

1-2012

Cover Story: A Modus Vivendi? Sex, Marriage and the Church

William L. Portier

Nancy Dallavalle

Fairfield University, ndallavalle@fairfield.edu

Christopher C. Roberts

Tina Beattie

R. R. Reno

See next page for additional authors
Show this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs>

Copyright 2012 Commonweal Magazine

Archived with permission from the copyright holder.

Original publication available at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/modus-vivendi>

Repository Citation

Portier, William L.; Dallavalle, Nancy; Roberts, Christopher C.; Beattie, Tina; Reno, R. R.; Hampl, Patricia; Johnson, Luke Timothy; Tentler, Leslie Woodcock; and Baumann, Paul, "Cover Story: A Modus Vivendi? Sex, Marriage and the Church" (2012). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 90.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/religiousstudies-facultypubs/90>

Published Citation

Portier, William L., Dallavalle, Nancy, Roberts, Christopher C., Beattie, Tina, Reno, R. R., Hampl, Patricia, Johnson, Luke Timothy, Tentler, Leslie Woodcock, Baumann, Paul. "Cover Story: A Modus Vivendi? Sex, Marriage and the Church" *Commonweal* 139(1), (13 January 2012) 12-19.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

Authors

William L. Portier, Nancy Dallavalle, Christopher C. Roberts, Tina Beattie, R. R. Reno, Patricia Hampl, Luke Timothy Johnson, Leslie Woodcock Tentler, and Paul Baumann

A Modus Vivendi?

Sex, Marriage & the Church

William L. Portier, Nancy Dallavalle, Christopher C. Roberts,
Tina Beattie, R. R. Reno, Patricia Hampl, Luke Timothy Johnson,
Leslie Woodcock Tentler, Paul Baumann

During the 1960s, nearly 80 percent of adult Americans were married. A recent analysis of U.S. census data reported that only 52 percent of adult Americans were married in 2009. That is the lowest percentage reported in the hundred years the Census Bureau has collected such information.

The reasons for this dramatic cultural shift are well known: high rates of divorce; changing attitudes toward premarital sex; social acceptability of cohabitation; the weakening of the stigma surrounding out-of-wedlock births and single parenting; the postponement of marriage and children for academic or professional reasons. Among those with only a high-school education or less, the data suggest that the decision to marry has been made more difficult by deteriorating economic conditions.

Catholic attitudes and practice have undergone a similar transformation. As reported last year in *Our Sunday Visitor* by Mark M. Gray of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, from 1972 to 2010 there was a nearly 60-percent decrease in the number of marriages celebrated in the church, even as the Catholic population grew by 17 million. The overall percentage of married Catholics also dropped from 79 percent in 1972 to 53 percent in 2010. At the same time, the number of divorced Catholics who remarry without a church annulment continues to climb.

What can be done to reverse these developments, both for the benefit of the individuals involved and society as a whole? Monogamous, lifelong heterosexual marriage open to the possibility of children is the ideal the church rightly celebrates. Yet that message is falling on deaf ears. It is widely acknowledged that the church's teachings about sexual morality and marriage are questioned or ignored by the vast majority of Catholics; its prohibition against the use of artificial birth control, for example, is rejected by perhaps 90 percent of Catholic married couples. Many, perhaps even a majority, of Catholics who choose to marry in the church live together before doing so.

How should the church respond, pastorally and doctrinally, to this growing disconnect between official teaching and the practice of individual Catholics? There seems little

chance that the teaching will change in the foreseeable future. This often leaves Catholics who conscientiously dissent living a kind of divided faith, one that alienates them from the sacraments, especially confession, and increases skepticism toward church teaching generally. With its own flock divided, the church finds it difficult to speak compellingly about the real satisfactions and graces of marriage. After all, if the rightness and necessity of the church's teachings are unpersuasive to those sitting in the pews, there is little chance the Catholic message will influence the larger culture.

Cambridge historian Eamon Duffy succinctly summarized these issues several years ago. *Commonweal* has asked a group of scholars and writers to reflect on Duffy's analysis, which is quoted below.

The shrinking of Catholic institutions is clearly part and parcel of a much broader unsettlement within Western society. It is not merely Catholic marriages, for example, which are in decline, but, it would seem, the institution of marriage itself. The moral pattern imposed by the church (slowly and with enormous difficulty) on European sexual behavior and family structure from the early Middle Ages onwards seems now to be collapsing. Later than most of the rest of the churches of the West, the Catholic Church is increasingly confronted with the need to evolve a modus vivendi with these apparently inexorable social trends, which can be lived by ordinary people with integrity. Marriage is above everything else a social institution, and if the church is not to decline into being a sect for the saintly, ordinary Catholic couples cannot realistically be expected to live lives untouched by the social and sexual expectations and mores of the culture as a whole. The tragically large and growing number of Catholics in irregular unions is both an indicator of the way in which the values of society shape the lives and perceptions of Christians and also, in pastoral terms, a ticking time bomb, which by one means or another is going to have to be defused if it is not to decimate the Catholic community and, more importantly, deprive thousands of people of the sacramental support and light they need.

—Eamon Duffy, *Unfinished Journey: The Church 40 Years after Vatican II*, *Essays for John Wilkins*

William L. Portier

One Sunday two years ago, my wife and I went to Mass at a New England parish. We were visiting my mother, who was battling her last illness and too sick to leave her apartment. After Mass we asked the pastor, an old priest with white hair and an Irish name, if we could take Communion to her. He looked us over. He recognized my mother's name but had never seen us. A bit apprehensive, he gave us a consecrated host in a pyx which he asked that we be sure to return. He wasn't there when we brought it back and I never saw him again. Rarely have I experienced Christ in the church as powerfully as I did the morning a kind pastor entrusted us with the Blessed Sacrament. An army of such pastors would be the revolution that defuses Duffy's ticking time bomb.

As far back as thirty years ago, high-school students greeted my explanations of marriage as a "social institution" with vacant looks. I live in the world Duffy describes. It provides little support for traditional marriage. For complex historical reasons such as industrialization and the changing roles of women, we have increasingly come to see marriage as a personal matter in which children are optional, a category into which same-sex marriage fits quite "naturally." Former Catholics make up 10 percent of the U.S. population. Among these many live in "irregular unions" and yearn to be reconnected to the church.

Is the church simply behind the times on the issues Duffy raises, or is the church more like one of the only voices of sexual sanity in Western culture? I incline to the latter view. But the contemporary church tends to hold its treasure so tightly that those in greatest need have a difficult time receiving it. This is a pastoral issue.

Women and men are, generally speaking, so differentiated as to seem designed for making children, and monogamous marriage, even as we have it now in the West, seems designed to nurture and raise them. Pope Benedict XVI calls this the grammar of creation. The church teaches that monogamous marriage reflects Christ's fidelity to the church and must be indissoluble. Indissolubility and a willingness to accept children lovingly from God are in principle essential to marriage—biblical teaching that the church is not authorized to change. But the canons and procedures of their administration could surely be more user-friendly. The church instructs those to be ordained to remember the Good Shepherd's example. Divorced and remarried Catholics cry out for his compassion.

The church is a refuge for sinners, but many of our bishops and priests have retreated into a fearful neoclericalism and forms of public witness that leave behind all but the most pure. Many fail to grasp the full sense in which they represent God. When they are gracious and hospitable, people feel God's compassion in the church. When they disdain the divorced and remarried or those in same-sex unions instead of reaching out to them as Christ would have, people feel

For complex historical reasons such as industrialization and the changing roles of women, we have increasingly come to see marriage as a personal matter in which children are optional, a category into which same-sex marriage fits quite "naturally."

God's disdain and turn from the church. Face to face with an actual gay person, the phrase "objectively disordered," whatever theoretical sense it might make, is pastoral nonsense. The church can't change the norm of heterosexual monogamy. But I pray that Catholics will witness to it with joyful fidelity, and pastors will teach and administer it with the wise compassion of that New England priest who trusted Christ and us.

William L. Portier teaches theology at the University of Dayton.

Nancy Dallavalle

We all know that what Eamon Duffy writes is true: irregular unions are everywhere, and they are often, as Duffy says, "lived by ordinary people with integrity." And we also see "regular" unions, marriages that reflect the traditional "moral pattern," that fail on every count: they are abusive, banal, venomous, or all three. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church continually trumpets the claim that adherence to traditional norms is the necessary foundation for human fulfillment: that same-sex unions will screw up your kids, that premarital sex will irretrievably poison your marriage, and that being divorced and civilly remarried will, somehow, scandalize the faithful and compromise the social order.

But these terrible things do not happen, or at least their occurrence seems no more the fault of irregular unions than those that follow the approved pattern. When the sky doesn't fall, when Will and Kate cohabit for years and there's no lightning

strike on their wedding day, when you're a sixteen-year-old cesspool of impure thoughts and there really is no hair on your palms, the warnings begin to sound merely shrill.

Duffy knows better than to brandish these canards, yet warn he does, concerned that many are constructing their lives without the help of the grace that is offered through the sacraments and nourished by their regular practice. Duffy's warning, with which I concur, is not so much about the list of desirable behaviors as it is about the danger of seeing marriage not as a sacred institution into which one enters, but rather as a self-expressive affective choice that comes with no inherited goods and gives rise to no ramifications beyond the immediate bonds. The problem, in other words, is not our behavior; in fact our behavior is quite understandable. It's the impoverished goal—a private union that is about me. Well, "us." Well, actually, me.

This attitude is even more reasonable when we consider how mediating institutions (churches, book clubs, Save the Whales groups) actually function in the contemporary world. Social stability is increasingly not an outcome of institutional health; institutional health is positively correlated with the stability of the individual persons who associate under a single banner. In other words, social stability isn't something we get from sturdy institutions. Rather, contemporary institutions tend to be as sturdy as their members are stable—we don't get stability, we bring it. Given that the institution of marriage is now understood by many to be pure fabrication, irregular unions of mature adults will always be more successful than traditional unions of those who are immature and high-maintenance, even though the latter may have the benefit of institutional (read "church") approval.

But what is happening with church weddings? Rule-followers and rule-breakers alike tend to see their "Catholic" affiliation as merely tribal—thus, getting married in church becomes an expression of "family." In this understanding, there is no sense that a larger social ethic underlies the commitment, that a deeper kind of belonging grounds the project, that there is recourse to an ultimate reality (which we call "God") that lends this very human moment some much-needed courage and scale and resolve. The "church" of the "church wedding" becomes nothing more than an "event space" for a celebration of "our people," a stage setting for the self-expression of the couple and their chosen community. (Thus the publication of banns, for example, no longer makes sense. Thus the impatience when clergy or church musicians refuse to play their assigned roles as directed by the bride and groom, who ask, plaintively, "Whose wedding is it, after all?" Good question.)

Getting married should mean—for some of us *must* mean—entering with awe into a sacramental moment that is much bigger than any given couple and their combined Facebook friends. In response to Duffy, I suggest that the bar for this sacrament should be higher, not lower, so that marriage can serve its properly prophetic role in a world that longs for a transcendent that must be more than one's

own world writ large. Yes, the traditional moral patterns matter—let's teach them. But they are not the entire point, and should not be presented as such. Sacramental marriage should not be reduced to a prize awarded to couples who meet all items on a checklist of approved behaviors; it should be an invitation, reserved for couples who genuinely recognize their need for grace, and have the humility to hunger for a tradition that will sustain it.

Nancy Dallavalle is chair of the Religious Studies Department at Fairfield University.

Christopher C. Roberts

Eamon Duffy, as usual, is right. Consensus about sexual morality has collapsed in the West, and ordinary Catholics need a *modus vivendi*.

I do not know what that *modus* should look like juridically and canonically. Those questions obviously matter greatly, and I look forward to that discussion. But whatever the rules and regulations turn out to be, preparing ordinary Catholics to weather an era of moral collapse will also require a new attention to spiritual formation and theological education. There is room to enlarge our expectations for what "ordinary" implies.

Simply learning the reasons our church teaches what it does would be a significant first step. Better catechesis would go a long way toward creating the possibility of resisting the collapse. Many Protestant denominations have adult Sunday school; why not Catholics? You cannot embrace Catholic teaching, much less thoughtfully question it, if you do not understand its rationale. You cannot practice Catholic orthodoxy fruitfully without a spirit of humility, humor, and conversion. But it is hard to learn the teaching and practice maturely without community. How often in your parish do you hear extended preaching and teaching on Catholic sexual morals, and how often is it done with compelling flair and style? Could we at least try?

Over the past five years, I have taught ethics and moral theology to nearly four hundred students at Villanova University. Most are good students with a heart for service; most are from upstanding families and Catholic schools. Sunday campus liturgies are packed. Yet casual weekend hookups on campus are not rare. Pornography consumption is common in the dorms. Students tell me that *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Tom Wolfe's novel of collegiate debauchery, is an exaggeration, but not by much. Too many students, despite being embedded in ordinary contemporary Catholic culture, lack the spiritual vocabulary for critiquing the sexual habits of the wider popular culture.

The same students respond with interest and attention, however, when they actually encounter authentic, intellectually serious Catholic teaching. I know that, in the bad old

days, moral theology about sex could be foreboding and legalistic, but it does not have to be that way. I assign things like *Humanae vitae*, John Paul II's Theology of the Body, and Ephesians 5. Most students have heard some of the sound bites before, but encountering the underlying reasoning is transformative. These students are too worldly for brain-washing, but they are fresh enough for good arguments.

Here are some theses debated in my classroom: Natural family planning works, but only when both spouses have learned to be patient and defer gratification. Celibacy is historically not something you practice alone, but is supposed to be a rule for living in community, a gift enabling relationships unburdened by sexual competition. Real courtship means treating marriage as a vocation to be discerned prayerfully while dating. Cohabitation can resemble marriage, but conditional sexual intimacy, unconstrained by vows for thick and thin, is a counterfeit version of the sacramental covenant. Postmodernism has a point—much about sex is socially constructed—but this insight can empower us to resist mainstream cultural defaults and make more Catholic choices about which stories and practices we allow to feed our imaginations and expectations.

When was the last time any of us adults was part of a candid extended conversation along those lines with other Catholics? In our parishes, youth formation is too often short-circuited, ending with confirmation. Lay and ordained commitment to ongoing adult faith formation is not much better.

The collapse that Duffy sees is advanced. The situation is arguably as bad as the brutally pagan world of antiquity. Today's collapse might continue no matter what we do. But Jesus died for us, and rose again. There are ways to tell the story of Catholic sex, ways to explain how we connect the dots from "Jesus loves you" to "here is what the spiritually wise recommend about birth control, or divorce, or dating." It takes practice and commitment to learn that story, let alone inhabit it. Ordinary lay Catholics can begin their quiet but important resistance in classrooms, parish base-ments, and home-study groups.

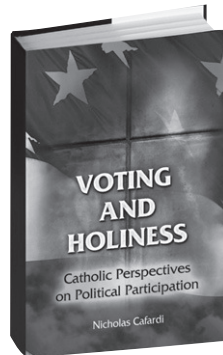
Christopher C. Roberts is the author of *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage (Continuum)*, which was reviewed in the April 11, 2008, issue of *Commonweal*.

Tina Beattie

At its best, the Catholic understanding of marriage has much to commend it. For many couples it remains a viable way to live, although not necessarily in full accord with the teachings of *Humanae vitae*. Moreover, children are suffering acutely in modern society as a result of the breakdown of marriage and family life, in a way that suggests our social attitudes toward sexuality and procreation are in crisis.



New from Paulist Press



978-0-8091-4767-0
\$24.95 • 272 pages
Paperback

VOTING AND HOLINESS

Catholic Perspectives on Political Participation

Edited by Nicholas P. Cafardi

A collection of essays by leading Catholic thinkers that addresses ethical questions that confront all faithful Catholics at election time. It will be of great assistance to Catholics who feel tension between their political choices and their faith.

"If you want to know how Catholics understand politics, read this book. It bristles with insight."

— MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS, *National Catholic Reporter*

Available at bookstores or from Paulist Press

Orders: 1-800-218-1903

Fax: 1-800-836-3161 • www.paulistpress.com

Yet the Catholic understanding of marriage cannot survive unless people see it as an attractive option. The natural-law tradition teaches that, although desire is subject to the distortions of sin, there is nevertheless a fundamental relationship between desire and goodness. As many feminists have argued, the traditional understanding of marriage, based on models of male authority and wifely subordination, has been used to justify subtle and not-so-subtle forms of domination, abuse, and violence. In cultures that place a high premium on sexual equality and women's rights, the church needs to reject this model decisively. Many single women, including single mothers, would love to find a man who would offer love, fidelity, and companionship. The church expends a great deal of energy fretting about the role of women, but perhaps a more urgent challenge is to attend to the emotional and sexual education of men.

The church acknowledges that sin and failure are woven into the human condition, yet a ruthless idealism prevails when marriages break down. The denial of the sacraments to the divorced and remarried means that many Catholics are excluded from their Eucharistic communities just when they are most vulnerable. This also affects children, who risk being alienated from the church indirectly through the exclusion of their parents. Maybe we need to rediscover a model of extended family life, one in which divorce, rather than death, weaves people into several families in the course

of a lifetime. After all, throughout Christian history early death has meant that most people have been serially monogamous, and the longevity of marriages today presents a new challenge. Step-parents and half-siblings are by no means a new historical phenomenon.

But what about those in same-sex relationships? I think the church has fetishized genitality at the expense of a deeper and richer understanding of the possibilities of sexual love. Church teaching now acknowledges that the unitive dimension of sexuality is valid even when a marriage is infertile, but this defeats any appeal to natural law to defend the church's opposition to gay relationships. The criterion of goodness in any sexual relationship is surely not reducible to every genital act (which is a major flaw in *Humanae vitae*). Rather, we need to ask how these acts are expressive of wider relationships of fidelity, commitment, and respect, which remain open to the "child" in the form of the vulnerable outsider. From this perspective, the traditional understanding of marriage would become an inclusive rather than an exclusive theology. A lifelong heterosexual marriage of fertile and faithful love would be a source of inspiration that others might emulate in ways that are not inferior, but that attend to and learn from the most enduring and widespread form of Christian sexual love. This would be a *modus vivendi* that would preserve the truth of the church's tradition and would make it a resource for all who seek what St. Augustine referred to as "the tranquillity of order" in this most potentially disordered aspect of human desire.

Tina Beattie teaches theology at Roehampton University in London.

R. R. Reno

Most of us crab-walk. We don't deny or repudiate moral norms but instead trim, adjust, and make exceptions. It's not a comfortable *modus vivendi*, but it's common, perhaps inevitable. By the end of the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain is contorting himself not only because he fears the sharp blows of moral judgment, but also because of the shame he feels over his own efforts to avoid them.

The sexual revolution was and remains a significant social reality, one that certainly influences Catholics. And it is equally true that a priest trying to pass on the church's sexual morality faces congregants who dissent, not only in practice (which is, after all, the historical norm) but with explicit and freely expressed convictions.

Not a good situation. But it's not unprecedented. As Eamon Duffy suggests, medieval sexual practices hardly accorded with the Christian view of marriage. Add to that the cultic sensibilities of many Catholics over many centuries, which often tend to be more magical than sacramental, and one

The bourgeois mentality treats the dominant sensibilities of the present as self-evidently true, good, and beautiful. Bourgeois religion, therefore, presumes that the feelings and behavior of well-to-do middle-class people pretty much reflect the will of God.

must admit that most Catholics most of the time organize their religious lives around highly suspect beliefs. Martin Luther thought he saw "a ticking time bomb," and he wasn't altogether wrong.

What's new is bourgeois religion. At least since the middle of the nineteenth century, progressives have denounced the smug mentality that animates the bourgeois. At its worst, the bourgeois mentality treats the dominant sensibilities of the present as self-evidently true, good, and beautiful. Bourgeois religion, therefore, presumes that the feelings and behavior of well-to-do middle-class people pretty much reflect the will of God.

There are many interesting and serious arguments designed to show why Catholic moral teaching on sexuality is mistaken. But there aren't many moral philosophers in the pews. Today, bourgeois American culture has incorporated into itself the countercultural belief that traditional morality involves a cruel and unnecessary limitation on the sexual lives of men and women. This conviction—now a bourgeois conviction—reassures many Catholics that their dissent couldn't possibly reflect a moral outlook deformed by popular culture. Instead, it emboldens them to ignore the church when she suggests that our sexual behavior is sinful and our moral vision clouded. As a result, most clergy are the ones crab-walking, contorting themselves to downplay traditional Christian morality when it clashes with the bourgeois hearth gods of the contemporary West: health, wealth, and hedonism.

This is indeed "a ticking time bomb." Something must give. Either bourgeois religion will triumph and the sexual ethic of the Catholic Church will become a dead letter, or bourgeois Catholics will become less bourgeois, which means entertaining the anxiety-inducing thought that what they imagine to be their progressive views of sex are, in fact, deformed and destructive.

I'm inclined to think that the coming explosion will do more damage to bourgeois religion than to traditional sexual morality. As the fate of liberal Protestantism indicates,

bourgeois religion has a relatively short life expectancy, at least as a vital force to be reckoned with. More important, the animating ethos of the Catholic Church does not come from the laity, or even the diocesan clergy, but instead from religious orders that are constituted to cast out the bourgeois hearth gods of health, wealth, and hedonism.

Of course the either/or won't be resolved decisively. Catholic sexual morality will not enjoy a serene reign over our moral imaginations. It never has. Nor will wealthy and powerful Americans entirely lose their smug confidence that they and their sensibilities have been providentially placed at the center of history. Instead, we will go back to crab-walking, which is the usual *modus vivendi* of reluctant Christians, and which presents the usual challenges to pastors who want to help people stand up and walk in pathways of righteousness.

R. R. Reno *is the editor of* First Things.

Patricia Hampl

In *Bare Ruined Choirs*, Garry Wills neatly lifted D. H. Lawrence's phrase about England's relation to sex to speak of the church's own "dirty little secret," which, he said, was change. That was 1972, forty years ago, well before the revelations that would make sex not just England's dirty little secret, but the church's. In that heady post-Vatican II period many Catholics believed that finally the church would—and could—play catch-up with modernity. Oh, how relevant we would be. How open, how—cool.

Dorothy Day was still alive, priests and religious were joining laypeople in getting arrested at armament plants and throwing pig blood on draft records. Nuns were doing scholarly work on the origins of their orders, questioning the idea of cloister and enclosure. Change? Stay tuned.

But maybe the current question isn't whether the church will—or can—change as society slowly grinds its gears to legitimize same-sex marriage and a range of "irregular unions." Resistance to change is deep in any institution. It is profound in an institution that claims immutability. It makes hypocrisy almost inevitable.

The most ancient and heroic (if sometimes shameful) struggle of the church is not with "change" but with "the other." This drama first plays out in Paul's letters, among the earliest documents of our tradition. The very nature of Paul's radical apostolic mission meant that abhorrent practices—eating defiled meat, sharing table with pagans, releasing converts from the requirement of circumcision—had to be, as people say today, revisited. Paul at Antioch and the leadership in Jerusalem had a hard time keeping it together. In a sense, they settled for a geographic *détente*—Paul's multicultural solutions (eat the meat, lose the sacramental surgery) in distant Asia Minor, a stricter adherence to received forms in Jerusalem.

Very scary stuff, though at our historical remove perhaps hard to see as much more than cultural oddities. But these differences were institution-threatening, filling believers with dismay and horror. How could such things be allowed—not to mention, how could they be sacramental?

The challenge we face now is not simply whether the church can change to fit the historic moment where same-sex marriage is already the law of the land in certain states. We need to decide if we are committed to the apostolic mission of inclusion, the rugged path Paul walked (and did he walk!) in cultures alien to his earliest assumptions and training. He kept walking, kept connecting house church to house church. He forged our tradition by this very insistence on sacramental inclusion.

And then there's my niece Theresa and her partner Sue, both cradle Catholics married "outside the church," whatever that now means. And their newborn twins, "the gentlemen," as we call Jack and Michael. They're here. We're all here with them. Conceived and born in the modern medical miracle way. Emphasis on miracle. I thought we were good with miracles. In my family we still are. We have the proof.

Patricia Hampl *is the author of* A Romantic Education, Virgin Time, and Blue Arabesque, *among other books.*

Luke Timothy Johnson

In every circumstance, the first question the theologian in the church must ask is, "What is God doing in the world?" The premise of theology is that the living God continues to be at work in the lives of humans in every age, disclosing, even if obscurely and indirectly, God's presence and power. The first responsibility of the church is to discern and respond with obedient faith to the work of the living God in the world. Discerning precisely what God is up to—and what God is calling the church to obey—is, however, not easy, as Duffy's provocative statement illustrates.

For the sake of discussion, we can grant Duffy's empirical observation that a "large and growing number of Catholics" are in "irregular unions." We can accept as well his conclusion that this fact is a pastoral "ticking time bomb." But it is not necessarily the case that the number of such unions is "an indicator of the way the values of society" shape the lives and perceptions of Christians, or a sign that Catholic marriages—or the "institution of marriage itself"—are in decline. The same evidence can be read, in fact, as a sign of the enduring appeal of covenanted unions, even, or especially, among those refused sacramental legitimation for their commitments.

Here is a case where sociological observation does not automatically yield theological discernment. Here is a case where attending to the actual experience of those participating in such "irregular unions," available through the stories

they are eager to share, can help the church perceive in such stories the work of God or its denial, as a means of guiding its own faithful response.

Perhaps such narratives would reveal that the motivation for such “irregular unions” was contempt for the church and its sacraments, or the conviction that fidelity doesn’t matter and holiness is passé. Then we could conclude that what is being revealed is the pattern of sin. In this case, the church would rightly defend the standards for licit marriage, even at the cost of being a “sect for the saintly.” Accommodation in this case amounts to faithlessness.

But perhaps the story told by those in “irregular unions” is one of deep loyalty toward God and a response to grace, even in difficult circumstances. Then it may be that God is showing the church the need to recognize and respond to God’s own work in such lives by enabling members of such unions to share in the sacraments. The church might even be called to examine how some aspects of the “institution of marriage” as presently structured do not so much nurture the people as reinforce custom, and to respond creatively to the work of God as displayed in the lives of those touched by grace. In this case, change is the expression of obedient faith by the church.

The one thing the church cannot afford to do is to refuse to pay attention to what is actually happening in people’s lives. What is at stake, after all, is not the preservation of Catholic (or European) institutions, or the survival of the community, or even the fullest possible participation in the sacraments. What is at stake is obedience to the living God, without which the church does not have much reason to exist.

Luke Timothy Johnson is the Robert R. Woodruff Professor of New Testament at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

Leslie Woodcock Tentler

A Sunday morning in my Washington, D.C., parish might seem to suggest that Eamon Duffy is needlessly worried. The relatively full pews contain some obviously gay couples, as well as couples whom I know to be in second marriages. The typical family appears to have only two children. As for the many young singles in attendance, I seriously doubt that all are living lives of perfect chastity. We never hear from the pulpit about premarital sex or gay marriage, although the latter is legal in the District of Columbia, still less about contraception or remarriage after divorce. Nearly everyone present goes to Communion; almost no one goes regularly to confession. The parish is not, I hasten to note, a bastion of postconciliar radicalism. A disconcerting number of my fellow parishioners receive Communion on the tongue. But most of us have apparently decided that the essence of the Christian message has to do with something other than sex.

The gulf between what the church teaches and how most Catholics actually live dictates silence on sex as a pastorally prudent strategy.

My Sunday-morning experience plays out in parishes around the country, and it does represent a kind of solution to the problem Duffy describes. Nonetheless, there is ample reason for concern. Consider, for example, the growing tide of Catholics who have left the church. Not all have done so because of church teaching on sex and marriage. Inadequate catechesis, a distracting culture, and uninspired liturgies play at least as important a role. But like most *Commonweal* readers, I am personally acquainted with Catholics who have left the church on principle, regarding its stances on homosexuality, women’s ordination, and sometimes premarital sex as cruel and oppressive. (Interestingly, I’ve never heard anyone cite church teaching on remarriage after divorce as a cause; perhaps the ease of annulment in the American church accounts for this.) Others, I suspect, have left because they believe that the church in head and members is dishonest. They know that most Catholics, including many clergy, disagree with church teaching in the realm of sex; they know that we frequently disregard aspects of that teaching in our own lives. And they think we are hypocrites.

Unlike the church in Duffy’s England, the American church isn’t yet losing numbers. We have Catholic immigrants to take the places of those who leave. But who believes that numbers tell the whole story? We are losing some of our best-educated and most morally serious members and may well experience the same phenomenon with the children of today’s immigrants. (Perhaps prophetically, I recently received an Episcopalian ordination announcement for a woman named Elizabeth Carmody Gonzalez.) Those who remain in our pews, moreover, are experiencing another form of loss—one that’s inherent in the *modus vivendi* prevailing in parishes like mine. The gulf between what the church teaches and how most Catholics actually live dictates silence on sex as a pastorally prudent strategy. At a time in history when Catholics are in desperate need of guidance on sex and marriage, the teaching church has nothing to offer beyond the occasional iteration of ill-understood prohibitions. Hence recent polls in which young Catholics overwhelmingly opine that decisions about sex should be made solely by the individuals immediately involved. If the church wishes to be heard in this moment of crisis, it will have to open an honest conversation with the laity about the purposes of sex and

marriage. That can't happen without a concomitant willingness to rethink the rigid formulae in which the tradition's wisdom is currently entombed.

Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *the author of Catholics and Contraception, teaches history at the Catholic University of America.*

Paul Baumann

My mother, Carol Marie Linehan, was not a pious woman. She did, of course, instruct us in how to say our prayers, but otherwise I can't remember her ever uttering the name "Jesus" or mentioning a pope, let alone a bishop. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby seemed to comprise the entirety of her pantheon of Catholic saints, and TV's *The Wonderful World of Walt Disney* was as close to religious programming as our family got. Her favorite biblical passage was "God helps those who help themselves," a proverb I have not been able to find in Scripture.

Although my mother's father was a lawyer, and had been educated at Boston College High School and College, he chose not to send her to college, and her own religious education, as best I could tell, was derived sketchily from the *Baltimore Catechism*. Nevertheless, she had a firmly fixed view of the moral universe. No premarital sex, no extramarital sex, and no divorce were the fundamental articles of her faith, and on two or three occasions she explicated with startling crudeness the moral reasoning behind these prohibitions. (As I recall, it had something to do with cows and free milk.) Like many of her generation, she inherited a Catholicism focused almost entirely on a deep belief in the tribal virtues taught by competitive sports—at least for boys—and rigid rules about sexual behavior. For women of her generation, a "bad reputation" could put you on the marital sidelines, and out-of-wedlock pregnancy spelled exile or worse.

My mother put great stock in marriage as the ultimate vocation for a chaste Catholic girl, although I can't recall her ever using the word "chaste." My parents were married in November 1950, and I was born nine months later. My brother Steve—a pushy fellow from the start—followed thirteen months after that. In the first ten years of her marriage, our mother was pregnant seven times—two miscarriages and five healthy births. The deliveries were not always easy. She also suffered from severe endometriosis, which caused heavy and almost constant bleeding and considerable pain. These things were not talked about in our family. I remember one bewildering night in my early teens when she collapsed—from a ruptured ovarian cyst, I now assume—and my father raced out of the house to the hospital with her in his arms. No explanations were offered, and no one dared to ask. The week I graduated from college, she collapsed again and underwent an emergency radical hysterectomy. She was forty-three.

This is an all-too-familiar story for Catholic women of a certain age, and I think it should be better known, especially among younger, more fervent Catholics whose idealism—and naïveté—is pandered to by the current emphasis on the Theology of the Body. In the 1960s, after her fifth child was born, my mother's doctor insisted she go on the Pill to help regulate her menstrual cycles. Dutifully she consulted our parish priest, and was told in no uncertain terms that recourse to the Pill was forbidden under any circumstance. She complied with the priest's instructions, or so I have been told, until she suffered yet another hemorrhage. Eventually, after several incidents like the one described above, she did go on the Pill, and doing so presumably helped alleviate her symptoms, at least for a time. Of course, my mother never talked to me or my brothers about any of this, though in later years she was more forthcoming with our sisters. I do remember her complaining bitterly, in the proud way the Irish do, about women on the Pill who still presented themselves at the Communion rail. In time my mother stopped going to Mass altogether; during the last thirty-five years of her life, she attended church only for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. She seemed to think that when it came to the church, you were either all in or all out. That was what she had been taught, after all.

I doubt that her personal conflict over the Pill was the only reason my mother stopped going to church, but it surely was the catalyst. Years later I am left to wonder, did she leave the church, or did the church in effect leave her, turning a blind eye, in its customary way, to "women's complaints"? Either way, it seemed—and seems to me still—a harsh exile for a woman who had risked her body, and on occasion her life, in obedience to the church's dubious teachings concerning the supposedly self-evident teleology of every sexual act. Despite the reasoned and patient objections of countless theologians and the largely silent defection of the majority of the faithful, the church continues to cling to these teachings, and does so with the fierce desperation of those who are wrong and can't or won't admit it. Yet as philosopher Michael Dummett wrote in these pages ("Indefensible," February 11, 2011), the unpersuasiveness of the current teaching undermines the church's moral authority in senseless ways. Is this pettifogging about sexuality really what the gospel demands of us? In the meantime, as Eamon Duffy worries, thousands are deprived of the sacramental nourishment only the church can provide.

Catholicism has altered seemingly irreformable teachings on more than a few occasions over the centuries (baptizing the uncircumcised, the perfidy of the Jews, slavery, usury, separation of church and state) yet somehow found a way forward with its identity, focus, and integrity intact; and I hope now that it will muster the will to find its way out of this particular dead end. As my mother, bless her, would say: "God helps those who help themselves." ■

Paul Baumann is the editor of *Commonweal*.

Copyright of Commonweal is the property of Commonweal and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.