.⁴

Sexual activity is welcome only if it aims to reproduce and virginity is superior to marriage. Therefore it can be claimed that, from the beginning and throughout the Middle Ages, for many Christians, sex was seen as something dirty and inferior⁵ while the Christian ethics concerning the marriage and the sexuality, mainly raised a defensive attitude.⁶

This devaluation of sexuality inevitably went along with the devaluation of women, whose roots in the western church tradition lie in Tertullian. His views on the female sex not only cause the anger of women's organizations up to nowadays due to the fact that she is identified with the notion of guilt and disgrace, but they also blame her for the destruction of human's creation according to God's image and she is also characterized as the door of the

⁴ A brief list of references are the following studies: J. - L. FLANDRIN, *Un temps pour embrasser: aux origines de la morale sexuelle occidentale (VIe-XIe siècle)*, éd. Du Seuil, Paris 1983; J. C. OWYER, *Human sexuality. A Christian view*, Sheed & Ward, Cansas 1987; D. C. FORD, "Διαφορές μεταξύ των σπουδαιοτέρων Πατέρων της Ανατολικής και Δυτικής Εκκλησίας σχετικά με τη γυναίκα και τη σεξουαλικότητα", *Σύναξη 77* (Ιαν. - Μάρτ. 2001), 32-48; I. FUCEK, *La sessualità al servizio dell'amore. Antropologia e criteri teologici*, ed. Dehoniane Roma, Roma 1996; PH. BECQUART - G. BEDOUELLE - J. - L. BRUGUÈS, *Amore e sessualità nel cristianesimo*, Per una storia d'Occidente. Chiesa e società, Jaca Book 2007; G. DUBY (a cura di), *L'amore e la sessualità*, ed. Dedalo, Bari 1994; P. BROWN, *The Body and Society. Men, Woman and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction (Columbia Classics in Religion), 2008; P. VASSILIADIS - M. KONSTANTINOU, "Agostino - Paolo - La Legge. Il problema della sessualità umana", L. BIANCHI (a cura di), *Sant' Agostino nella tradizione cristiana occidentale e orientale*, ed. San Leopoldo 2011, 167-201.

⁵ N. MARTELLA, *Sesso e Affini. Sessualità e contesti*, vol. 1, Punto a Croce, Roma 1998, 162-163.

⁶ E. FUCHS, *Desiderio e tenerezza. Una teologia della sessualità*, Claudiana, Torino 1988, 101.
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devil, causing the wrath of God.⁷ Therefore, he recommends to women the path of virginity and the repentance, the adoption of the veil and not of the crown on her head-because the crown is a sign of vanity, of abandonment of modesty and challenge into temptation-⁸ and advises men not to touch the virgin, because the woman's virginity is sacred and the only one that is free from any relationship with prostitution.⁹

Such are the prompts of Jerome, who argues that marriage is something less than prostitution and that even the blood of martyrdom cannot erase the stigma of sexual relationship.¹⁰

Ambrose of Milan insists on Paul's exhortation for marriage to avoid firing the flesh and recommends to marry than to ablaze. He recognizes the libido of human beings, but he also advises us not to keep that flame in the depths of our mind and into our hearts, in order to avoid the voracious flame of desire, which will consume the outer clothing of our soul, and her leather robe. If anyone encounters the fire of love, may skip her and may overtake her or maintain the false desire in the chains of thoughts. The young may not watch exceedingly the physical beauty of the prostitute, but the girl may not lift her eyes on a young man's face again, because, if she looks with perseverance, she will be captivated and will fall in love. Even in casual encounters she should be covered with a veil, in order not to expose herself to wounds, which either alone will cause or other will cause to her. It certain that in both cases, she will be the one who will be harmed. Surely, says the Holy Father, the fact that she saw, doesn't consist a sin, but we should be careful not to become the cause of sin. The carnal eye saw, but the modesty of mind may hold the eyes of the heart. The Lord said: Anyone who looks a woman aiming to desire, commits adultery already with her in his heart. He did not say: whoever looks, commits adultery, but: anyone who looks, aiming to desire. He did not limit the vision, but he considered the temper. We see more with

⁷ TERTULLIAN, *De cultu feminarum* I, 1.

⁸ TERTULLIAN, *De corona* 14.

⁹ TERTULLIAN, *De exhortatione castitatis* 9.

¹⁰ JEROME, *Adversus Jovinianum* I.5, PL 23, 228.

the soul than with the body. So, the principal of the blame is the soul. Thus the flesh is innocent, but more often it is the servant of sin. Therefore, may not defeat us the desire of beauty and may one penetrate the fire of adolescence and the erotic flame of youthful age.¹¹

In all these exhortations one can discern that Ambrose tries to protect the young people from sexual desire and promiscuity and mostly the young girls from sexual frustrations that cause pain. Nevertheless, he believes that if Eve, that is the sense of the first women, had lit her candles, neither she would had us engaged in the effects of her breach, nor she would deduct from the immortality of virtue,¹² as the first woman was deceived and then she lured her husband (*1 Tim 2, 14*). Although the man was created outside of the paradise, that is in a lower place, is considered better, and she, who was created in a place better, in paradise, is proved to be inferior.¹³

¹¹ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De Paenitentia* 1, 14, 68-76, F. IOANNIDIS, *Χριστιανοί Λατίνοι, Α΄*, Thessaloniki 2011, 303-309.

¹² AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De paradiso*, 2, 11: “nam si Eua, hoc est sensus primae mulieris accensas habuisset faces, numquam praeuaricationis suae nos crinuculis implicasset neque ex illa uirtutis immortalitate cecidisset”.

¹³ AMBROSE OF MILAN, *De paradiso*, 4, 24-25: “quo loci illud aduerte quia extra paradisum uir factus est et mulier intra paradisum, ut aduertas quod non loci, non generis nobilitate, sed uirtute unusquisque gratiam sibi comparat. denique extra paradisum factus, hoc est in inferiore loco uir melior inuenitur et illa quae in meliore loco hoc est in paradiso facta est inferior reperitur; mulier enim prior decepta est et uirum ipsa decepit. unde apostolus Petrus subiectas fortiori uaso mulieres sanctas uiris suis uelut dominis oboedire memorauit. et Paulus ait quia Adam non est seductus, mulier autem seducta in praeuaricatione fuit. deinde contuendum quia nemo debet sibi facile praesumere. nam ecce illa quae in adiuumentum facta est uiro praesidio uirili indiget, quia uir caput est mulieris, ille autem qui adiuumentum uxoris habiturum se esse credebat lapsus est per uxorem... ergo positus est in paradiso uir, facta est in paradiso mulier. sed etiam tunc priusquam a serpente mulier deciperetur, habuit uiri gratiam, quoniam de uiro sumpta est, licet hoc sacramentum magnum sit, sicut apostolus dixit, et ideo causam uitae ex eo traxit. ideo que de uiro tantum scriptura dixit quia posuit eum in paradiso operari et custodire”.

Ambrose connects sexuality, sin and salvation to sexual purity, arguing that Jesus avoided the common transmission of human sins through sexual intercourse because of his virginal conception, just as the Virgin shunned sin through the preservation of virginity.¹⁴

The superiority of man over woman, not according to nature but to the cause and reason for existence, also supports the Ambrosiaster (pseudo-Ambrose). Then he is led to an anthropological and soteriological extremity, because he supports directly that the woman is not created in the image of God.¹⁵

For Augustine, the desire of the flesh (*concupiscentia carnis*) is a consequence of the fall, which cannot be controlled by the human mind. In addition, sexual desire is not a good point of marriage, since it was given as punishment because of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Indeed, by the original sin all human beings are under the power of the devil, because all were born as a consequence of sexual desire. In fact, the union of the sexes is blameless only for procreation.¹⁶ Although Augustine defends the institution of marriage, the carnal union of spouses, not for reasons of procreation but for their pleasure, belongs to excused sins. He considered them as a necessary evil, sinful and shameful even those that were aimed to the production of children. Married couples have sexual fidelity and priority should always be to have

¹⁴ D.G.HUNTER, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*, Oxford University Press 2007, 202.

¹⁵ AMBROSIASTER, *Ad Corinthios I*, 11, 10, H. J. VOGELS, CSEL 81/2, Vindobonae 1968, 122: “mulier ergo idcirco debet velare caput, quia non est imago dei, sed ut ostendatur subiecta”. AMBROSIASTER, *Ad Corinthios I*, 14, 34, op.cit., 163: “si enim imago dei vir est, non femina, et viro subiecta est lege naturae”. See also in F. IOANNIDIS, “Τα Υπομνήματα του Αμβροσιαστή στις δύο προς Κορινθίους επιστολές του Απ. Παύλου”, *Πτυχές της Ορθόδοξης δυτικής εμπειρίας. Θεολογία - Γραμματεία - Πνευματικότητα*, Thessaloniki 2010, 93-104.

¹⁶ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Sermo 351*, 3.5, F. IOANNIDIS, *Χριστιανοί Λατίνοι, Α΄*, 475. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De bono coniugali*, 6. See also the study D. G. HUNTER, “Augustine and the making of Marriage in Roman North Africa”, *J ECS* 11:1 (2003), 63-85.

children together and prevent each other from the weaknesses of the flesh, in order to avoid illegal intercourse. Satan guides anyone, who gets married not for the birth of children but to satisfy the carnal desires.¹⁷

Augustine cites one example, comparing the need of food with sexual contact. As food, he says, sustain humans, so the sexual intercourse "preserves" the human race. As food is the enjoyment of the abdomen, so the sexual intercourse is a pleasure of the flesh. But no man should resort to excesses due to increased appetite, if he does not need food and if he does not aim to create family. It is better for anyone to stay hungry than to eat forbidden foods. Also, it is better to remain landless from seeking a family through the unlawful sexual intercourse.

In the first book *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* Augustine refers to sexual desire as sin. He claims that the devil is the one who pushes people to lust, and carnal relations within marriage should exist only for reproduction and acquisition of children. But if from this contact are born children who are not wanted by the couple and their behavior towards children does not imply love but hatred and denial of their upbringing then all this reveals the sin that they had made in dark and now is being revealed in daylight. An unequivocal hardness deplores the hidden sin and sometimes cruelty of lust resort to extreme actions such as using drugs to avoid pregnancy or even the killing of life in the womb before it is born. If in such a case there is no response and the couple is characterized by debauchery then the woman is considered as a prostitute and the male as an adulterer.¹⁸ Augustine even thought the death of Adeodatus -mortal fruit of an illicit relationship of his- as a punishment.

Temperance then is better than marriage, but marriage is better than prostitution. However, the carnal lust should not be given in marriage, but only be tolerated within it. This is not some good derived from the essence of marriage, but an evil that resulted

¹⁷ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De Bono Coniugali*, 6.

¹⁸ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* 1, 1-15.
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from original sin.¹⁹ Only Mary conceived without concupiscence. That is why, in the Incarnation, the Lord was born without sin.²⁰

There is no marriage without physical and sexual contact, but also there is no sexual relationship without shame. In paradise, if sin was not preceded, could not of course exist the reproduction of the generations without the union of the sexes. Then, however, the sexual union would take place as a quiet combination of members and not as a lust of the flesh that would cause shame.²¹

Similar to Augustine's are the opinions of Gregory the Great, who argues that, in itself-and thus as an end in itself-the pleasure experienced by the man in the sexual act is a sin, but tempered within marriage and always for the purpose of procreation. In his thinking prevails ascetic spirit, the mind of Christ and in Christ the pleasure of man, free from anything that removes him from that point of view.²²

2. Middle and Late Age (1000-1500)

Our knowledge about the sexual life of couples, especially after the year 1000, are derived mainly from the theological writings, the exomologitaria, the circulars and conciliar exhortations. For example, provisions of the 7th century to the constraints of the priesthood, as far as the purity concerns, who had since died down, were restored by decree of Pope Leo IX (11th c.).

Respite in this era of persecution of pure love and sexual intercourse are the fascinating love letters between the fifteen years old Eloise and her teacher Peter Abelard (1079 to 1142). The spiri-

¹⁹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* 1, 1-17.

²⁰ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* 1, 1-24.

²¹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De Nuptiis et Concupiscentia* 2, 2-22.

²² GREGORY THE GREAT, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 1.8.3; 2.30.1-2, PL 76, 1105; 1220-1221. IDEM, *Moralia in Iob* 9.36.58; 9.53.80, CCL 143, 498-499; 512 and 15.15.19, CCL 143A, 760. For more inf. see C. STRAW, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, University of California Press 1988, 118 passim.

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tual contact between teacher and pupil did not take long to become carnal and a great love thrived secretly in the house of her curate uncle Fulbert. As the philosopher himself writes: "we were joined under one roof ... On the pretext that we are studying, we spent hours and hours in the sweetness of love ... Our kisses were more than our words ... My hands were asking for more armfuls than books ... The love filled our eyes."

But the romantic story takes a dangerous proportion when in the bowels of the small pupil begins to grow the fruit of their love. Eloise brings world Astrolabe and Abelard wants to legalize his relationship with her. She blocks. Eventually the couple getting married, but hatred and revenge captured his heart Fulbert. The Eloise ends up in a monastery and Abelard castrated Paid by henchmen of her uncle, vilified crippled before the world and is forced to retire to a monastery.²³

In his "Ethics or Know thyself" (*Ethica seu scito te ipsum*)²⁴ Abelard stands in the term sin in psychoanalytic mood and helped to the change of attitude of punishment towards sin, giving more importance to man and the intention to repent. As he writes: "the repentance of the heart eliminates the sin, that is the contempt to God or the assent to evil. Because the mercy of God, who inspires this remorse, is not compatible with the sin". His teaching alarmed the Roman Catholic Church and with the assistance of his rival, Bernard of Clairvaux, she condemned him as dangerous heretics. As a mental wreck, Abelard refuges in the monastery of Cluny, where he exhales his last breath. Eloise, before closing her eyes, asked to be buried next to her husband, he so loved.

In the 12th century, Peter Lombard and the founder of Canon Law Gratian warned Christians that the Holy Spirit will leave the conjugal roof when a couple gets together, even for the purpose of

²³ É. GILSON, *Ελοΐζα και Αβελάρδος*, translation - commentary G. M. KALIORIS, ed. Armos, Athens 1998; É. GILSON, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, New York 1955, 153-163. K. PENT, *The Passion of Peter Abelard*, http://rucdk.academia.edu/KristelPent/Papers/901383/The_Passion_of_Peter_Abelard (retrieved on 15-5-2012).

²⁴ PL 178, 633-678.
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procreation. Sexual abstinence was recommended to the believers of the Church during the holy days and even in the days: Thursday to honor the conceive of Christ, Friday to commemorate the crucifixion and Saturday in honor of the Virgin, Sunday to commemorate the resurrection of Christ and Monday to honor the souls of the departed. Therefore only Tuesday and Wednesday remained free for mating couples.²⁵

The church strictly condemns the delegacy and during the 13th century Thomas Aquinas unleashes his arrows to fight her. There is such a variety of concepts concerning delegacy, and particular if it is permitted or not, that they make us think that nowadays all these seem unrealistic, as for instance the debate on whether the woman has sperm or not.

However, there was a positive contribution of Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who conceived the meaning of wedding in terms of love and tenderness, which are associated with sexuality and friendship as well. Unfortunately, this was not a continued effort. This would certainly mean a radical questioning of the entire social and ecclesiastical structure, based on a rigid hierarchy, according to which the male was superior to the female and to the church servant, as well as to an unmarried virgin. Furthermore, the male was superior to the married and uncontrollable man who lives in the world.²⁶

A characteristic of this period was the immoral sexual life which was mainly occurred among the upper classes. The nudity and prostitution were not subject to prohibition and furthermore the feudal society, the "Jus primae noctis", was in power, and particularly the right of the noble to deflower the wives of the people who were inferior to him,²⁷ fact that is well attested in literary texts of the 13th and 14th century and in legal texts as well.²⁸

²⁵ N. MARTELLA, *Sesso e Affini*, op.cit., 162-163.

²⁶ E. FUCHS, *Desiderio e tenerezza*, op.cit., 128, 132.

²⁷ The "παρθενοφοβία (parthenofthoria)" was the tax paid by the vassal daughters the right to marriage. We do not know whether the Byzantine rulers did use "the right of the first night." In his publication N. A. VEIS, "Υπήρχε jus primae noctis παρά Βυζαντινοίς", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift ΣΥΝΘΕΣΙΣ* τχ.3 (2013)

During the same period, many women were accused of coming in touch with the devil, because the devil considered as the direct inspiration for any kind of erotic dream. Whoever had this kind of thoughts during his sleep, he had to repent, because it was like to have committed a sin.

In conclusion, one would notice that, apart from any excesses on the matter and the legal concept, the teaching of the Western Fathers insists on ascetical and pastoral dealing of the issue through a soteriological perspective. They try to eliminate human passions, to ensure the avoidance of prostitution, the mess and the agitation of the soul from the birth of the desire until the saturation. They know that passions destroy virtues that, they are responsible the creation of sly desires in the soul and for neglecting the act of pray, as well as for the crafty mood, the selfishness, the lack of sensitivity and the for the adherence to the world and the despair. Passions cause the sedation of mind and also encumber the soul by subjecting the man to real tyranny, because of their power and the amazing speed of demon's action, especially in case of lust, inciting prostitution.

In the post-rift period the west is dominated by a phobic syndrome concerning love and sexuality, which is exclusively created within an ecclesiastical context, for which it must be pointed out that they are responsible for having the Christianity be religionized. The absolute character of the prior ecclesiastical tradition's strict trend with the guilty complexes, the condemnation of the flesh and the devaluation of the female sex, is mainly responsible for the similar tendencies, which effectively, developed in Eastern Orthodox Christianity as well.

21:1 (1912), 169-186, denies using the right by the Byzantines, but without our lists data for allegations.

²⁸ This law imposed by the Ottoman rulers and widely applied in countries under Ottoman rule until the late 19th century.

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