

Taking Issue with the Church

Douglas McManaman



Many people today seem to “have issues” with Catholicism. What is particularly interesting about those who do are precisely the kinds of things with which they take issue. I have yet to meet or read about anyone who has issues with the Hypostatic Union, for instance, or with Baptism, or the Anointing of the Sick, or the real relations within the Trinity, or stained glass windows, etc. The “issues” of those who make known that they “have issues” always, without exception, turn out to be those that directly or indirectly bear upon their sex lives: homosexuality, fornication, adultery, contraception, divorce and remarriage, abortion, etc.

The same phenomenon is evident in the academic world. Many former students of mine complain that moral relativism has been institutionalized at the university level. In a typical ethics course, one is taught that there are simply no moral absolutes, especially in the area of sexuality and the life issues (i.e., abortion, euthanasia, and embryonic stem cell research). And yet there are all sorts of moral positions that these very relativists unwittingly regard as absolute. War, in particular ones in which the United States is involved, is absolutely unjustifiable. Capitalism seems to be absolutely anathema, not to mention capital punishment, racial bigotry, and indifference to environmental causes.

It is often said that the Church is “hung up” on sex, but the truth of the matter is that only certain individuals are hung up on sex. After preaching on the feast of the Ascension, a friend of mine received a phone message that he’d saved for me

to hear. A man with a heavy Slavic accent and who by the sound of his voice was probably in his early 60s called to assert his freedom and his right to have as much sex as he so desires. He ended by saying that he wouldn't be back again to listen to that "bull___". What is noteworthy is that my friend did not mention sex in his homily, only sin in general.

When it comes right down to it, however, such people do not have issues with the Church or with Catholicism at all. They have issues with Christ. For it was he who said: "It is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean. For it is from within, from men's hearts, that evil intentions emerge: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, malice, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evil things come from within and make a man unclean" (Mk 7, 21-23). It was Christ who said, "Anyone who looks upon a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5, 28). And it was the same Christ who said, "In the beginning, God made them male and female", and that "it is for this reason that a man shall leave his father and mother and the two shall become as one" (Mk 10, 6-7). And it was Christ who said, "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and the woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery" (Mk 10, 11-12).

Christ was not big on the "gospel of self-esteem and unqualified affirmation". His solution to our difficulties was altogether different; for he said: "You keep saying, 'I am so rich and secure that I want for nothing.' Little do you realize how wretched you are, how pitiable and poor, how blind and naked! Take my advice. Buy from me gold refined by fire if you would be truly rich. Buy white garments in which to be clothed, if the shame of your nakedness is to be covered. Buy ointment to smear on your eyes, if you would see once more. Whoever is dear to me I reprove and chastise. Be earnest about it, therefore. Repent!" (Rev 3, 17-19).

I recently heard of a married man who is committed to taking care of his sick wife who, as a result of her illness, is unable ever again to engage in marital relations with him. His friends would assure him that God could not possibly expect him to remain celibate for the rest of his life and that he should date others in order to meet what they referred to as his "needs". His only answer to them: "It is a privilege to die to myself for the one who died for me." He saw his circumstances as an opportunity to rise higher and to grow closer to God, not as a restriction — a very different attitude from the man who left a message to indicate that he'd chosen his genitals over the very salvation of his own soul.

The Church does not offer us anything other than what has been given to her by Christ, and his message is very straightforward: “Anyone who loses his life for my sake finds it” (Mt 16, 25). God calls man to a life of love, a love patterned after the mystery of the cross. But inordinate passion is an obstruction to a life characterized by a love of the cross.

Doug McManaman is a Deacon and a Religion and Philosophy teacher at Father Michael McGivney Catholic Academy in Markham, Ontario, Canada. He is the past President of the Canadian Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. This article was published in May 2006.