

A DESIGN FLAW

By Gabriel Moran

In my ninth decade of life on earth I have come to a conclusion: The human male has a design flaw in its sexuality. The response of many women to my discovery might be: What took you so long? I admit to being a slow learner but I think it takes a man in old age to get a clear perception of this problem. Some people would disagree with my conclusion because it may seem to excuse the bad behavior of men. But my conclusion does not eliminate the responsibility of individual men for bad sexual behavior. Some men – no one knows the percentage – manage to work around the flaw and lead morally responsible lives. But they have a nearly endless struggle with their mysterious bodies.

The problem is evident in the Bible's opening chapters. Many people seem to know only one creation story but there are two. One ancient theory of why there are two stories of creation is that God was dissatisfied with the first model and tried again. The second version was better but the human 2.0 still had a serious flaw on the male side, (The author professes to know a little about the human male, but almost nothing about the human female).

In the first story the "man" emerges from the evolution of the other creatures. Unlike the other animals, he was alone and lonely. He wanted a little contact with a being like himself. So God took a rib and fashioned him a mate. That was a bad idea because the man would never consider the wo-man ("with man") as an equal. The woman employed the qualities she had so as to get some control of the man, offering him a piece of fruit, an obvious metaphor for sex. The man liked the fruit but then was awakened to his own complexity and felt the strange emotion of shame. By that point, God was fed up with the human 1.0 version and told them to get out and fend for themselves.

The second story in Genesis has the man with a real partner (she deserved a better name than "woman"). They were put in a garden and told to take care of it. It was hard work but not without its pleasures. The ancient rabbis' favorite description of the first man and woman was "guardians of the garden." The Jews favored this story of human beginnings but the Christians latched on to the failed version.

All of the Fathers of the Church wrote commentaries on the Book of Genesis but the one who had the most influence on the Western church was Augustine of Hippo. He can be called the founder of both Protestant and Roman Catholic theology. These days he is highly criticized for his sexual views. He linked sex to his concept of "original sin" which was a terrible name for something important that he was trying to get at. It should perhaps be called "original flaw." Garry Wills maintains that Augustine was far more concerned with denouncing greed than with condemning sexual sins. An obvious reason for Augustine's concern with sex was that he was the first man to write autobiographically. He had trouble understanding his sexual history, like every man.

Augustine is blamed for saying that the will is under the bondage of sin. He is not given credit for inventing the idea of the will itself. He recognized that a human has freedom of the will but that it is a severely limited freedom. Instead of choosing whatever he or she desires, a human can

only negate all possibilities except one, thereby allowing the body to follow this one remaining inclination.

The flaw left in the 2.0 version of the human male is that it is ready for something sexual all the time but sexual activity is infrequently appropriate. For centuries the Catholic Church taught that sexual behavior was not only to be restricted to marriage but even within marriage it had to be directed toward conception. It seems safe to say that this never worked. No doubt some men repressed the sexual drive at great cost. It was an extraordinary man who could healthily direct all of his sexual energy into other outlets. Preaching this sexual code for all men was unrealistic, to put it mildly.

Why did western society generally agree with this Catholic code until the middle of the twentieth century? Because church and society feared what would happen if men's sexual desires, sexual imagination, and sexual behavior were unleashed? Women, children and every institution would be under threat. An unrealistic code of behavior could not survive the twentieth century. Unfortunately, the rejection of what is unrealistic does not automatically produce a realistic alternative.

Society, as embodied in religions and secular law, has decided that control of sexual behavior should be left to the individual man. Without institutional help an individual man is almost helpless to deal with the forces of his own body. Better sexual education that begins in infancy is indispensable. But when his body all but explodes in the teen age years the boy desperately needs to develop healthy controls and outlets. Instead, he is met by an avalanche of sexual imagery and few models of adult sexuality to guide him.

One surprising thing that the women's revolt of the last two years has shown is the pathetic sex lives of powerful men. These men are not out on wild sexual escapades. They seem driven by the need for a human contact (tactile, aural or visual), something they apparently can't find in straightforward human encounters. The term sexual harassment was coined a few decades ago and has been regularly criticized as too hazy in meaning for legal purposes. But the ambiguity of "harassment" was perhaps necessary to cover the range of weird things that so many men do to women, children and men who are under their control. Why would a forty-year old man who has a financially successful career risk everything by rubbing up against someone? Or weirder still, why would one of the most powerful men in the country demand that a woman watch him masturbate into a potted plant? Is that what the sexual revolution promised?

The scandal revealed about the Roman Catholic clergy exemplifies what can go wrong with partial revolutions. Catholic priests since the middle ages have been required to promise "celibacy" which explicitly excludes marriage but implicitly forbids all sexual activity. The "secular" priest was to be like a monk but without the protections and support of the monastic life of religious brothers. The chief characteristic of brotherhoods is community. The monk takes vows that usually include poverty, chastity and obedience, all three of which are aspects of community life. As a life-long commitment it was meant for very few men although as a temporary discipline of life it could be a valuable experience for many people. The life was no more nor less than the word brother implies, a deep bond with men as equals but the exclusion of

women. A saying in the early monasteries was that the monks should avoid two things: women and bishops. They were more successful at avoiding women. The bishops ordained monks to be priests, removing them from community.

The life of the secular priest was always very demanding. He had status and respect from the “laity.” When he became a pastor he seemingly had great power in his small kingdom. Although he was always in danger of going astray, the rigid system in which he operated exercised a tight control. It was not a practice for “father” to shed his collar and hang out at the local bar. Since they were men there were no doubt sexual failures but scandals were seemingly infrequent. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s began a long overdue reform of the Catholic Church. But hardly had the Catholic Church opened up to the contemporary world when a reaction set in with the result that the clergy still had all the power but many of the restraints were missing. That happened at a time when a sexual revolution was underway in society. Not much was done to improve the training of the priests and to provide them with a communal support in their lives as priests.

The result was predictable although the horrific details of what some men have done were beyond imagining. It was now possible to have a secret life alongside public life as a man of God. The sexual inclinations that had been repressed now found a range of expression, some that were appalling. The priest still had power, especially over young people who were told that the priest was trustworthy. The Roman Catholic Church is not alone in having this problem but the promise of celibacy, an assumption of holiness, and a bureaucratic pyramid of authority gave the sex problem of Catholic clergy a distinctive and sometimes frightful aspect.

The solutions that are now spoken about, such as married priests and the ordination of women, would no doubt be an improvement. Obviously, there should be women priests. But to ordain women into the current system would only prop it up rather than fundamentally change it. The ultimate solution is to eliminate the clergy. Priesthood is not necessarily tied to a clerical class. The language of clergy/laity comes from a time when the clergy were educated and other church members were not. According to Christian belief, baptism is the main qualification for exercising priesthood. Pope Francis has said: “It would be opportune for all roles of service to have a time limit – there are no lifelong leaders in the church.” A priest could be ordained for a certain length of time, say 10 or 12 years, Some of these priestly members might be reappointed for another term.

This solution is not likely to be adopted anytime soon and the steps to do so are not evident. For now, Pope Francis has at least begun the process of modeling the pope as a brother bishop who does not have the trappings of a king. He will probably follow his predecessor in resigning when he has done what he can. Every bishop in the world could start doing the same thing, getting rid of episcopal trappings and deciding policies by conversations with the priests and other church members of the diocese. Having served as episcopal leader for a while, a bishop could return to being a nonofficial church member. A new bishop could be chosen by the community from current priests.