

## Sexuality: The Mysticism and Ethics of a Mediated Return To Immediacy

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In the midst of a chapter explaining the functions of meaning, Lonergan gives us an intriguing parallel between instances of a mediated return to immediacy: "Finally, there is a withdrawal from objectification and a mediated return to immediacy in the mating of lovers and in the prayerful mystic's cloud of unknowing."<sup>1</sup> Lonergan is referring here to a state of consciousness in which a person has ceased the processes of asking and answering questions that are involved in coming to know and is intentionally entering into a state of consciousness that he calls a "mediated return to immediacy." Some Christian couples have said that at times their experience of the "mating of lovers" was not separate from, but was also part of, a prayerful mystical encounter.

This essay explores the question: "If it is possible for the mating of lovers to be a prayerful, mystical experience, *what does this mean?*"

The one question unfolds into three questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the mediated return to immediacy in the mating of lovers?
2. How might the lovers' mediated return to immediacy also be a mystical experience of God's presence, love, and action?
3. How do the couples cooperate with the precept to "be in love" in their mediated return to immediacy?

In my responses to these questions, I start with a few reports on the experiences of varied and selected couples. I propose an account of their mediated immediacy and situate these experiences within the dimension of the mystical. My approach is to use the categories of interiority, the "within" of consciousness, identified and explained by

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 77. Hereafter cited as *Method*.

Bernard Lonergan. These categories are drawn from the processes in human consciousness of knowing, choosing, and loving. Through them I attempt to reconstruct from the perspective of interiority the lover's experience and mediations. The comprehensiveness of Lonergan's thought lends itself to my interdisciplinary use of psychology and mystical spirituality as components of my reconstruction. I conclude by drawing out some of the ethical implications of the mating of lovers that can also be a mystical encounter. Within the context of Christian belief, I understand my work to be that of "faith seeking an explanatory framework" with which to answer these questions.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF COUPLES

I have encountered various brief reports by authors on the mystical experiences of Christian couples within the context of their sexual intimacy. For instance, Morton and Barbara Kelsey wrote, "At times our sexuality in itself can give a taste of wholeness and even of a mystical union with the Divine."<sup>2</sup> Social workers Patrick and Claudette McDonald write of couples who say that they understand their sexual intimacies as a deep form of prayer whereby they come to know the passionate love of God.<sup>3</sup> From Joseph and Lois Bird comes this remark:

When we speak of finding Christ in the marital union, we are talking about a personal encounter. It is an emotional experience of a spiritual nature which accompanies the lovemaking in a mature marriage. ... The more we are present for each other, the more He is present to us.<sup>4</sup>

My own research with committed, Christian couples, both opposite-sex and same-sex, found that they understood the experiences of their sexual practice to be a graced process of transformation in themselves and in their relationship. In one way or another every couple I interviewed told of encountering the presence of the Divine Other in the context of their sexual intimacy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Morton Kelsey and Barbara Kelsey, *Sacrament of Sexuality: The Spirituality and Psychology of Sex* (Warwick, NY: Amity House, 1986), 243.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick J. McDonald and Claudette M. McDonald, *The Soul of a Marriage* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 133.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph and Lois Bird, *Sexual Living: The Experience of Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 199.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Ponder Soto, *Redeeming Eros: A Christian Ethical Spirituality of Sexual Intimacy*, Ph.D. Diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Service, 2003).

**THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A MEDIATED RETURN TO IMMEDIACY  
IN THE MATING OF LOVERS' IMMEDIACY**

During their lovemaking, the lovers quiet the operations of intentional consciousness. It is to the immediacy of experience in Lonergan's strict sense that the lovers return. For Lonergan, the world of immediacy is illustrated by:

the world of the infant ... the world of what is felt, touched, grasped, sucked, seen, heard. It is a world of immediate experience, of the given as given, of image and affect without any perceptible intrusion from insight or concept, reflection or judgment, deliberation or choice. It is the world of pleasure and pain, hunger and thirst, food and drink, rage and satisfaction and sleep.<sup>6</sup>

As people "listen to music, gaze upon a tree or landscape, are stopped by beauty of any kind," just so the lovers in their immediacy are "freeing their sensitivity from the routines imposed by development and allowing it to follow fresher and deeper rhythms of apprehension and feeling."<sup>7</sup>

The lovers' experience in lovemaking is marked by experience in the strict sense. It is of the seen, felt, touched, and heard as it is seen, felt, touched, and heard; it is the experience of the immediacy of the beautiful, pleasurable, intimate, ecstatic, mingled perhaps with sensations of discomfort, fear, anger, and anxiety as lovers feel such things in the context of their lovemaking.

I specifically investigate three types or centers of natural immediacies in the lovers' return via their lovemaking, and one supernatural immediacy. The first is the most primitive kind and is called the "autistic contiguous position." The return to this psychic position ushers in the possibility of the other two immediacies: spontaneous intersubjectivity and self-presence. The fourth center of immediacy is the supernatural gift of the indwelling Christ. His presence in awareness is mystical immediacy. Christ is *mediator* in the couple's objectification of their mystical immediacy and their ensuing graced living, or, life of prayer.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Lonergan, "The Mediation of Christ in Prayer," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1958-1964*, ed. Robert Croken, Frederick Crowe, and Robert Doran, vol. 6, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 182.

## MEDIATION

I take seriously Lonergan's choice of the name "lovers" for those who mate: "lovers" means that they mate because they are in love with each other. Yet their love is inexorably connected with the loving God since their mutual and continuing love is the fruit of being in love with God. Their state of being-in-love is the dimension in our consciousness of Mystery.<sup>9</sup> This is a fifth level of consciousness that is the graced fulfillment of our unrestricted desire to know and love through our attention, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility. Being-in-love is the Divine gift at the summit of our soul.<sup>10</sup>

In the fifth level of consciousness the (quasi-) operator is not the question as in the other levels, but rather involves interpersonal relations and total commitments. Being-in-love is a way of living, of being transformed, and "on that ultimate level we can learn to say with Augustine *amor meus pondus meum*, my being in love is the gravitational field in which I am carried along."<sup>11</sup>

It may be a level or realm that is specifically religious, but it also includes all authentic relationships of love. In their interpersonal relations and loving acts, the lovers' mutual self-mediations influence and effect their transformations. Their loving in an unrestricted manner mediates and transvalues their experiences of lovemaking, and radiates through their relationship with one another and the Divine Other. Religiously converted lovers can make love in such a way that their loving is a mediation of their religious consciousness, and the content of religious consciousness is also mediated through the experiences of immediacy. Both instances of mediation can influence and promote living as a being-in-love.

## IMMEDIACY AND THE AUTISTIC CONTIGUOUS POSITION

The thought of Thomas Ogden, a psychoanalyst who lives and works in private practice in San Francisco, offers some important contributions to our understandings of the world of immediate experience and its mediations in human consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Ogden

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<sup>9</sup> Tad Dunne convincingly argues that Lonergan posited a fifth level of consciousness; see Dunne, "Being in Love," *METHOD: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 13, no. 2 (1995): 161-175. Hereafter cited as "Being in Love."

<sup>10</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 106–107.

<sup>11</sup> Lonergan, "Variations in Fundamental Theology," in *Philosophical and Theological Papers: 1965-1980*, ed. Robert Croken and Robert Doran, vol. 17, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 248.

<sup>12</sup> I wish to thank Jaime R. Madrid for bringing the work of Thomas Ogden to my attention.

follows and expands upon the thought of Melanie Klein.<sup>13</sup> Klein was the first psychologist to recognize in infants what she termed “*positions*”—the earliest patterns of creating and organizing experience psychologically, as well as the earliest patterns of relating to others. She described two fundamental positions—the *paranoid-schizoid position* and the *depressive position*.

Ogden extended Melanie Klein’s discoveries by identifying a prior mode of experiencing (prior in both a temporal and a formal sense). Ogden called his development the *autistic-contiguous mode of experiencing*. I recognize in Ogden’s thought on the autistic-contiguous mode a similarity and even equivalence with Lonergan’s definition of *immediacy*, or the world of immediate experience. Both Ogden and Lonergan are describing the world of experience in the strict sense, and for Ogden that is before the development or use of the world mediated by symbol, language, and culture. As I have noted above, Lonergan refers to the full pallet of sensory experience. In contrast, Ogden has selected two main instances of immediate experience as the foundation of our sensory organization. I draw extensively on the clear exposition by Michael Stadter for the following brief account of Ogden’s autistic-contiguous mode.<sup>14</sup>

The *autistic-contiguous mode* is the most primitive mode of experiencing. Self and world are experienced in a fundamental, pre-symbolic manner through the basic organization of sensory experience. The infant relates to sensory contiguity—surfaces, edges, and rhythmicity. His defenses try to preserve the continuity of bounded surfaces and ordered rhythmicity on which the infant’s sense of self rests. Ogden distinguished two major parts of the autistic contiguous position: dimensions and shapes/objects.

*Autistic-contiguous dimensions.* The major dimensions of the infant’s organization of his/her sensory experiences are *skin surface* and *rhythmicity*. Through the sense of touch at the skin surface the infant experiences the boundary of his/her existence, and these serve as the basis for a cohesive self. Rhythmic activity like rocking or humming serves a similar function in giving the infant the experience of staying together.

The practice of mothers, through the ages, bears witness to Ogden’s theory. Mothers know how to calm and quiet their new babies by swaddling, rocking, and singing to them. Perhaps Ogden came to his insights by observing such a scene.

*Autistic-contiguous shapes and objects.* Two types of experiences make up the autistic-contiguous inner world—*autistic*

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Ogden, *The Primitive Edge of Experience* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1989), 11–14, 18–26.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Stadter, *Object Relations Brief Therapy: The Therapeutic Relationship in Short-Term Work* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), 38.

*shapes and autistic objects.* Autistic shapes are sensations of soft objects such as padded chairs, blankets, or beds, on which the infant's body is able to make impressions. Connection with autistic shapes tends to give the infant a sense of security, connectedness, and comfort. Autistic objects are sensations of things that are hard and have edges, such as walls, desks, and crib railings. Connection with autistic objects provides a sense of a protective armor, or separateness and rigidity.

These internal shapes and objects of the autistic-contiguous mode are not what we typically think of as constituting the inner world, but they are an important part of it. It is not the autistic shape or object that is taken in but the experience, the immediacy of the tactile sensation and the experience of the self being defined by coming up against it. Imagining one's bare bottom suddenly seated upon a cold metal stool would convey a sense of this experience of immediacy.

#### **MEDIATION IN THE AUTISTIC-CONTIGUOUS POSITION**

Psychological change can occur in the autistic-contiguous position. The infant simply imitates another person and changes in that way. "In imitation, the qualities of the external object are felt to alter one's surface, thus allowing one to be 'shaped by' or to 'carry attributes of the object.'"<sup>15</sup>

None of the three modes identified by Kline and Ogden exists in isolation. Once they appear, they remain possible modes of experiencing and patterning. We do not outgrow them, nor do we leave them behind. As adults we continue to move among them. All are stances from which we deal with the world; each has its assets and liabilities.

Without much difficulty we can identify those aspects of the autistic contiguous position that are summoned, reenacted, and foregrounded during lovemaking: the repeated sense of touch at the skin surface and rhythmicity, and contact with hard and soft objects. All of these experiences may enable a return to immediacy. This "most primitive mode of experiencing" can provide the lovers during their lovemaking with a sense of staying-together, bestowing comfort, and reinforcing personal boundaries that serve as the foundation for a cohesive sense of self.

Ogden's account of immediacy and psychic development and the lovers likely return to this state of consciousness help to explain what some lovers say about their lovemaking: they describe the experience as "centering," "connecting me to myself," "grounding," and as producing a "feeling of wholeness." When such effects take

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Ogden, *Subjects of Analysis* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994), 141.

place the lovers' return to immediacy mediates a psychological change, a new patterning, and a new experiential integration of the lovers.

#### IMMEDIACY AND SPONTANEOUS INTERSUBJECTIVITY

In their lovemaking the lovers can experience another kind of immediacy: themselves as a "we" or "we-ness." Lonergan's notion of "spontaneous intersubjectivity" involves a primal and pre-reflective experience of "we-ness."

Prior to the "we" that results from the mutual love of an "I" and a "thou," there is the earlier "we" that precedes the distinction of subjects and survives its oblivion. ... It is as if "we" were members of one another prior to our distinctions of each from the others.<sup>16</sup>

I think that spontaneous intersubjectivity feels like being connected to another, of being at-one-with the whole that induces a sense of personal wholeness. One author describes the experience of we-ness or wholeness in the context of lovemaking as being

rent open; I am cleaved/joined not only to my partner, but to everything, everything-as-my-beloved (or vice versa), who has also become me. The puny walls of my tiny separate personhood either drop so that I-you-he-she-we-they-it are one or they build up so thoroughly that all/me is one.<sup>17</sup>

The experience of spontaneous intersubjectivity is a likely component in the unitative powers of sexual intimacy and a basis for what is commonly referred to as a couple's bond.

#### MEDIATION IN SPONTANEOUS INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Lovers are no longer infants having the initial experiences and structuring of immediacy. Consequently they enter the experience of we-ness with the totality of their histories and prior meanings. Their lives as knowers, choosers, and lovers are now manifested within the fullness of a "we" consciousness. Their spontaneous intersubjectivity includes the Divine presence as the ground of each person's being. This is a rich mix of intersubjectivity that enfolds the meanings of their relationship from and with the Divine Other.

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<sup>16</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Mary D. Pellauer, "The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality," in *Sexuality: A Reader*, ed. Karen Lebacqz, with David Sinacore-Guinn (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 17.

As authentic lovers their mutual commitment would be one such meaning. The displacement inwards—their conscious intention of commitment—gives rise to a displacement outwards—the “we” of human community.<sup>18</sup> Yet the basis of community, Lonergan wrote, is not an idea, but spontaneous intersubjectivity.<sup>19</sup> In the state of we-ness then, the lovers bring to the foreground the roots of their lovers’ community and the fruit of their commitment. The lovers’ bond is strengthened by their experience of spontaneous intersubjectivity; relived, it is refreshed and vital.

The immediacies of physical pleasure and the psychological state of we-ness become contiguous and simultaneous within their intersubjectivity. The bond itself takes on the coloration of lovemaking—pleasure, delight, comfort, resolution of conflict—and becomes the communal “place” where they receive the integrative benefits of the autistic-contiguous position. Their community, their “we-ness,” is baptized by their multi-faceted love that intends care, respect, mutuality, loyalty, trust, and other qualities of being-in-love. This enriched intersubjectivity means a cumulative strengthening of their bond that is a transformation for the lovers and their relationship.

### **THE MYSTICISM OF A MEDIATED RETURN TO IMMEDIACY IN THE MATING OF LOVERS**

#### **THE IMMEDIACY OF SELF-PRESENCE**

The immediacies of the autistic-contiguous position and spontaneous intersubjectivity during lovemaking can be overlaid by another immediacy: the experience of the immediacy of consciousness. The center of immediacy in the subject is the self-presence of the subject, consciousness-as-consciousness, or the subject-as-subject.<sup>20</sup> It is the awareness of self by the person to himself or herself. The self-presence of the subject does not come to awareness through an act of introspection, but can come through a heightening of the intensity of the activities of consciousness.<sup>21</sup> For instance, as I struggle to

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<sup>18</sup> Lonergan, “Mediation,” 170.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, vol. 3, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 237. Hereafter cited as *Insight*.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Frohlich, *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic: A Study of Teresa of Avila’s Interior Castle*, vol. 83, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1993), 45-47. Hereafter cited as *Mystic*.

<sup>21</sup> Lonergan repeatedly speaks of the difficulty of “heightening one’s consciousness” which is “a matter not of inward inspection but of inquiry,



understand and present this material, I have an enhanced awareness of myself while I do this. Yet it is not only in the cognitional acts of knowing that one may have the awareness and immediacy of self-presence. The experience of self-presence is also manifested in acts of loving, specifically, lovemaking.

The lovers usually approach their lovemaking with prior cognitional acts of affirming the value of one another. They have suspended the conscious operations of asking and answering questions and instead, they are responding to, or “doing” their previous reasoning. Then the acts of lovemaking become valuing-as-praxis. In their lover’s praxis each person’s self-presence becomes increasingly acute as the intensity of the lovemaking increases; self-presence is heightened in the activity of lovemaking. Since self-presence is a psychological phenomenon from “below upwards” that “can be partly ‘acquired’ through practices of meditation and concentration,”<sup>22</sup> the lovers’ psychological state of self-presence and spontaneous intersubjectivity positions them for the possibility of mystical experience. Both “moments” of self-presence and spontaneous intersubjectivity open to (perhaps “interface with”) the presence of the transcendent ground of consciousness.

#### **BROAD AND NARROW SENSE OF MYSTICISM**

In her work on the intersubjectivity of the mystic Mary Frohlich uses James Price’s definition of mystical experience as “the vital union of an individual’s consciousness-as-consciousness with its conscious ground”<sup>23</sup> This definition leads Frohlich to the conclusion that the experience is potentially open to everyone since consciousness-as-consciousness and the ground of consciousness are always there, by definition.

Frohlich thinks that many experiences contain at least a minimal degree of mysticism, making the likelihood of the lovers’ mystical experiences seem less improbable or rare.

Mystical experiences can and do happen to people who have no expectations of them, make no preparations for them, and do little or nothing in response to them. These experiences can nevertheless be “transforming” to the degree that they effect a conscious or unconscious shift in the individual’s

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enlarged interest, discernment, comparison, distinction, identification, naming.” Lonergan, *Method*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Frohlich, *Mystic*, 134.

<sup>23</sup> James R. Price, “Lonergan and the Foundation of a Contemporary Mystical Theology,” in *Lonergan Workshop*, vol. 5 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 188. Cited in Frohlich, *Mystic*, 125.

understandings, judgments, and decisions.<sup>24</sup>

Frohlich distinguishes mystical experience into the *broad* and *narrow* sense. In accord with her statement above, mystical experience occurs in the *broad sense* whenever there is any mediation of the transcendent ground. Mystical experience begins in the *narrow sense* with the preliminary form of contemplation in which there is an experience of the self-presence of the subject-as-subject without the operations of consciousness. This state is “spiritual access” to true mystical experience in which the subject undergoes the transformation that is a “reconfiguring of the operations of consciousness so that they no longer mediate experience in the ordinary intentional manner, but instead are themselves a direct mediation of the transcendent ground of consciousness.”<sup>25</sup> The narrow sense of mysticism and mystical transformation occur when “mystical intersubjectivity—the vital sense of one’s own ground as in union with divine consciousness—become one’s reality.”<sup>26</sup>

At the very least it seems fair to say that the couples reporting experiences of God’s presence in their lovemaking are having mystical experiences in the broad sense. To determine if these experiences are mystical in the narrow sense would require more information from couples than we presently have. However, by comparing the mating of lovers with contemplative prayer, we can investigate, from a theoretical stance, the possibility of a narrow kind of mystical experience in lovemaking.

#### LOVERS, CONTEMPLATION, AND MYSTICISM

The same positioning for mystical experience in the narrow sense exists in both contemplative prayer and the mating of lovers. Frohlich describes the contemplative who contemplates from within a tradition of contemplation, who learns how to steady and stabilize

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Frohlich, *Mystic*, 127. Frohlich’s use of the phrase “direct mediations” is something of a contradiction. Frohlich is saying something like the “immediate mediated.” The source and the mediation have been conflated. The key, I think, to the apparent contradiction is the Divine transformation of the person and her consciousness. This is the transformation spoken of by John of the Cross by which the soul’s natural “substantial” union with God—the ground of consciousness—has become a ‘supernatural’ union of likeness. See *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. II, Ch. 5 no. 1-11. The mystic’s operations of consciousness are so transformed that “it is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me.” This is how I think Frohlich means a “direct mediation of the transcendent ground of consciousness.” The person is mediating a self that is now Divine-self.

<sup>26</sup> Frohlich, *Mystic*, 128.

her (or his) self-presence, and interprets this experience in the realm of transcendence.<sup>27</sup> The contemplative as well as the lovers deliberately suspend their cognitive faculties and return to the immediacy of self-presence with an intention to surrender to the indwelling Divine presence.<sup>28</sup> The lovers' surrender is doubled: to the Divine Other mediated through the beloved other.

For both contemplatives and lovers the means of movement between the broad and narrow sense of mysticism is that of openness; it forms the "bridge" between the broad and narrow sense of mystical experience.<sup>29</sup> Openness is the supernatural openness that parts the sea of self-presence into the transcendent promised land.<sup>30</sup> Or, as Lonergan writes, "openness as gift is the self entering into personal relationship with God."<sup>31</sup> The grace, the sheer gift of openness is the way, then, in both contemplative prayer and lovemaking, from the immediacy of self-presence to the transcendent ground of consciousness and thus to the possibility of a mystical union of Divine and human consciousness.

The distinction between the solitary prayer of contemplation and that of lovers is that the self-presence of the lovers is mutually self-mediated and involves physical sexual intimacy, but the contemplative practice of the solitary does not. With both the solitary and lovers the *dynamic* of entering contemplative prayer is the same—a steadying of the state of the immediacy of the subject-as-subject who then receives the gift of openness and resting in God. But for the couple, the *process* of arriving at this state includes the lively participation of the beloved in the activities of the body, psyche, and spirit that constitute lovemaking. If mystical union occurs during contemplation, then the intersubjectivity in the solitary is between the subject and the Divine other, while in the lovers it is among the subject, the beloved other, and the Divine other. The basic structure of solitary contemplation is isomorphic with the structure of conjugal prayer in the mating of lovers; both possess the conditions for mystical experience in the narrow sense.

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<sup>27</sup> Frohlich, *Mystic*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (New York: The Continuum Pub. Co. 1994), 15.

<sup>29</sup> Frohlich, *Mystic*, 135.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Rahner thinks that because the transcendental nature of humans is always fashioned by God's self-communication, every act of the suspension of the faculties is always elevated by grace. "Mystical Experience and Mystical Theology," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 17 (London: Dartman, Longman & Todd, 1981), 97.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Lonergan, "Openness and Religious Experience," in *Collection*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert Doran, vol. 4, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 187.

### THE ETHICS OF A MEDIATED RETURN TO IMMEDIACY IN THE MATING OF LOVERS

The ethics of the lovers' mystical experience is a question of their response to the loving presence of God within their lovemaking. What is the further good they should seek, and how do they cooperate with the precept to "be in love?" These are initial questions I address in this preliminary exploration of an ethics of mysticism for lovers. But first, allow me to propose an all-encompassing answer: lovers are to seek God above all else. Their relationship and their lovemaking are means to grow in the love of God and in the love of neighbor for the love of God, and as such, they are subject to the demands of the kingdom. Otherwise their mating becomes a substitute, a "distraction," as Paul writes (1 Cor. 7:32-35), from their complete self-transcendence that finds its fulfillment in God alone.<sup>32</sup>

In mystical union, God may effect inner transformations immediately, but the ongoing invitation is to "a living, a developing, a growing" that "is the mediation of what is immediate in us."<sup>33</sup> To say this in several ways, the lovers' most authentic response to their mystical experiences—broad or narrow—is to join the field of love through their loving,<sup>34</sup> to gradually make their home in the dynamic state of being-in-love, to live out of fifth level consciousness, to mediate the immediacy of the indwelling Christ through a life of prayer. This is a dynamic process that is already urged upon the lovers through the immediacies of their lovemaking. In an early article Lonergan identified the process that goes from "erôs to friendship, and from friendship to a special order of charity."<sup>35</sup> My research found that the couples' transformations generally proceeded along this trajectory. I use the progression—eros to friendship to a special order of charity—to classify their developments. Their advances are in the form of religious, moral, and affective conversions that occur and are expressed in the mode of sexual intimacy. Their developments do not mean that sexual intimacy is authentic only when serious and solemn—any more than the blessing of a meal means there must be no joy or laughter at the table.

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<sup>32</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 111.

<sup>33</sup> Lonergan, "Mediation," 179.

<sup>34</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 290.

<sup>35</sup> Lonergan, "Finality, Love, Marriage," *Collection*, 32. In this quotation, Lonergan is summarizing his understanding of the 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, the encyclical which recognized the "finalistic drive" toward Christian perfection in the sacrament of marriage and thereby prompted Lonergan to write the article on the vertical finality of marriage.

## EROS TO FRIENDSHIP

*Commitment.* A first form of moral conversion is to two kinds of commitments: one provides a protective and nurturing context for the lovers, and the other protects their lovemaking, which in turn strengthens their friendship. The first, between the lovers themselves, recognizes the value and promise of their love. They establish their love through its avowal in their mutual commitment. It provides a means of mutual mediation, promoting trust through pledged loyalty.

The second commitment is to a practice of lovemaking. Mutual life-long commitment, such as that in marriage, is also an assurance that there will be time enough for the development of the couple's manifestation of their mutual love through lovemaking. A person's genital (physical) prime is distinct from a person's potential for the development of a fully intersubjective sexual prime. The latter is reached through personal maturation, usually later in life.<sup>36</sup> Many couples give up on their sexual relationship when the desires of physical prime fade and are overwhelmed by the stresses of life.<sup>37</sup> When this happens their friendship is deprived of the contributions that could or should come from lovemaking.

*Lovemaking and friendship.* Friendship, Lonergan writes, is a sublation of eros toward the lovers' special order of charity. And friendship, marital researcher John Gottman discovered, is the optimal context for sexual intimacy.<sup>38</sup> I find that the dynamic works both ways: sexual intimacy is an antidote and corrective to the contempt, criticism, and negative physiological responses that Gottman found can destroy a couple's friendship and the marital relationship.<sup>39</sup> The realization by the lovers of the value of their sexual intimacy for its role in supporting their friendship, their "we-ness," is also a call for the lovers' commitment to a sexual practice that suits their particular time of life. In whatever form, it should be given the same level of priority and importance as other central spiritual practices.

To illustrate: two couples thought to remedy the stagnation in their lovemaking by making love every night, one for a year, the other for 101 nights. Both couples reported positive changes to their marital relationship. One wife said, "It required a daily kindness and

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<sup>36</sup> In marital therapist David Schnarch's humorous phrasing, "Cellulite and sexual potential are highly correlated." *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), 78-79.

<sup>37</sup> Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995), 194.

<sup>38</sup> John Gottman with Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>39</sup> Gottman, *Seven Principles*, 27-34, *passim*.

forgiveness, and not being cranky or snarky, that I don't think either of us had experienced before." And, "We were so aware of wherever the other person was mentally and emotionally and physically." One husband wrote, "There's much less of a sense of having to perform. After one hundred days, that kind of melted away." The other man noticed that after their marathon lovemaking, it later became more spontaneous and that "you don't go back to that always gaming for it and always trying to get out of it."<sup>40</sup> The point is not to recommend a similar marathon, but to appreciate the powerful role lovemaking plays in deepening friendship and the need for a commitment—in whatever form—to its practice.

The same-sex partners Dan and Jack and Bob and Ken told how they insisted upon the need to have a friendship in place before engaging in more explicitly sexual behavior with one another. Bob and Ken decided to have, in Bob's words, "an old fashioned courtship" before they became sexually intimate. Dan and Ken continued on this theme:

Dan: It's very easy to get the cart before the horse. Understandable how it happens. And I've done it—that going and finding sexual satisfaction and thinking that that's emotional satisfaction. This is not unique to gays. I think it's true with heterosexuals as well. [If] a relationship is built upon a sexual, on sexual intimacy, [it] falls apart later on. ... We just wanted to be friends.

Ken: Oh, absolutely. That was the real key...

Overall, my interview material showed that the trajectory of sex is toward a flowering of eros into the spirituality of intimate relationships through the creation of a friendship.

*From control to concern.* The transformation of eros into friendship and into friendship's charity means another kind of self-transcendence that is radical enough to be identified as a moral conversion. Through it the roots of sexual desire are transposed from an objectifying/power/control mode to the empathic/love mode.<sup>41</sup> In the empathic/love mode, the couple seeks and practices mutuality; they respond to each other as a subject, not as an object. Responsibility, concern, and caring become the central moral values,

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<sup>40</sup> Ralph Gardner Jr., "Yes Dear, Tonight Again," *The New York Times*, July 8, 2008, Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/08/fashion/08nights.html?pagewanted=1>

<sup>41</sup> Judith Jordan, "Clarity in Connection: Empathic Knowing, Desire, and Sexuality," in *Women's Growth in Diversity: More Writings from the Stone Center*, ed. Judith V. Jordan (New York & London: Guilford Press, 1997), 54-57, and *passim*.

rather than the control, individual autonomy, competitiveness, and possessiveness that are emphasized in the objectifying/power/control mode.<sup>42</sup>

One respondent, Wayne, offered the story of discovering and subsequently shifting his sexual roots. Wayne said that he would insist on having sexual relations with his wife whenever he wanted. He eventually realized that by demanding sex from his wife he “shut her down,” and found that his own sexual pleasure did not have much meaning; it was not satisfying unless there was a sense of “we” in their lovemaking. Wayne’s conversion moved him through a focus on seeking the gratification of his sexual urges to the true value of engaging his wife as a subject with unique needs and desires that could be blended with his into a “we.”<sup>43</sup>

In a similar vein, Ken and Bob spoke of the tenderness in their intimacies that means learning patience and, “caring for the other person’s needs ahead of your own,” and with it, “the love element gets stronger and stronger.” Both male same-sex couples agreed that for a man, showing concern for his partner—male or female—is considered unacceptable by our culture. The value they found in relating to each other as subjects not objects prompted Bob to say, “We’re *gay*, okay, fine. Any other labels you attach to us are meaningless at this point. I don’t care what you say about me just because I want to be tender to Ken. I don’t care what society says.”

*Vulnerability.* Becoming more vulnerable is a kind of affective conversion that accompanies the movement from control to concern, and perhaps is its precondition. The lovers’ increasing vulnerability is a process of “letting down one’s defenses, of entrusting oneself to another.”<sup>44</sup> The state of vulnerability is a midwife to the gift of openness that means entering into a relationship with God, and in this discussion, a relationship with God mediated through the beloved. Through it the lovers become supple and sensitive to each other and to the influence of the Divine other. For the lovers it means

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<sup>42</sup> Carol Gilligan, *A Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), cited in Jordan, *ibid.*, 55.

<sup>43</sup> The valuing does not preclude, but rather enhances, the pleasure and satisfaction of lovemaking. Aquinas states that “some say Adam’s and Eve’s sexual pleasure would have been less or nonexistent *in statu innocentiae* [in the state of innocence, i.e., prior to the fall].” He disagrees with that opinion. It is his contention that *in statu innocentiae* sexual pleasure would have been greater for Adam and Eve because of their inner coherence and integrity (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 98, art. 2).

<sup>44</sup> Lonergan, “Mediation,” 174. Lonergan’s words cited here concern the self-commitment and self-discovery of an existential decision. The reference has an interesting connection to this work: the editors tell us in n.19 that this quotation and the paragraph that follows owes much to Lonergan’s 1943 article “Love, Finality, Marriage,” in *Collection*, 17-52, at 31-32.

an inner disposition toward one's self and the other that releases each person's liberty and nudges them toward self-revelation, trust, and cooperation. In being vulnerable, the lovers acknowledge neediness, unfulfilled desires, and a yearning for connection. Will noted that,

Intimacy means a tremendous vulnerability. Many people have been burned and so they erect walls because they do not want to take the chance. People who risk intimacy appropriately are usually the ones who get a tremendous pay-off. But it is always a risk because there is always this vulnerability that is involved in intimacy.

Dan and Jack and Bob and Ken started from a place of great vulnerability. Their journey to a still deeper vulnerability was the acceptance of their homosexuality as a gift and an appropriation of its benefits for themselves and their relationship with God. They have an understanding that their homosexuality gives them the ability and the freedom to go beyond male stereotypes and to access and express the feminine side in their spirituality, relationships, and sexual intimacy.

Without risking vulnerability, true mutuality is impossible. The need for mutuality between lovers is often overlooked when the emphasis is heavily on the self-gift of one to the other. An openness to receive the gift of the other requires an equal, if not greater, measure of generosity and humility. As Maria discovered, "in the vulnerability is a holiness because it's letting go and in that delight, feeling something that one cannot bring to one's self."

*Symbols.* The lovers' vulnerability is revealed in part by withdrawing from the objectifying/power/control mode. Those attitudes and behaviors are antithetical to it. But there is a supplementary need for the lovers to recognize and appropriate their sexual feelings and the symbols that evoke them.<sup>45</sup> Their transformation involves a stripping, a letting go of "macho" or "seductress" psychic images that originate, in Frank's words, from "this consumer culture that is the larger story in our life." These cultural overlays portray sexual activity as something impure, a bargaining chip, reserved for the physically beautiful, and unrelated to a life of faith; sexual activity is substituted for other kinds of relational intimacy. Freedom from these distortions means allowing, as Frank said, the self-exposure where we "really encounter the image of God, where we're not our own aggrandizements and our poverty is beautiful ... to experience that on a physical level, on a level of flesh and blood."

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<sup>45</sup> Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 8-9, 42-63, 75.



With a little effort, the couple can discover the presence of other symbols in their lives that image their desire to truly value each other and express their valuation by making love. With loving as the supreme illustration, Lonergan suggests just such a possibility of reinforcing “feelings so deep and strong ... that they ... shape one’s horizon, direct one’s life.”<sup>46</sup> When the couple’s mating becomes a symbol of their love and commitment, when it functions as a symbol by overwhelming the tensions and conflicts of their life together,<sup>47</sup> then their “mind and body, mind and heart, heart and body communicate.”<sup>48</sup> Thus their authentic intentions and meanings, condensed into a symbol and accompanied by the emotional charge of lovemaking are “circulated” and deepened throughout the dimensions of their humanity.

#### A SPECIAL ORDER OF CHARITY

The trajectory within human sexuality that Lonergan identified potentially goes from “eros to friendship, and from friendship to a special order of charity.” All of the reports from couples that I mentioned manifest such an orientation. It is a vector within the lovers’ mating that urges the couple toward the ultimate horizon, and orders their spirit and actions by the precept to “be in love.” I venture to call the lovers’ special order of charity *erotic charity* due to its function of enlisting the energy and the drive of eros into the “process of development through conjugal love to the very summit of Christian perfection.”<sup>49</sup>

A clue that the journey from eros to erotic charity is underway appears when the couple’s lovemaking takes on new qualities and dimensions as a symbol. When their sexual intimacy grows into a fuller expression of charity, there is an attendant change in its representation and its power to diffuse the lovers’ deeper emotions and meanings. After their lovemaking underwent a period of seasoning, respondents said that simple gestures like a gaze across the table or a pat on the rear could evoke—symbol-like—some of the feelings and meanings that were born out of their sexual intimacy. Liz spoke of how she and her partner April remain sexually intimate

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<sup>46</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 32.

<sup>47</sup> In *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson writes how lovemaking functions as a symbol to reconcile tensions and conflicts: “The total fact of finding, via the climactic turmoil of the orgasm, a supreme experience of the mutual regulation of two beings in some way takes the edge off the hostilities and potential rages caused by the oppositeness of male and female, of fact and fancy, of love and hate. Satisfactory sexual relations make sex less obsessive, overcompensation less necessary, sadistic controls superfluous.” *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.) (New York: Norton & Co., 1950 [reprint 1993]), 265.

<sup>48</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Lonergan, “Love, Finality, Marriage,” 28.

in various ways such as hand-holding or touching April's back: "All of those things to me are sexual intimacy. And so if we're in a place where we don't have sex defined as orgasmic sex, for a while, that's okay, because we're still sexually intimate."

The expanded power of their lovemaking's image to transcend its original context enhances the affect of their daily lives. This now transformed and mobile symbol of their sexual intimacies carries into the lover's everyday living some of the meanings they find in their lovemaking.

*Transcendent exigence.* The dynamism of the transcendent exigence within human consciousness is the force and orientation of the trajectory toward the "summit of Christian perfection." The fulfillment of the transcendent exigence for the lovers—and for all—is being in love, and with a love that has the character of ultimacy.<sup>50</sup> It operates to organize and order all the activities of the lovers; it summons development in every dimension of their humanity, and it inserts the lovers into the movement of creation toward union with the Creator. The transcendent exigence urges lovers to be attentive and responsive to "the solicitation of the infinite"<sup>51</sup> within their desire.

*Self-love.* A foundational mode of affective and intellectual conversion is to authentic love of one's self. Repeated experiences of God's unconditional love, mediated through the beloved and lovemaking, can become the fulfillment of the conditions that establish self-valuing. Dunne writes that the experience of God's love is often a judgment of faith.<sup>52</sup> The experience and its affirmation in consciousness dries up all relevant questions regarding his or her self-worth, and prompts the insight and judgment that one is truly loved by God. In his article "Sexuality," in the *New Catholic Dictionary of Spirituality*, Dick Westley describes lovemaking as an experience of self-valuing where

One feels in solidarity with the beneficent Presence that transcends and yet dwells in our world. One feels gifted and graced. One, for however briefly, feels no need to dominate, no

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<sup>50</sup> Lonergan, *Method*, 105. Frohlich writes that "The transcendent exigence is fundamentally a quest for love." *Mystic*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Sebastian Moore, O.S.B., "The Universe at Prayer: What Does It Mean To Pray?," in *A Hunger for God: Ten Approaches to Prayer*, ed. William A. Barry, S.J. and Kerry A. Maloney (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1991), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Dunne, "Being in Love," 170-171.

need to assert oneself, no need to manipulate, so delicious is the taste of being and of being loved.<sup>53</sup>

The most common religious understanding of their lovemaking among my interview couples is that God is loving each through the other.

*Integration.* As a kind of religious conversion, the lovers' trajectory led to their fuller integration as sexual beings and the incorporation of their lovemaking into the horizon of their Christian faith. It was a process that required the accommodation of "bringing God into the bedroom." Many couples have a need to realign their religious beliefs with their sexual experiences. They must remediate their perceived, if mistaken, ideas about the Christian Church's negative stance toward sex. Or, they need to recognize and reverence the holiness of sexuality and its potential for self-transcendence and transformation.

The couples I spoke with remediated the understanding of their sexual intimacy vis-à-vis their image and understanding of God. For them, God grew "larger" as a God of love who could embrace their sexual desire and intimacies and became more immanent within their friendship and lovemaking. This deepening of their religious conversion often came with much soul-searching. Charlie's wholeness was achieved in the struggle for an integration of his sexual experience that embraced his faith. He said "not until I was home in my heart sexually and found out how wonderful it can be, did I have reconciliation with the Church and with my own sexuality." Because it was her church's teaching, Annette said she believed in her head, but not wholeheartedly, that sex with her husband was good. Her integration of head with heart took place over several decades and now means a realization that "God delights in our lovemaking."

To find some answers, Michael undertook "an extensive study" of Christian beliefs concerning homosexuality. His intellectual quest included not reading any gay or lesbian authors who might be "defending their cause because they wanted their answer to be positive."

During the course of his study, Michael said he "would be OK and thirty minutes later I was a basket case again." He would call his partner and say, "We have to break up, it's all over. I'm not OK with this." Then he would return to retrace the work he had done "and wrangle through it again." At the end of his investigation into homosexuality Michael said,

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<sup>53</sup> Dick Westley, "Sexuality," in *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 877-883.

I knew that I knew that I knew. I've never had one second of backing up since that time... I knew that I was accepted by God. I knew what the passages in the Bible meant and how to understand them historically, and textually, and contextually—and in the whole experience, as opposed to isolated passages. And so that was my greatest knowing ... They don't condemn me and they don't condemn other people who have the [same-sex] attraction. And so when I got it, I got it.

All of the interview couples showed a determination to discover that religious horizon spacious enough to hold them as a sexually intimate couple. This, in spite of the fact that our most pervasive cultural models obscure at best, and at worst, negate or denigrate the relationship between our sexuality and our quest for the Transcendent. What models of holy, mutual, committed, respectful, joyful, responsible and passionate sexual intimacy are offered? Even the churches are mostly silent. Yet these couples knew, by the true north of the transcendent exigence, that the vastness of an ultimate horizon is the only suitable and sustainable atmosphere for their lovemaking.

*Family and ministry.* The effects of the couple's lovemaking are pervasive, benefiting their children and their wider families. The living bond that the couple creates is their first fecundity and ongoing responsibility. It is the environment, the psychological and spiritual nest, into which their children are born and nourished. The dynamic is simple: our loving sexual activity influences and enhances our ability to lovingly care for others.<sup>54</sup> We cannot give what we have not first been given, and lovemaking is a way to receive the graces that we can then share.

My interviews confirm an outward flow of conjugal grace—all the couples, opposite-sex and same-sex, were involved in various forms of church or community work. The graces of their lovemaking extend beyond the confines of their home to help empower their ministry. Kevin Regan makes this point in his article "The Mystical Character of Conjugal Love." He connects the experience of spousal and divine union in lovemaking to Christian service. Regan says that the love he gives and receives with his wife and God motivates him to share with others.<sup>55</sup>

Sexual intimacy, qua intimate, demands that lovers gradually become mutually attentive, grateful, just, forgiving, respectful, caring, trusting, open, responsible, or simply said—in love. They

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday Life* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), 130.

<sup>55</sup> Kevin Regan, "The Mystical Character of Conjugal Love," *Spiritual Life: A Quarterly of Contemporary Spirituality* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1992), 33-40.

become holier as they become better lovers. The development of their sexual immediacies into prayerful living becomes an interpretive key for evaluating other experiences: revelatory of the Transcendent, constitutive of virtue, their lovemaking provides a concrete meaning for the human truly good.

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