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From natural law to ecology: evolution of the conceptions of “nature” in Catholic sexual morality (20th-21st c.)

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Summary:

Sexuality has always been subject to normative and practical regulation by the Catholic Church. During the contemporary period the deployment of discourse and technics designed to control, contain and repress sexual practices seems to be evolving. In a secular society, the effectiveness of these normative devices is challenged and has to be renewed. The valorization of "responsible" and ethical sexuality tends to take precedence over the enumeration of sins which, although still very present, are no longer at the centre of the Church discourse on sexuality. Today, facing climate change and environmental crisis, the emancipatory power of technology raises more scepticism. From a Catholic perspective, “human ecology” - or even an “integral ecology” - should be followed in sexual conduct; the condemnation of sexuality outside marriage, “artificial” contraception and medically assisted procreation technologies is no longer directly justified by “moral” considerations but by biological and environmental considerations.

Keywords:

[gender](#), [sexuality](#), [nature](#), [theology](#), [ecology](#), [catholicism](#), [morals](#)

Sexuality has always been subject to normative and practical regulation by the Catholic Church. This regulation takes place through the enactment of rules that frame sexual life, but also through the development of a pastoral care that is not only the place where norms are applied, but also where they are, to a large extent, produced; the role played by clerics, priests, spiritual directors and confessors is essential in this respect (Foucault 1976; 1984a; 1984b; Brown 2008; Langlois 2005). The contemporary period sees the continued deployment of a body of discourse and devices designed to control, contain, channel and repress sexual practices (Walch 2002; Sevegrand 2013). However, in a context generally marked by secularisation (Hervieu-Léger 2003), the effectiveness of these normative devices is being tested by the disregard for the religious institution and competition from other discourses which leave more room for the individual to choose how to conduct his or her practices.

Throughout the period, a common thread runs through the Catholic Church's efforts to frame sexuality, consisting of the defence of a naturalized link between sexuality and procreation. In the first half of the 20th century, this essentially involved reserving sexuality for heterosexual married couples, maintaining the prohibition of the "crime of Onan" (which consists, for men, of "letting their seed be lost in the ground" by practising masturbation or by applying the ancestral contraceptive method known as "withdrawal") and, more generally, severely condemning any use of sexuality for purposes other than procreation (and therefore the search for sexual pleasure or lust): Chastity thus commands spouses to "keep themselves within the limits of just moderation", according to the expression of Pius XII (speech of 29 October 1951), while others are bound to strict continence.

In the course of the 20th century, however, the work to stabilise the link between sexuality and procreation was indeed thwarted by two technical innovations: Firstly, from the mid-1950s, the appearance of chemical means of contraception based on synthetic hormones, whose effectiveness was far greater than that of pre-existing contraceptive methods and which therefore radically changed the conditions for the possibility of a non-procreative sex life, both within and outside the married couple (Leridon, Charbit, and Collomb 1987; Pavard, Rochefort, and Zancarini-Fournel 2012) ; then, in the 1980-1990's, the development of assisted reproduction techniques, and in particular in vitro fertilisation procedures, which make it possible to envisage procreation without sexuality, or at least separated from it.

This double disconnection between sexuality and procreation profoundly upsets the context in which Catholic sexual morality is expressed and makes a reformulation of it necessary. Furthermore, the evolution of morals, which accelerated sharply from the 1960s onwards (Mendras and Duboys Fresney 1988; Bozon 2009) , and the second wave of feminism (Picq 1993; Chaperon 2000; Mouvement français pour le planning familial 2006) also contributed to the "Catholic crisis" (Pelletier 2005; Hilaire et al. 1988; Dubesset 2015) around these issues and forced the Catholic Church to reiterate, clarify or reinforce its prescriptions concerning, in particular, the prohibition of sexuality outside marriage, whether it concerns the sexual relations of unmarried couples living in 'concubinage', sexuality outside the couple ('sexual vagrancy' in the emic lexicon) or homosexuality, which is always considered 'unnatural' and therefore 'intrinsically disorderly' (Buisson-Fenet 2004). It is this recharging of Catholic sexual morality that this article focuses on.

In reviewing the ecclesial productions of the period in the field of sexual morality, the first observation is that there is a strong continuity in the Church's condemnation of non-reproductive sexuality. Without calling this into question, a closer look reveals a significant evolution in the vocabulary and, more profoundly, in the framing (Benford, Snow, and Plouchard 2012)¹. If at the beginning of the century it was above all a question of forcefully

¹ The notion of framing a social movement refers to the work of formulating a cause in order to make it

recalling the prohibitions in the field of conjugal sexuality, in the post-conciliar period the discourse takes on more benevolent accents with regard to "acts which bring about the union of the spouses" (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*). The valorisation of a model of "responsible", ethical sexuality then tends to take precedence over the enumeration of sins which, although still very present, are no longer at the centre of the discourse.

This movement was accompanied throughout the 20th century by renewed theological reflection on the concept of nature, which was successively mobilised in different forms (Médevielle 2010; Gisel 1992). The different conceptualisations of nature which follow one another, or rather are superimposed on one another in a complex theological edifice, correspond in fact to as many phases of Catholic sexual morality. If, in the first half of the 20th century, marked by demographic concerns, it was a question of submitting to a naturalistic 'natural moral law', it was a rediscovery of 'human nature' that John Paul II's 'theology of the body' proposed in order to counter the great transformations of the 1960s and 1970s in the field of sexuality. At a time of climate crisis and scepticism about the emancipatory power of technology, it is now the path of a "human ecology" - or even an "integral ecology" - that should be followed in the field of sexual conduct; the condemnation of sexuality outside marriage, "artificial" contraception and technologies for medical aid to procreation is no longer directly justified by moral considerations, but by biological and environmental considerations.

Obeying nature: the reaffirmation of a sexual morality ordered by the procreative purpose

The hardening of control over conjugal sexuality

In the 19th century, the priority of the Catholic hierarchy was the defence of Christian marriage as the foundation of the family and society. The hierarchy was rather flexible in its approach to the relationship between spouses (Flandrin 1981; Langlois 2005, 451–54; 2010; Gibson 1993; 1994). Things changed radically at the beginning of the 20th century, especially after the First World War. Fears about the renewal of priestly vocations - which were being recruited from large families (Suaid 1978) - redoubled those concerning the spread of neo-Malthusian ideas (Cova 2011) and the consequences of "depopulation" (Bard 1995; Thébaud 1985). The Church recalls that the primary end of marriage is procreation, "the appeasement of concupiscence" being only its secondary end, and that the spouses must observe the rules of chastity that apply to them. The clergy is henceforth invited to question the married faithful who come to confess about "conjugal onanism" (Rousseau 2005, 193).

Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Casti connubii* (Pius XI 1930)(31/12/1930) follows in the wake of *Arcanum divinae sapientiae* (Leo XIII 1880). This reflection on the "authentic meaning of Christian marriage" clarifies the rules of conjugal sexuality and responds to the Anglican Church's announcement allowing married couples to use contraception when they need to limit the size of their family (Sevegrand 2013; Lambeth Conference 1930). Addressing the claim of Christian Indigenous women to have the right to divorce from their non-Christian husbands in several African colonies, *Casti Connubii* recalls the requirements of consent and Christian morality regarding marital union: it must be indissoluble and exclusive. Above all, in response to the spread of mechanical contraceptive methods, the Magisterium firmly re-establishes that sexual relations within marriage are subordinate to the procreative purpose (Della Sudda 2017):

acceptable and shared. We apply it here to ecclesial rhetoric.

No reason, however serious, can make what is intrinsically unnatural become natural and honest. Since the act of marriage is, by its very nature, intended for the generation of children, those who, in accomplishing it, deliberately apply themselves to removing its force and effectiveness, are acting against nature; they are doing a shameful and intrinsically dishonest thing. (...) Any use of marriage, whatever it may be, in the exercise of which the act is deprived by the artifice of men of its natural power to procreate life, offends the law of God and natural law.(II, 2)

The seriousness of the “crime of Onan” is reaffirmed here in the name of “natural law”: if contraception is condemned here without appeal, it is because it is “intrinsically unnatural”. *Jus* naturalistic reasoning in itself is nothing new in the Christian tradition: it is an ancient heritage which, through the mediation of Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics, has its roots in Aristotelian thought. Moreover, it continues to irrigate present-day theology, especially after the post-conciliar neo-thomistic revival (Costigane 2017). However, this way of insisting on the existence of a natural moral law to which men must submit is characteristic of that first moment of Christian discourse on sexuality in the 20th century.

The silent release of the faithful in the intimate realm

This rigorist doctrine, based on the centrality of the reference to the natural moral law, gives rise to reservations. The magisterium's pronouncements are relatively effective for the entire French population. Among the Catholics themselves, doubts arise and practices do not always follow the doctrine, especially when it becomes rigid (Sevegrand 1991). The letters sent by the faithful to French Abbot Viollet (18875-1956) (Viollet 1996), a central figure in family pastoral and social work, document the widening of this gap and the distress of certain couples, which opened up gaps in marital sexual orthopraxis, as early as the inter-war period.

In the 1950s, the demand of couples and women for access to effective contraceptives through synthetic chemistry became apparent. In France, various organisations put on the agenda the demand for the legalisation of these contraceptives, mainly led by activists born during the baby boom, often mothers of families and socially integrated. Among them are the Protestant women of the Young Women's Movement and a few rare members of the *Action Catholique Générale Feminine* (Catholic Action of Women) (Della Sudda 2016).

Among the Catholics, this demand is the subject of debate. A 1962 survey of 6,000 Catholic households of the Teams of Notre-Dame revealed a tension over issues of sexual morality and birth control (Walch 2002, 467). The “Liaison Centre for Research Teams on Love and the Family” (*CLER Amour et famille*), founded in 1962, intends to respond to this by promoting conjugal sexuality (Sevegrand 1995; Fradois 2017). The Catholic psychosexologist Paul Chanson (1890-?) develops the theme of the “reserved embrace”, which designates a set of non-procreative practices allowing to reconcile morality with a sexual fulfilment contained and channelled in the couple (Chanson 1952). In 1950, his work *L'Art d'aimer ou la continence conjugale* – the Art of Love or conjugal continence (Chanson and Féret 1950) caused a scandal (Chaperon 2002). Conjugal sexuality, whose aim was not orgasm but the expression of love between the spouses, was rehabilitated in controlled and chaste forms between the spouses (Oraison 1965), while Father Marc Oraison (1914-1979), who was also a doctor, published works that made knowledge about the body and sexuality accessible to Catholics.

The Humanae Vitae crisis

One of the major texts on sexuality in the last century, the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (HV)(Paulus VI 1968), published on 25th July 1968 by Pope Paul VI (1963-1978), illustrates

the link between natural law and sexuality. The preparation of the encyclical followed alerts received and relayed by the hierarchy, based on confidential surveys and reports on the state of mind and practices of the faithful between 1961 and 1965 (Grootaers 2002). Within the Pontifical Commission for the Study of the Problems of the Family, Population, and Birth Rate, created by John XXIII, some of the prelates are working in secret on the drafting of the letter, which must on the one hand respond to the expectations of the faithful expressed in the Council and, on the other hand, stabilise the doctrine on sexuality. At the last minute, the conservative minority - Cardinals Ottaviani, Lestapis and especially Wojtyła, who played a decisive role - won a victory in the Commission, which Paul VI decided to join (Sevegrand 2008; Grootaers 1984; Rouche 1984).

The letter responds to the questions raised by advances in contraceptive techniques and to the feminist and feminine demand for women and couples to control their fertility. It clarifies Catholic sexual morality, as much by the debates it aroused at the time of its publication as by its influence on subsequent texts of the Magisterium which claim to be based on it. In 1968, Catholicism was still the religion of the French. The encyclical was eagerly awaited by the faithful, especially since the pill was legalised in 1967. The Council, divided over the use of new contraceptive methods, had not clearly settled the issue; Paul VI had decided to reserve this thorny subject for the Holy See. The arguments put forward in the conciliar debates and the reference to “responsible fatherhood” in *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul VI 1965) gave reason to hope for an opening on the issue (Sevegrand 1995).

The encyclical reminds the spouses of their “duty” and shifts the discourse by taking the physiology of the female body as the basis of natural law. The eleventh paragraph is entitled “Respecting the nature and purpose of the matrimonial act”:

“These acts, by which the spouses unite in chaste intimacy, and by means of which human life is transmitted, are, as the Council recalled, “honest and worthy”, and they do not cease to be legitimate if, for causes beyond the spouses' control, they are foreseen to be infertile: they remain ordered to express and consolidate their union. In fact, as experience shows, not every conjugal encounter generates new life. God has wisely set laws and natural rhythms of fertility that already space out the succession of births by themselves. But the Church, reminding men to observe natural law, interpreted by her constant doctrine, teaches that every act of matrimony must remain open to the transmission of life”.

The appearance of nature, associated with the female body in the argument, holds little attention from contemporaries, but many of the faithful express their disagreement and doubts about a sexual morality that they consider contradictory to their aspirations and to the message of the Second Vatican Council. This “new Galileo Case”(La Croix 2014)² keeps women away from confessionals in a lasting way(Hervieu-Léger 2003; Dubesset 2015; Sevegrand 1995). An analysis of the letters from readers of the main Catholic women's magazine, *L'Echo de notre temps*, reveals these doubts and bears witness to the construction of a new conjugal intimacy. Far from the clamour and spectacular protest of May 1968, the contraceptive revolution that is taking place in the catholic home is silent. While the clerical regulation of sexuality in the name of salvation is rivalled by the medical regulation in the name of health described by Denis Pelletier (Pelletier 2012) , the women who express themselves bear witness to a conjugal ethic of sexuality removed from the inquisitive gaze of the clerics (Della Sudda 2016).

² This is the term used by the French diocesan priest Loïc Berge, at the time of the family synod, to call for a morality of communion that is more open to the choice of couples.

Rediscovering nature: the “theology of the body”

Revaluing “human love”

The failure to receive *Humanae Vitae* makes a radical change in the way of approaching sexuality necessary. John Paul II, elected Pope ten years after the publication of the encyclical, is the main architect of this renewal of Catholic sexual morality. The discourse on sexual morality he proposes is based on two currents of thought that developed on the margins of Catholicism in the decades preceding his pontificate: the “marital and family spirituality” of the beginning of the century, which was already echoed in *Casti Connubii* (Cuchet 2010) and *Humanae Vitae* on the one hand, and the personalist philosophy (Portier 2011) on the other. The first movements in this reflection began long before Karol Wojtyła's accession to the throne of Peter: traces of this can be found as early as the early 1950s in the series of articles he published in the Polish magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Regretting that the Catholic Church has placed “this whole area [of sexuality] under the sign of the forbidden” and “relies only on injunctions, authority and sanctions” (Wojtyła 1953), he is working to revalue “human love” and to speak more positively about sexuality. He explains that sexual desire should not be perceived as morally bad, since it is a component of human nature: “The Creator foresaw this joy, and linked it to the love of man and woman”, he writes in *Love and Responsibility*; it is therefore “legitimate” to seek “the satisfaction of desire by means of carnal voluptuousness”. But he does not limit himself to assuring, as Pius XII had already dared to do, that “spouses do nothing wrong” (Pie XII 1951) when they enjoy sexual pleasure, nor even, like the conciliar fathers, that their acts are “honest and worthy”: in John Paul II, carnal love is nothing less than “the image and symbol of the Covenant that unites God and his people” (Ioannis Pauli II 1981, 12). This new approach to sexuality is based on the use of the concept of nature.

Reading human nature in the body

In the early years of his pontificate, between 1979 and 1984, the pontifical “Wednesday audiences” gave John Paul II the opportunity to develop his “theology of the body” (an expression he would eventually abandon as he felt it was confusing). Displaying, in the wake of the conciliar orientations (Paul VI 1965, 16)³, the objective of recovering the lost meaning of “human nature” in order to found a morality of intimate relationships, he alternated the exegesis of the texts of Genesis with meditations based on the observation of the body (“the only one capable of making visible what is invisible” (Ioannis Pauli II 1980b), and even of the sexual act itself (“the reality of the conjugal union where man and woman become 'one flesh' contains in itself a new and, in a certain sense, definitive discovery of the meaning of the human body in its masculinity and femininity” (Ioannis Pauli II 1980d). All this converges towards an univocal conclusion: the human being “is called to live with someone and for someone” (Ioannis Pauli II 1980a, 2), it is made for the total and disinterested gift of himself; which means, in other words, that “love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” (Ioannis Pauli II 1981, 11).

³“In the depths of his conscience, man discovers a law that he does not give to himself and to which he must obey? He carries a law that God has written in his heart; his dignity is to follow it, and it is on it that he will be judged”.

What is new here is not the substance of this teaching: it is the empiricism on which it claims to be based. Instead of a natural moral law which would be imposed vertically by the magisterial teaching, the human nature of John Paul II can be seen in “the mystery of his 'origin' which each man carries within him, which is closely linked to the awareness of the procreative meaning of the body” (Ioannis Pauli II 1980c), and in “the experience of so many couples and the data of the various human sciences” (Ioannis Pauli II 1981, 32). In John Paul II (who again develops here a reflection of the Council (Paul VI 1965), the valorisation of sexuality rests on the fact that it is the place of fulfilment, even of incarnation of an oblation vocation inscribed in human nature: it is “the sign and fruit of total personal self-giving”, a “language at the service of love” (Ioannis Pauli II 1994) . It is easy to understand the normative charge of this celebration, which only seems to be in tune with the times: the fact that sexuality is the physical translation of the most absolute self-giving in love should not be read only as a justification, but also as a condition.

In fact, in situations where sexuality does not engage people in their whole being, it is “internally unjustified”, as we read in *Love and Responsibility*. As soon as the gift is no longer complete, as soon as sexual pleasure is “sought for its own sake”, or as soon as the other is perceived as an object of enjoyment, sexuality ceases to be a place of human fulfilment and becomes “depersonalising”. This conclusion reinforces the demands of Christian sexual morality, which the arguments inherited from the previous period can no longer effectively defend after the “sexual liberation” and the relaxation of laws on divorce, contraceptives or the status of same-sex couples: firstly, Christian marriage (where one gives oneself to the other entirely, exclusively and indissolubly) as the unique and “natural”⁴ (Ioannis Pauli II 2001, 3;5) framework of legitimate sexuality; secondly, the absolute prohibition of the use of artificial contraception – that is “objectively contradictory language” to that of sexuality, “falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love” by which the spouses “manipulate and degrade human sexuality and, with it, their own person and that of the spouse by altering the value of their total donation” (Ioannis Pauli II 1981, 32)- and medical aid for procreation; finally, the renewed condemnation of masturbation and homosexuality - often mentioned together with (Congrégation pour la Doctrine de la Foi, Seper, and Hamer 1975), the argument of the absence

⁴ Marriage is natural, since it is only the realisation of a vocation to total self-giving inscribed in human nature. It is interesting to note here that John Paul II is part of the long Christian tradition, through Pierre Lombard and the Council of Trent, which insists on the importance of consent in marriage; far from leading to a contractualist conception of marriage as an agreement of wills, this element demonstrates, according to him, the natural character of the marital union : « *Marriage is not just any union between human persons that can be formed according to a variety of cultural models. Man and woman experience in themselves the natural inclination to be joined in marriage. But marriage, as St Thomas states so clearly, is natural not because "it results by necessity from natural principles", but because it is a reality 'to which one is inclined by nature, although it comes about through free will'* (Summa Theol., Suppl., q. 41, a. 1, in c.). Any opposition, therefore, between nature and freedom or between nature and culture is extremely misleading » :3 [...] « *Marriage and the family are inseparable, because the masculinity and femininity of the married couple are constitutively open to the gift of children. Without this openness there could not even be a good of the spouses worthy of the name. The essential properties, unity and indissolubility, are also inscribed in the very being of marriage, since in no way are they laws extrinsic to it. Only if marriage is seen as a union involving the person in the realization of his natural relational structure, which remains essentially the same throughout his personal life, can it withstand the changes of life, the efforts and even the crises through which human freedom often passes in living its commitments. But if the marital union is thought to be based only on personal qualities, interests or attractions, it obviously is no longer seen as a natural reality but as a situation dependent on the current perseverance of the will in relation to the continuance of contingent facts and feelings. Certainly, the bond is caused by consent, that is, by an act of the man's and the woman's will, but this consent actualizes a power already existing in the nature of man and woman. Thus, the indissoluble force of the bond itself is based on the natural reality of the union freely established between man and woman » : 5.*

of a genuine ‘other’ to which partners give themselves being reinforced here by the argument of the lack of procreative purpose.

Protecting nature: Church ecological framing on sexuality

Human ecology as intersection of Catholic discourse on technology and sexual issues

The last three decades of the 20th century were marked by an acceleration of secularisation, which had a strong impact on the power of penetration of the Church's discourse. However, ecological concerns, which grew during the same period, provided the Catholic authorities with the basis for a renewal of their arguments. Environmental concerns were integrated from the end of the 1960s (Euvé 2012), with Paul VI warning against “reckless exploitation of nature which risks destroying it” (Paulus VI 1971b). At this stage, however, the link between the ecological crisis and moral discourse remains superficial. Even though Paul VI already speaks of the “moral pollution” (Paul VI 1971, 227) of the media that convey licentious behavioural patterns and even infers the need for a “moral ecology” (Paulus VI 1971a), the link here remains essentially metaphorical. It was not until the second half of John Paul II's pontificate that the themes truly merged into the discourse of “human ecology” (Turina 2013).

This discourse unfolds in two stages (Bertina and Carnac 2013): firstly, it is a matter of affirming that “the seriousness of the ecological situation” is only the revelation of “the depth of man's moral crisis” (Jean-Paul II 1990). This perspective is then mobilised by Benedict XVI in support of the Church's discourse on sexual issues, particularly on the difference between men and women (questioned by the second feminist wave and gender studies), the defence of Christian marriage as the only legitimate conjugal and family form (weakened by the development of free unions, competition between different forms of civil unions and legislation on unions of same-sex couples) and the reproductive purpose of sexuality (called into question by the legalisation of the use of contraception and medically assisted procreation techniques). Cardinal Ratzinger suggested as early as 2001 that “experiences of the abused nature” should make people aware of the need to set limits in the area of civil rights and freedoms (Ratzinger and Flores d'Arcais 2001). Now a pope, he developed this idea during his Christmas greetings in 2008:

The Church] must not only defend land, water and air as gifts of creation belonging to all. She must also protect man against the destruction of himself. It is necessary that there should be something like an ecology of man, understood in a just way. (...) Tropical forests deserve our protection, but man deserves it no less as a creature. (...) It is not an outdated metaphysics, if the Church speaks of the nature of the human being as man and woman and asks that this order of creation be respected. (Benoit XVI 2008).

“Human ecology”, “ecology of man”, “ecology of creation” or “integral ecology”⁵: these rhetorical constructions are based on a sustained amalgam between the two meanings of the word “nature” (Fassin 2010): the nature of ecologists, as “environment”, and the nature of

⁵ The expression “integral ecology”, which appears in an important text of the International Theological Commission (“In Search of a Universal Ethic. A New Look at Natural Law”, 2009, n. 82), is the one favoured by Pope Francis (with several occurrences in *Laudato Si*), who uses it in a perspective that often appears less explicitly conservative than that of his predecessor.

theologians, as “natural law” or “natural right” (*jus naturalis*), i.e., in Thomism, as a divine project. In France, these concepts were particularly successful in “La Manif pour tous” (notably through its leader Tugdual Derville and his “*Courant pour une écologie humaine*” (Human ecology) and the “*Printemps français*” (French Spring), which diverted ecologists' calls for the application of the “precautionary principle” against the wishes of “sorcerer's apprentice”.

In France, mobilisations against gender equality policies - the Taubira law on civil marriage for same-sex couples, reforms of the National Education system, relaxation of access to voluntary interruption of pregnancy - crystallised these developments. Among the “Watchers”, who challenged by singing and commenting on sacred and secular texts (April to July 2013), a small group of students from the École normale supérieure - Gaultier Bès de Berc and Marianne Durano - and journalists - Paul Piccarella and Eugénie Bastié - created the magazine *Limite* to promote “integral ecology”(Balas and Tricou 2019). The publication of Encyclical letter *Laudato Si* (24 May 2015) gives this group an avant-garde status in Catholic discourse on natural law and respect for human nature.

Among the journal's proposals, the recharging of the critique of contraception and abortion operates a synthesis between ecology and Catholic morality (Schlegel 2018). Hesitating at first on the terms, it is finally, rather than “alterfeminism”, “integral feminism” which is chosen by the review to designate a feminism respectful of the “nature of women”(Bastie and Durano 2017, 56–59) . This concept, under an apparent modernity, refers to the theology of Thomas Aquinas and rehabilitates two elements of the feminine “nature”: its “vegetative power” - of giving birth and feeding - and the sensitive power of desiring and being moved (Hartel 1996). Sexuality, for those Catholics who present themselves as ecologists and conservatives (Flipo 2019), is seen through the prism of fulfilment and resistance to the law of the market or the law of the State (S.n. and Hargot 2020)⁶. Abortion and contraception are no longer castigated as moral disorders, but questioned as a lever of emancipation(Durano 2018). The sexologist Thérèse Hargot embodies this discursive reversal. Daughter of Billings Method trainers - who observe cervical mucus to determine the periods during which it is possible to have unfertile sexual relations - she reflects an image of a free and modern woman, sexually fulfilled, evoking pleasure without taboo (Jacob-Hargot 2016; Revue Limite 2017; Fourneraut 2016). She, like philosopher Marianne Durano, argues for a “natural” regulation of fertility based on the observation of the female body, implicitly referring to the theological developments mentioned above, but also to contemporary “environmental concerns”(Levain 2013). It is no coincidence that his first work, *Pour une libération sexuelle véritable* (Jacob-Hargot and Joyeux 2010), is prefaced by Professor Henri Joyeux, the pill slayer, who establishes a link between the contamination of the female body by synthetic hormones and river pollution. In other words, integral feminism is reformulating, in terms in line with current events and contemporary mentalities, the Catholic discourse on sexuality.

At the end of this process, a renewed formulation of Catholic sexual morality is taking shape, which is now presented as an ecology. The ecological crisis and environmental concerns contribute to the success of this new framework, as evidenced by the spread of conservative ecofeminist practices beyond what Y. Raison du Cleuziou calls “observant Catholic circles”(Della Sudda 2020; Raison du Cleuziou 2019).

⁶ “The female cycle reveals the purpose of human sexuality. It is not just for having children. It is not just for pleasure. When the goal of sexuality is simply to meet, to know each other, to say I love you, the logic of profitability and efficiency disappears. Goodbye performance anxiety and guilt of not coming. Goodbye anxiety and shame of not being able to have a child. Because it is relationships that human beings fundamentally need in order to live happily, not satisfaction”.

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