

BOOK REVIEW

John F. Perito MD, 2008: *Adolescent Sexuality. Too Much Too Soon. Spiritual and Sexual Guidance for Parents.* American Book Publishing, Salt Lake City, UT 84117-720. Available from Catholic Bookshop Canberra Ph (02) 6201 9888.

I LOVE THE story of the abbot whose monastery was slowly but surely losing all signs of life. In desperation he journeyed to the guru to seek counsel. The pleading woes of the abbot over, the wise man reflected and simply said ‘one of you is the messiah’. With those few words the world of the abbot was transformed and when back at the monastery he shared them with his fellow monks the whole life and style of the monastery changed too.

The genius of the prophet was to re-focus their attention to the fact that all that they sought was embedded in relationships. How easy it is for us to forget that clear scriptural direction given in phrases such as ‘love one another as I have loved you’ or ‘if we do not love our neighbour who we see, how can we claim to love the God we do not see’ and as often as we do it to one of the least of our brethren, we do it to all. The importance of relationships for life both within us and between us is obvious.

While we may bemoan the many glaring failures in relationships that mar our current human landscape, it is heartening to note that amongst the young, relationships are of the utmost interest and concern; the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of them is all important. The problem is not the lack of interest rather it is a lack of understanding and appreciation that permeates our culture. In a word, we who are called to be the bearers of wisdom, along with our youth are in dire need of education and formation concerning relationships and that means love. When the Beatles in June 1967 launched their

hit song ‘All you Need Is Love’, they had it right and it is still right! When we open out the mystery further and claim that relationships which are forged in and through love are moved by possibly the strongest of all our God given drives we are beginning to draw an exciting picture. When we name that all important drive as our sexuality, we are starting to see some shape forming in a tantalising confusion around which too many of us can say little or nothing of worth.

It is against the above background that modern prophets within our Catholic Tradition such the English psychiatrist Dr Jack Dominion have reflected long and desperately on relationships under headings such as marriage, sex and love. From another continent the American Jesuit priest psychiatrist James J. Gill spoke to us of ‘the great gaps and distortions in people’s minds around sexuality’. He went on to say, ‘So many are victims of ignorance and dysfunctional myths that need not exist; ... these distortions and ‘ignorances’ are causing great pain and awful behaviour and are a burden to the Church in its mission to evangelize’.

Recently another voice joined the chorus in the person of Dr John E. Perito, a man who is at the same time a committed Catholic, a spouse, a parent and grandparent and a medical psychiatrist who specializes in the knowledge of human nature and behaviour.

There are those, even in high places in our Catholic community who think that we can be immune from the present challenges that arise from these basic areas of relationships, love

and sexuality. For such as these Perito's first book in 2003 was titled *Contemporary Catholic Sexuality—What is Taught and What is Practised* and it firmly places our contemporary Church within 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age,' If we were not aware of it before, in that work we discover that many Catholics, in good faith, are unable to accept the Church's current teachings on many topics central to relationships, love and sex and I suspect that it is this fact more than any other that is eating away at our Church's wellbeing and mission. Whatever we might do and however we might do it, if we are not examining and addressing these questions we are playing outside the main game and doing no more than 'playing' if even we can be said to be doing that.

Traditionally prophets speak in poetic terms and inspire rather than instruct mechanically. Aware of this we cannot expect that they will have all the answers or meet all the objections but if we do disregard them, we do so at our peril.

Towards the end of 2008 John Perito published a long awaited second book entitled *Adolescent Sexuality. Too Much Too Soon. Spiritual and Sexual Guidance for Parents*. When it comes to topics such as this most of us need what we might describe as permission to discuss and a language to capture and deal with the matters that are involved. One need only reflect on the difficulty parents still face in speaking amongst themselves or with their children about something as basic as masturbation, fantasies, sexual diseases, sin and conscience. John Perito goes a long way in these directions as he writes for both parents and adolescents and he covers most, if not all questions they might have. For both his aim is to help them become both committed lovers and effective parents. His clear purpose is to educate, not simply to indoctrinate or train; and for him education is an ongoing process leading to lively development and freedom.

Along with all his competent contempo-

raries Perito situates sexuality within the context of love and love in the context of relationships; making love is synonymous with making a relationship. At that initial point he locates his criteria for the extensive discernment that has to be made concerning this integral part of our lives. He identifies himself clearly with Christ whom scripture proclaims as coming that we might have life and have it to the full. [John 10.10.] For Perito things are promoted or argued against depending on how they promote relationships and well-being.

Would that it were so simple! Unfortunately, as we have already noted, sexuality, doubtless due to its delicate nature has attracted to itself a plethora of taboos and dysfunctional myths over the years. For various reasons many of these no longer make sense or at least not in the same way now that sciences such as biology and scriptural theology have come of age. One needs only to note the many ritual purity laws which played a part in an earlier dispensation but no longer in the dispensation given by Christ, and yet many want to persist in retaining them! Some may look for some inherent value in a particular action aside from its role in sustaining life and/or loving relationships but other than sustaining life and loving relationships what could that inherent value be? In itself sex or virginity isn't something that designates one as special or not, it all depends on the meaning of our doing or not doing.

Some time ago I heard a moral theologian reflecting on what would have happened if we had decided to deal with our appetite for food in a way similar to the way we deal with our sexual appetite. I cannot recall all of his many fascinating comparisons but I do recall these which I hope will convey what he was getting at. He speculated that if we treated food as we approached sex then any pleasure sought solely for its own sake would be sinful and we could expect that chewing gum would be forbidden as providing pleasure and satisfaction without any chance of nourishment, cookery

books would become pornographic and restaurants and such places outlawed where a main focus is clearly on playing around with food in order to make it as pleasant as possible.

Not only are there complications arising from the back log of past and outdated insights, there is the complexity of modern life which is constantly throwing up questions which clearly outsmart earlier wisdoms. It is a particular blessing of Perito's recent book that current issues are faced without fear or prejudice. To assist him in this task he has engaged a team of people to identify contemporary issues and also to identify the contemporary cultural position on these issues. The importance of these cultural positions which might also be referred to as community values is that they construct the environment within which we, especially the young, must live our lives. In the context of the Gospel parable which refers to both the wheat and weeds within the Kingdom we are mindful that this milieu embraces both light and dark-

ness, truth and falsity; but our youth need to have it explored in the process of true discernment.

It is of particular value to have the wisdom of a wise and qualified person of integrity alongside the wisdom of the ages and the wisdom of the masses. This is what Perito's book provides us with as the 'gene pool' from which we can form and help others form conscientious decisions. Education implies providing people with the pros and cons for making informed decisions. It goes well beyond and is more effective than simply telling them either to do or not to do which if done without appreciation and understanding is little more than another form of slavery! Assertion without convincing arguments is not good enough nor has it ever been.

God's sexual gifts are amongst his most precious and it is paramount that we help our young to think positively about relationships and not just about sex, to promote love not fear and hope not despair; John Perito in writing his book clearly has this same dream.

John Ryan is a priest of the Diocese of Sandhurst in Victoria. For most of his priestly life he has been involved with renewal programmes, particularly for priests. He was a founding member of Humanita, a foundation dedicated to exploring the role of human development—and especially sexuality—within an authentic Christian spirituality.

We all need to experience *eros*-love from those close to us. This is because it would be impossible to live the high demands of *agape*-love without some experience of already being loved however imperfectly. We need to feel loved, if we in turn are to give it.

—Desmond O'Donnell OMI, *The Lifegiving Word. A Prayer Book*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2008, p.42.