

The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality

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Questions for Chapter 2

God's Good Symbols: Christian Symbols

God and Matter

1. What is the most obvious thing about God's attitude towards material things?
The most obvious thing about God's attitude towards material things is that He likes them; He takes delight in them; He loves them.
2. What truth about the nature of God does the Judeo-Christian tradition know that is not known by some of the Nature Religions of the Near East? How does this misunderstanding of the nature of God lead to a misunderstanding of created things?
Judeo-Christian tradition knows that there can be no evil in God; that nothing else exists for a creature to be modeled on or to be like except the infinite goodness of God; hence, there is no evil in His creation except what His creatures bring about by abusing their freedom. Matter is good, it is not, as Hinduism and other Oriental religions have thought, ambivalent or bad, a cosmic illusion or force for evil embedded in the structure of the universe.
3. What is meant by the term *incarnation*? What are the truths Christians sometimes fail to realize that show the importance of Christ's physical body?
Incarnation means *enfleshment*—the taking on of human flesh by the Second Person of the Trinity. Christians can forget what this means: that we have been redeemed and sanctified through the offering of the **body of Jesus on the cross. Further, we are justified by the raising of His **flesh and blood** in glory from the tomb. His entrance into heaven was a **bodily** entrance, Christ's resurrection and ascension are the ultimate proof of the goodness of material things.**
4. What then, is the seed and root of our salvation and glorification? And what are we called to do as a result?
The **bodily glorification of Christ is the seed and root of our salvation and glorification. We are called by Christ to **do in our bodies** as He did in His **body**; to suffer, to die, and to rise again in glory in our own flesh, made glorious in the power of His Spirit.**
5. The author states, "This is the reason why He gives us His body as nourishment when we receive Him in Communion." Explain.
It is the **body of the Risen One that we receive. Looking and tasting like bread and wine—yet the same **body**. Just as Christ willed to be present to the Apostles in the upper room, Christ, **body and whole being**, was suddenly present. He willed to be there; there He was. So He does at Mass, in Communion, in the tabernacle—He is present because He has chosen to be there...Christ's **body** is still a human **body**, still flesh and blood. His is also the **body** of the sacrifice that is offered; His is the **body** of the priest, for it is He who offers Himself upon the altar to the Father.**

6. The doctrine of the Assumption emphasizes something that is often forgotten. Explain.
The doctrine of the Assumption (the bodily assumption of Mary into heaven) reminds us that those who rise from the dead rise as male or female. Mary remains woman; she remains “she”. Though flesh and blood—in the scriptural sense of human weakness—cannot inherit the Kingdom of God, flesh and blood DO inherit the kingdom. We will be in heaven more truly male or female than ever on this earth—perfect in virility and femininity for all ages.

Christian Symbolism

7. Through what means does God give us the greatest of His spiritual gifts? Name some examples. What is a sacrament?
God gives us the greatest of His spiritual gifts through material means: e.g., the sacraments that use water, oil, bread, wine, balsam—and for the sacrament of matrimony—our bodies. A sacrament is an outward sign (something material) of an interior grace, established by Christ and conferring the grace which (as a material thing) it signifies—some new mode or way of living the supernatural life or some new growth in it.
8. Describe the difference between sign, symbol, and cultural symbols? Give examples.
Though often used interchangeably, the author makes a distinction between signs and symbols. A sign is the wider category. A **sign** is anything that points to or leads to an understanding of something else. Some signs are purely conventional—you need to be part of the culture, the language or the community to understand these signs—like **written or spoken words, a red or green light**. There is nothing in a conventional sign that has intrinsic meaning. The meaning has been assigned to it by man.
Some signs are also symbols. A **symbol** is a material thing, that by its form, structure, action or appearance, is similar to, or like the immaterial or spiritual thing it signifies. The meaning is intrinsic.
9. The author discusses natural symbols as well as the role of symbolism in culture, psychology and psychiatry. Give an example of a natural symbol, a cultural symbol, a psychological symbol. What can result from skewed or damaged symbol structures in the human unconscious?
Fire is a natural symbol. We say that fire is like love. Fire is bright and beautiful. It is mobile and active, spreading, growing as if alive. It warms us and gives heat. It is necessary for civilized life. Without it we cannot cook our food, keep warm in winter, or melt metals out of rock. Yet if fire gets out of control, it becomes something terrible, destructive, leaving only ashes. So too is love.
Cultural symbols. In our culture, maleness is symbolized by bigness or excellence in sports. In other cultures, it might be the number of wives, children, or scalps.
Psychological symbols: a politician kissing a baby or shaking hands; all human sexual activity. Enormous damage can be done to a person if the deep symbolic structures that are built into us are skewed or damaged or wrongly related to reality. Then a man is at odds with himself or the world. The result can be psychosis.

10. What definition does the author give for liturgy? List several symbols used in the Liturgy.
 Liturgy is: a series of symbolic actions through which man worships God and through which God's grace is given to man. Examples: the altar, the priest's gestures, the types of readings, the way we listen (sitting, standing, kneeling) the carrying of candles, the offering of incense, the bread and wine, etc.
11. What historical events are re-enacted symbolically through the various liturgical rites? Give at least three examples.?
Baptism: God's freeing His people from slavery in Egypt and their passage through the Red Sea, prefigures His liberating us from the power of Satan through the waters of Baptism.
The Mass: a re-presentation of the whole history of the Jewish people from the offering of the Paschal Lamb in Egypt to the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the cross to take away the sins of the world.
 Symbolism in the **Easter Triduum:** darkness and light; the passing of the light from one person to another; Palm branches, processions, breathings on the water, consecrating and pouring oils, washing feet, blessing fire.
12. How is Catholicism's rich use of symbols in keeping with our nature?
 Human nature is composed of both body and soul—we are both material and spiritual. Catholicism is of the earth—earthly; as well as of heaven, heavenly. The various rituals of the Church offer both physical and spiritual experience as a means of involving the whole person.
13. What, according to the author, is the fate of those persons who fail to understand symbolism?
 Because the whole life of the Church is symbolic, not only sacraments and worship, but, divine revelation and all morality, if we do not understand symbolism, we will have but small understanding of Christianity.

Symbols in Revelation

14. The author lists several reasons why God uses a profusion of symbolism to communicate with us. What are some of them?
 God revealed Himself to us in order to rectify the skewed symbolic activity that constitutes so much of natural religions. (Skewed symbolic activity can generate false attitudes toward the world and other men.) He rectified, reoriented and restored the skewed symbolism and enabled us to have a right understanding of the material universe and thus revealed to us the true meaning of man.
 Another reason: God wishes to tell us things that lie beyond the range of comprehension of even the highest intellectual powers. He wishes to give us true knowledge of Himself, of His own internal life of the Trinity, of the incarnation, and of all the other mysteries of the faith, far beyond human understanding.
 Symbols, especially natural, because of their concreteness, contain tremendous potentialities that the mind cannot exhaust. Thus, sheep were created, among other reasons, that Christ might be the Lamb of God; lions, that He might be the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.
 Finally, God wished His revelation to transcend all time, place and culture. He wants to speak to

every man so He can be understood. God can communicate things to us that lie beyond particular cultural conditionings. Such symbols touch the nature of man in the depth of his unconscious; they are able to speak to him universally, even when he is without education.

15. What attitudes or experiences can cause us to distrust symbols?

We may distrust symbols because we think of them as artful or contrived, of a cheap way of manipulating emotions. Men, in particular, tend to hold back in the presence of symbolic activity, they feel just a little bit silly if they do engage in it. Also, symbols can be abused, pretending to all the world that they mean what the symbol expresses, at the same time intending something quite different—thus a symbol becomes a vehicle for hypocrisy. Such experiences can make us either bored or sickened by symbols