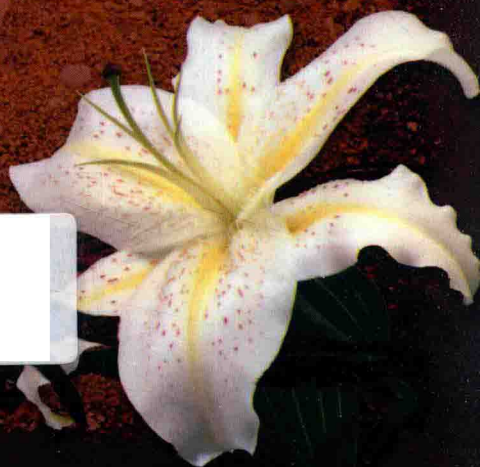


Miguel A. De La Torre

A Lily Among the Thorns

*Imagining a New
Christian Sexuality*



JOSSEY-BASS

A LILY AMONG THE THORNS

Imagining a New Christian Sexuality

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A LILY AMONG THE THORNS

To My Beloved
As a lily among thorns,
so is my lover among other women.
(Song of Songs 2:2)

A NOTE OF THANKS

This book is the product of more than one person, as many have joined me in this dialogue, raising questions and contributing comments. I specifically wish to thank the fifteen students who took an upper-class course I taught at my previous academic institution, titled "The Exotic Bible." Many of the concepts and ideas that appear in this book were first discussed during our Tuesday and Thursday seminar. I am also grateful to the six graduate students at my present institution who enrolled in a summer seminar in which portions of this manuscript were read and debated. I am deeply grateful to Catherine Craddock of Jossey-Bass, who read the entire first draft of this book and provided invaluable editorial suggestions. And special thanks are due to the publishing house editor, Sheryl Fullerton, for her support during the process of taking the book from concept to finished manuscript. Finally, I am grateful to my beloved, who read this text as it was being written, constantly challenging me to rethink and more deeply explore the issue of sexuality.

PREFACE

DURING POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, politicians can make the most outrageous promises to potential voters—everything from filling all the street potholes, to ending poverty, to putting “a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.” But it was Italy’s Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, age sixty-nine, who made what must be one of the most interesting campaign promises in recent memory. Trailing in the polls in his 2006 reelection campaign, the prime minister, who had been married for sixteen years, publicly announced a vow he made to a priest. At a political rally he proclaimed: “I promise you two and a half months of complete sexual abstinence until April 9 [election day] . . . I’ll try not to let you down.” For Berlusconi’s self-sacrifice, Rev. Pusceddu anointed him as the only defender of family values in Italy.¹ Unfortunately for Berlusconi, abstinence was not enough for him to win his reelection. Nevertheless, this unique campaign promise, and the minister’s response, reveal a disturbing undercurrent in Western Christianity’s understanding of sexuality.

Why is sexual abstinence linked to family values? The prevalent ascetic tradition within Christianity has taught us to associate sexual abstinence with purity and holiness. Many Christians, believing that there is a moral degradation of our society and that it is the result of excessive sexual promiscuity, recoil at the concept of sacred sexuality or the possibility of an ethics based on sex. These Christians see sexual desire as both powerful and dangerous, and they believe that lack of sexual control has led to the present crises of skyrocketing divorce rates and broken families.

In its campaign against sexual immorality, the U.S. Religious Right reduces sex to an act involving nothing more than the genitals, with emphasis placed on who you have sex with and the sexual act itself, rather than defining relationships in which sex can and should occur. This prevailing attitude makes it difficult for committed Christians to openly discuss and explore sexual issues without appearing “dirty.” What discussions exist are usually fear-driven: have sex, it is said, and you’ll die of AIDS, your life will be over because you’ll get pregnant, you’ll catch some sexually transmitted disease that will ruin the rest of your life; if you are female, you’ll become a whore, never be able to

attract the love of a godly man, and suffer being shamed and shunned by your friends, family, church, and community.

Generally speaking, many conservatives view sexual desire as dangerous. To further their crusade for the reining in of sex, they preach sermons, host rallies, and enact legislation against sexual education in our public schools and “sexual perversions” like homosexuality. Their answer for all sexual issues is celibacy when single and monogamous heterosexual sex in marriage. Several conservative organizations believe that public policies and legislation are imperative to protect society from the destructive nature of an unchecked sexuality.

Many liberals, on the other hand, seek to privatize sexuality by reducing it to something personal, kept in the seclusion of the bedroom. What occurs between two or more consenting adults is no one else’s concern, they say; after all, sex is simply a biological function, one that is shared with other animals. As a bodily function like eating, sexuality, they argue, should require few, if any, moral considerations as long as the participants are consenting adults. The biblical text becomes an ancient document with little or no influence. On matters of sexuality, one’s reason and experiences, rather than the Bible, become guides toward a utilitarian-type approach. Live and let live. If no one is hurt, and pleasure can be derived and maximized, then go ahead and participate in whatever sexual encounter you desire.

Toward a New Sexual Ethos

Neither the conservative nor the liberal view toward sex in the United States is adequate. Both are rooted in the dominant hyperindividualist U.S. culture, and as such, they share common assumptions and presuppositions about sexuality. For example, both conservatives and liberals tend to reduce the Christian faith to a personal piety that dictates which acts are and are not permissible for the individual. Accordingly, sex falls under the private rather than the communal. But although sex may indeed be private, it does have public, social, and cultural ramifications that cannot be ignored. We need a new way of approaching Christian sexuality. But how does one construct a sexual ethic within a conservative religious atmosphere that usually equates sex with sin and a liberal secularized society in which sexual images are ubiquitous in film and television, on our advertising billboards, and on the Internet?

In this book I will search the Christian Scripture, in spite of their patriarchal tendencies, to find biblically based guidelines and principles for developing an ethical sexual lifestyle that is aware of how sexism, homophobia, and even racism and classism have influenced past and

current conversations on sexual ethics. Avoiding either a conservative or a liberal approach to sexual ethics, this book will attempt a *liberative* methodology; that is, sexual ethics influenced by the viewpoint of those who reside on the margins of power and privilege. To use a liberative methodology means to explore sexual ethics by (1) listening to the stories of those voices that are usually ignored, the voices of those abused by the prevailing sexual norms; (2) paying close attention to who benefits, either through power or privilege, from the present normative sexual practices of society; and (3) challenging sexual norms that prevent individuals from living the abundant life promised to them by Christ (John 10:10). I believe that social injustices pervert human relationships and distort any definition or concept of love. Because justice-making (the fostering of nonoppressive structures) is an action done in obedience to unconditional love (loving the other as yourself), any sexual ethic that ignores the communal ramification of healthy sexual relationships will fall short of offering an alternative to either the Religious Right's stringent purity code or the hyperliberal view of "anything goes." For sex to be liberating, sexuality must be understood as an issue of justice. Great lovemaking is needed for justice-making to take place, and vice versa.

From Divisiveness to Liberation

Postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84) asserts that for our present culture, sex has become "more important than our souls, more important almost than our life."² Although Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul did not make sexuality the focal point of their teachings, issues involving sexuality are currently tearing apart Christian denominations and individual churches. Believers are no longer divided over issues of doctrine, but rather over issues concerning sex. Once upon a time, questions about such issues as transubstantiation (Christ present within the Eucharist) tore the church apart, spawning new denominations. Today, such doctrinal issues have been replaced by questions concerning women's autonomy and the type of sex one can engage in. Few sitting in the pews properly know their denomination's Christological doctrines, but they do know where their church stands on premarital sex, homosexuality, and ordination of women.

Sidetracked by these divisive issues and afraid to tackle the topic of sexual ethics head-on, Christians have failed to seriously and openly discuss sexuality as an integral part of our humanity. Quite simply, they run the risk of making their perspective on the topic irrelevant. This need not be the case. Christians can be at the forefront of this discussion. The Bible can provide guidance for human sexuality and the multiple social

and political issues associated with sexual practices. After all, if God is love, what can teach us humans more about the nature of God than human love?

Sexuality is part of our shared experience as a community, contributing to its ethos and literally to its continued survival. Sex is an important issue that everyone must face and about which the Bible has something exceptionally important to say. This book's focus will be on developing frameworks for healthy models that foster intimacy and vulnerability for a disjointed and at times oppressive society. The church's traditionally negative attitudes toward sex in general—and, by extension, toward women, people of color, and gays in particular—have made it difficult, if not impossible, to create biblically based and just sexual ethics. But when the biblical text is read from the viewpoint of the marginalized in society, specifically those who are normally oppressed due to their gender or sexual orientation, preconceived notions about Christianity and sex get turned on their heads. Reading from these margins of power forces the reader to move beyond a biblical interpretation that merely reflects their own opinions about sexuality. To read from the margins provides a liberating approach to dealing with issues of sexuality.

An Autobiographical Note

A word about my social location as the author of this book is needed from the outset. The contribution being made by ethicists from marginalized communities include autobiographical elements so as to avoid creating a lifeless ethical framework. The methodological inclusion of one's story powerfully connects ethical theory with reality. Yet for some scholars, considering the interpreter's identity or social location somewhat adulterates the intended meaning of scholarship. They insist that revealing a person's identity interferes with the job of ascertaining a so-called "objective" rendering. I maintain that there is no such thing as objectivity. All ethical reflections are subjective. Only the subjective ethical reflections of those within the dominant culture are labeled *objective*. The approach employed in this book challenges the assumption that ethics—in this case, sexual ethics—can be understood apart from what the interpreter brings to the analysis. Hence, the analysis conducted in this book is autobiographically influenced, even though academia at times considers the hermeneutics of the self as unscholarly. I approach the task of understanding sexual ethics via my own sexual experiences, specifically as a heterosexual Latino man who has been married for nineteen years and is blessed with children. I also write as a committed Christian who

takes Scripture seriously, yet remains keenly aware of how oppressive ideologies have been fused and confused with the Christian faith.

When I first thought of writing this book, I deeply considered who would be my audience. The book will address conservative Christians in the hopes of presenting a more liberative sexual ethics rooted within the biblical text. I also address liberal Christians, hoping to elucidate the biblical and historical roots of the conservative Christian's world view on sexuality. The result, I hope, will be to provide a better framework from which diverse views on sexual ethics can engage in conversation. I have also attempted to develop a new way to discuss the important issues of sexuality with our youth. As I wrote, I had my two teenage children in mind, hoping to share with them the biblical principles their mother and I have employed to develop a deep familial relationship. Obviously, not all readers will be a part of this audience, or want to be. And that is fine. But I must remain faithful to my chosen audience, and it is to them, as personified by my own children, that I write this book.

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INTRODUCTION

DURING CREATION, God formed humans with the capacity to engage in sexual activity. Not only was this among the first gifts given to humans by God, it was a gift God declared “good” (Genesis 1:31). But to say that sex is good is an understatement. Sex is great! It is great because it fosters intimacy within relationships that serve as the bases for healthy and just communities. As such, the first words God addresses to humans, the very first instructions given—before even forbidding them to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—were to engage in sexual relationships. God instructs this new human creation to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28), a goal that can only be achieved through copulation. This is not to conclude that reproduction is sex’s ultimate purpose, for although sex is the source for future generations, it is also the source of extreme pleasure. The task before us is to forge a biblical sexual ethics that captures the pleasures of sex.

Reading the Bible Through Which Lens?

Any discourse on Christian sexual ethics is also a debate over biblical revelation and inspiration; specifically, how scriptural interpretations are formulated and used. Although there are many theories, the basic question is whether the Bible consists of God’s actual words as dictated to human secretaries or the testimony of believers who witnessed God’s movement in their specific time and place. If the latter is true, could God’s revelation be misconstrued due to the prevalent existing social structures of the time—social structures that accepted polygamy, genocide, or slavery without any qualms? The question we must wrestle with is whether the Bible itself supports patriarchy, or rather that the authors of the text, as members of an unquestioning male-centered social order, simply presumed their own gender-based social structures as normative?

Those with a sense of how the Bible has historically been used to foster oppressive structures voice concern about returning to some romanticized pristine illusion of biblical times. There is a keen awareness of how the Bible has been and continues to be used to justify all forms of oppressive structures. Following God’s biblical call to evangelize the heathens and

fulfill the United States' "manifest destiny," European settlers decimated the indigenous people. Based on the Word of God, the townspeople of Salem, Massachusetts, charged independent-thinking women as witches and burned them alive. Following God's ordained order for the universe as laid out in the Bible, European colonists kidnapped, raped, enslaved, and murdered Africans. Even now Americans in predominately white suburbia offer thanksgiving to God for how they are blessed, continuing to ignore how their riches are maintained at the expense of the black and brown urban centers they surround. Maintaining God's scriptural command that men are to rule over women, men denied them the right to vote, and even today women are paid a fraction on the dollar for the same work done by men. And when the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. voiced the call for freedom and liberation to flow like living water, most white churches stood against someone who was seen at the time as an outside agitator, because the desegregation he advocated contradicted how they had been taught to read the Bible.

I do not question the good intentions of those wishing to return to a more traditional and literal interpretation of the biblical text, but I do wonder if they realize the full ramifications. Furthermore, as the spiritual heirs of those who have historically used the Bible to sustain and justify oppressive structures, they continue to be responsible for much of the misery suffered on the margins of society today, despite their good intentions.

Though we do not want to admit it, we all read biblical texts selectively. All of us come to the Bible with a specific life story and read our personal biases into the text. Our social location influences how we interpret Scripture, and the biblical interpretations we construct—which usually justify lifestyles beneficial to us—can contradict the very essence of the Gospel message. As we all well know, the Bible has historically been used to justify atrocities like genocide, slavery, war, crusades, colonialism, economic plunder, and, of course, gender oppression. Bible verses have been quoted, sermons preached from pulpits, and theses written in theological academies to justify barbaric acts in the name of Jesus.

When it comes to sex, Christians are usually taught to begin with the Bible. Based on how the Bible is read, we arrive at a truth concerning sex—a truth that serves as the basis for establishing doctrine, which in turn creates church traditions. Once we articulate this truth, we derive moral actions in accordance with said truth. But what happens if the determined truth is based on an erroneous sexist premise? Usually, men who are accustomed to the privileges bestowed upon them by patriarchy read their sexist biases into the text. Likewise, the original writers of the text—rooted in the social customs, traditions, and laws of

their time—recounted God’s revelation to humanity from the patriarchal framework in which they were embedded. The truth is thus tainted. What is determined to be the revelatory biblical mandate merges with the customs of the dominant male-centric culture. All too often we assume the prevalent existing patriarchy of the original text writers’ times as God’s will, or we read into the biblical text the prevalent sexism of our own culture, finding verses that justify the prevailing social power structures. Those who read the Bible from the position of authority must guard against misinterpreting scripture, consciously or unconsciously, as a way to protect their power and privilege. Passages that foster either sexism or patriarchy must be reinterpreted from the perspective of those marginalized by the text, or rejected in the same way we Christians today reject passages that foster genocide (Exodus 23:23), slavery (Numbers 31:25–47), wars of conquest (Joshua 1:10–18), and ethnic cleansing (Deuteronomy 19:1; 31:3–5). In addition to these passages, there are those establishing dietary, sacrificial, and cleansing laws that are no longer practiced or followed by today’s modern (or postmodern) Christians. We no longer consider such passages authoritative, nor should we. Similarly, the biblical text can prove to be unreliable for establishing sexual ethics if we solely and uncritically begin (and end) with the text.

What if the reflections on the Bible conducted by American Christians in their search for truth were grounded in the experiences of those who are negatively impacted by the prevailing sexual mores? What if we were to use a lens for reading and interpreting the biblical text other than the one used by those in power? By consciously reading the text from the perspective of those who are oppressed by the present sexual mores, we can liberate the Bible from the patriarchal culture in which it is entrenched. Crucial, then, to any understanding of sexual ethics are the voices of those whom society seldom listens to—specifically women, people of color, and gays. By reading the Bible from the margins, we gain an opportunity to better grasp the scriptural message from those who not only know what it means to live in a hierarchical society, but also know what it means to live subject to those power structures.

How then can we read the biblical text as a source of liberation from oppressive structures? Jesus Christ said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). (The reader should note that all scriptural quotations are the translation of the author from the original Hebrew or Greek.) The mission and purpose of Christ’s coming was to abundantly provide life, both temporal and eternal. It is through this lens, rather than the lens of patriarchy so often used, that we must read and interpret the entire biblical text. In short, if a biblical interpretation prevents life from being lived abundantly by a segment

of the population—or worse, if it brings death—then it is anti-Gospel. When a reading of the Bible relegates women to second-class status, reducing them from persons to sexual objects, then such interpretations cease to be biblically based. Only those interpretations that continue Christ's mission of empowering all elements of humanity—offering abundant life in the here and now, as opposed to just the hereafter—are biblically sound.

For example, during the antebellum period, white masters read the Bible through the lens that justified slavery and, by extension, their economic and race privilege. Thus, they focused on passages like “Slaves, obey your masters” (Ephesians 6:5) or the epistle to Philemon in which Paul returns a runaway slave to his master. To read the Bible from the margins is to read the Bible from the experience of slaves, who would have instead emphasized the Gospel message that the “truth has set us free” (John 8:32) or the Exodus story of a God who enters history so as to lead God's enslaved people to freedom. (For further information on how to read the biblical text from the perspective of the disenfranchised, see my *Reading the Bible from the Margins* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002].)

Family Ties

God created sex, and it was a gift God declared to be good, but that doesn't mean that all forms of sex are holy or ethical. We will explore different types of sexual unions in Part Two, but for now I want to introduce a term that I will use throughout this book to describe the type of sexual union that best reflects the spiritual union one can expect to have with and in God. It is a union based on the biblical concept of the *familial*. Familial—that is, that which is of or common to a family—means relation-centered. As a corrective measure to the hyperindividuality salient in Euro-American western culture, the familial reinforces the family, not the individual, as the basic social unit of society.

Familial relationships are not limited to two individuals forming a marriage bond; they also encompass children, siblings, elders, and all others whom we term *extended family*. Thus, of course, not all familial relationships are sexual, nor should they be. For purposes of our discussion, however, we will solely focus on the particular familial relationship that constitutes a union of two adult individuals engaged in mutual sexual activity. In such unions, sex can be a binding part of that relationship, but it certainly is not, nor should it be, the central act of or purpose for the relationship. Still, when the familial relationship is consummated with sex, it does have the potential of becoming more potent than any type

of platonic relationship based on friendship or comradeship. When two choose to become one flesh within a familial-based relationship, there is the opportunity to create intimacy, in which mutual sexual pleasure can be epitomized. This sexual pleasure is not only abundantly satisfying, but it also opens us up to the possibility of communing with God, a concept to be explored in greater detail in the third chapter of this book. At its best, sex creates a feeling of security, fulfillment, and ultimate love due to the process of two becoming one mind, one flesh, and one spirit.

Establishing a familial relationship does not necessarily signify marriage. Although church weddings are religious rituals and celebrations that publicly proclaim the existence of a familial relationship, these events do not create family—people do. Church weddings serve to bless a relationship. If a sexual relationship fails to meet the deepest physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual needs of both partners, there may be a marriage because a ritual occurred in a church building, but it is no family.

At its core, a familial relationship is based on mutual commitment. Recognizing this, one should be cautious in describing the markings of familial relationships in specific detail. There are no hard and fast rules with clear parameters; rather, a familial-based relationship is a fluid state, based on the reality and circumstances of those entering into the relationship.

Some may wonder why I shy away from the term *covenant*. Covenant is presented in the biblical text as an agreement between two entities, usually between two strangers. I am struck by the fact that covenants became necessary after sin entered the world (the Fall). The creation of Adam and Eve was to establish not a covenant, but a relationship, a family. Even though the concept of covenant, with its stipulations, blessings, and curses, is usually posed as an alternative to a contract, still, its biblical link to treaties continues to carry a sense of establishing a contractual relationships. Perhaps covenants are a necessity of a fallen world, but if we are striving to return to the wholeness of God's perfect will—as expressed in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall—then seeing the union of two individuals as familial better captures the ideal relationship. Therefore, because familial relationships are not covenant agreements, we should hesitate to specifically spell out what its necessary terms are, recognizing that real life is seldom so clear-cut. That being said, we can still attempt to describe and better understand familial relationships by exploring their leading characteristics, which are mutual giving and vulnerability. Only by giving fully of oneself can there be hope of fully possessing another. And only by becoming totally vulnerable can one hope to gain full security.