

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## The Origin of Catholic Sexual Values\*

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The media repeatedly screams about conflicts related to sexual values — especially about abortion and homosexuality. Many of us have definite views on these topics, but we are unaware of the origin of our views. This article will discuss one source of our sexual values — the **Roman Catholic Church**. Most people see Catholic views — especially those related to sex — as being unchanging, absolute, and unaffected by the course of human history. According to Daniel C. Maguire\*, Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (a Jesuit Catholic University that I attended), this is far from the truth.



Maguire sees the Church's negative view of sexuality as a "*pelvic obsession in current Catholic leadership*." Since neither the Hebrew nor Christian Bibles have any major preoccupation with sexuality, where does this negative view of sexuality come from? It certainly did not come from the Jews. Sex was appreciated in ancient Israel and was viewed as a gift from God. Jews considered heterosexual desire and its passionate expression in marriage as a beautiful thing. To add to this, no information about Jesus indicates that he rejected the positive attitudes of the Jews toward sexuality.

The early Christian church was not born with a detailed set of sexual morals. As with any new social group, they selected their principles from groups that existed around them. Early Christianity mainly adopted the view of the **Stoics**. The ideal of the Stoics favored pure rationality or logic and the absence of emotion. (This ideal is probably very similar to the Vulcan philosophy of Spock, a popular character in "*Star Trek*." ) **Stoics** accepted sexuality only because of the logical need for reproduction. Seneca, a Stoic writer respected by the early Christians, said that if one's wife was pregnant, there is no reason for sex.

Essentially, sexual intercourse for pleasure in marriage was severely criticized. According to Seneca, too much love for one's wife was shameful. Early Christians partially adopted the Stoic view by considering other uses of sex as secondary to reproduction.

At the beginning of the 4th century, this view was further changed by Christian leaders when they met in Elvira, a town in Spain. The Church was on the brink of becoming the establishment. For too many reasons to be mentioned in this article, this was a major turning point. The Christian elite sought to carve out a "*clerical image*" for the Church — an identity to strengthen the hold of the Church on the faithful. They concentrated on sex. However, the real issue was not sex — it was power. In part, this power was gained by imposing sexual restrictions.

The Vatican operations still show the effects of Stoicism and Elvira. However, Maguire says that Catholic sexual ethics show two other weaknesses — "*absolutism and immodest, not to say arrogant, certitude*." In other words, the Vatican admits no exception at all, regardless of circumstances, and states its feelings with absolute certainty.

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**There are exceptions to even the best of rules.**

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These two qualities are in stark contrast to other philosophies. For example, [Aristotle](#) stated that the educated person seeks only as much certainty as is available. In moral matters, we often deal only in probabilities. Even [Thomas Aquinas](#) said, "*Human actions are good or bad according to their circumstances.*" This statement points to some situational differences. Aquinas also said that practical moral principles are true and applicable most of the time, but they may not apply in certain situations.

Today's [Vatican](#) shares none of these beliefs. In its view, *all* homosexual acts are intrinsically evil, as are *all* abortions, *all* uses of contraception, *all* sterilization procedures, *all* masturbation, and *all* sex outside marriage. This is stated with so much certainty that even discussion of these matters is seen as irreverent. In relation to abortion, Catholic bishops naively refer repeatedly to "*the clear and constant teaching of the church on abortion.*" According to Maguire, there is no such thing. The Bible does not treat abortion in our terms at all. Accidental abortion is only mentioned once (Exodus 21: 22-25). For 1900 years, the common teaching was that in early pregnancy, you did not have an "*ensouled*" baby. Thus early abortions were not murder.

According to Jesuit scholar John Connery (who takes the most conservative position on abortion), the beginning of the ethical discussion of abortion seemed to occur in the 15th century. The widely accepted opinion was that early abortions to save the life of the woman were moral. Since the theologians were not sure when the baby was "ensouled," they gave the benefit of the doubt to the woman. However, in the 19th century, the Vatican declared that abortions are always wrong. The Vatican was so successful — most people do not even realize that this absolute ban is relatively new in Catholic history. The Vatican is still trying to maintain that absolute view, but with decreasing success. A strong majority of

Catholics approve of abortions in at least some cases.

Since we are a Judeo-Christian culture, another major source of our sexual values is [Judaism](#), which will be discussed next week.

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\* Maguire, Daniel C. "Catholic Sexual and Reproductive Ethics: A Historical Perspective," *SIECUS Report*, May-June 1987, pages 1-4.