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The NCCA’S recommendations for a new Relationships and Sexuality Education Programme in schools: is it compatible with the Catholic ethos?

Richard Casey

This article will provide a critical analysis of the recommendations made in the ‘Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools’ (henceforth referred to as ‘NCCA report’), which was published by the NCCA in December 2019, in light of Catholic Church teaching on sexuality. The superiority of the Catholic Church’s position over the stance taken by the NCCA will be proposed in this article through a discussion of the fundamental concepts of truth, happiness and purpose, and freedom.

TRUTH

The superior position is the one which is based on the truth about God, humanity and life. Superiority should not be measured by how good something makes one feel at a given moment in time. However, living in accordance with one’s subjective desires is the motivating force of expressive individualism. The autonomous individual is “presumed able to choose the roles he will play and the commitments he will make, not on the basis of higher truths”.¹ However, the metaphysics of expressive individualism are based on a false anthropological understanding of human

1 Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, Ann Swidler, William M. Sullivan and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 47; O. Carter Snead. *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020).

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beings as “mere wills inhabiting instrumental bodies”, instead of as “embodied” beings.² The NCCA report’s recommendations have been based on this expressive individualism, as manifested in its recommendations to teach about “consent and its relevance to all interpersonal relationships”.³ On the other hand, Catholic teaching relating to sexuality comes from Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God, Truth incarnate.⁴ It is based on a true anthropological understanding of what a person is and what his purpose is in life: a composite of body and soul, made in God’s image and destined for heaven.

The form of secular liberalism, that is expressive individualism, is born of humanity’s disordered desires, which derive from his fallen nature; of course, this is not to claim that every desire implicated in, and encouraged by, expressive individualism is disordered. The passions that are disordered impede people from attaining to the truth about God, humanity and life:

“Now the human intellect, in gaining the knowledge of such truths is hampered both by the activity of the senses and the imagination, and by evil passions arising from original sin. Hence men easily persuade themselves in such matters that what they do not wish to believe is false or at least doubtful”.⁵

Christ said that “if any man’s will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I’m speaking on my own authority”;⁶ thus, if one does Christ’s will he will know the truth about who Christ is and will more easily understand his teachings. On the contrary, “pride and sensuality are the metaphysical values of the Revolution” that is being waged against Christian civilisation and its morality.⁷

Within the report, the NCCA has drawn its recommendations from an implicit secular premise that is false: humanity cannot know God exists and so he should govern without God and act as if God does not exist. This premise clearly underpins the NCCA’s report as God and his will are not mentioned; rather, what is included, excluded and highlighted in the report is evidence of a

2 O. Carter Snead. *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 8.

3 NCCA. *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools* (Dublin: Government Publications, 2019), 74.

4 Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor* [online] (Vatican.va, 1993), 95. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

5 Pope Pius XII. *Humani Generis* [online] (Vatican.va, 1950), 2. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html> [accessed 14th January 2021].

6 Jn 7:17.

7 Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira. *Revolution and counter-revolution* (Pennsylvania: American TFP, 2002), 34.

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liberal secular worldview. However, one can determine by reason that God does exist.⁸ Therefore, the conclusions of the report will have been based on a false premise; if one's premise is flawed, then one's conclusions will be flawed.

In the worldview of secular liberalism, as demonstrated in the NCCA report, then the Catholic Church is just one among many churches that falsely claim to have the full truth; as such, it is believed that the Catholic Church can change her teachings to become more modern and progressive. But the Catholic Church cannot make moral laws; "she cannot be their arbiter—only their guardian and interpreter".⁹ The Church is the guardian of the divine deposit of faith from Christ. The objective truth about God and about moral laws can thus be known by God's Revelation; furthermore, the truth and reality of God and his laws can be proved by rational discourse. It is the placing of the true, reasonable morality of Christ, which helps fulfil humanity and bring it to a true sense of wellbeing, at the centre of a RSE programme that makes it superior.

PURPOSE AND HAPPINESS

Obedience to God is not always easy, but disobedience leads to dire consequences for people's happiness and their understanding of their purpose. Due to original sin, in which Adam and Eve yielded to the temptation of Satan, who is always "a liar and the father of lies",¹⁰ humanity is perpetually tempted to make itself into its own god and to worship idols.¹¹ In doing this, humanity exchanges "the truth about God for a lie".¹² The most important question in life is that of humanity's purpose, its final end. All philosophers, throughout the centuries and millennia, have answered this question of humanity's greatest good; the answer that they give is vital, as it determines everything that follows in their philosophy.¹³

The Catholic Church asserts that humanity, created, redeemed and sanctified by the Trinitarian God, has as the decisive meaning

8 John Haldane & Philosophy Documentation Center. "Common sense, metaphysics, and the existence of God" *American Catholic philosophical quarterly* 77, no.3 (2003): 381-398.

9 Pope Paul VI. *Humanae Vitae* [online] (Vatican.va, 1968), 18. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

10 Jn 8:44.

11 cf. 1 Thes 1:9.

12 Rom 1:25; VS 1.

13 Peter Kreeft. *Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press,1990); Servais Pinckaers. "Christ, Moral Absolutes, and the Good: Recent Moral Theology." *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no.1 (1991).

of its life to praise and glorify God.¹⁴ This is an objective reality and attains to each person's life and final end.¹⁵ However, it is a commonly held view in this liberal and relativistic age that each person may create his own meaning in life and that this is perfectly acceptable.¹⁶ Such a view is entirely compatible with the NCCA report's recommendations that propose consent and autonomy as the fulcrum of their morality.

The NCCA report's recommendations are based on the false doctrines of expressive individualism. This worldview posits that "individuals thrive insofar as they are able to freely create and pursue the unique projects and future-directed plans that reflect their deeply held values and self-understanding".¹⁷ If this philosophy is taken seriously in the context of RSE, then children could be allowed to believe that pleasure is the source of happiness, if they should so choose it to be. This, however, is a fallacy. It is found that pleasure is less desirable when it is attained than when it is being pursued.¹⁸ This experience of dissatisfaction, found in living a hedonistic lifestyle, is a true teacher of how leading a life of pleasure-seeking ends in emptiness.¹⁹ This is not to say that pleasure and one's passions are evil; they are good when they are properly ordered. They are properly ordered in accordance with the natural law and God's divine law.²⁰ Thus, pleasure is a positive experience of the intimate nature of sex. However, if this experience is to be properly ordered, it must take place in the context of a marriage between a man and a woman and the act must remain open to procreation and unity.²¹

To seek pleasures without seeking them as part of a genuinely fulfilling human good and without properly ordering them to God is to worship the god of hedonism. The NCCA recommendations do not explicitly teach the wrongness of a hedonistic lifestyle. Living

14 Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor* [online] (Vatican.va, 1993), 10. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

15 Servais Pinckaers. "Christ, Moral Absolutes, and the Good: Recent Moral Theology." *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no.1 (1991).

16 O. Carter Snead. *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 5; Robert P. George. "Gnostic Liberalism." *First Things* (December 2016): 33-38.

17 O. Carter Snead. *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 70.

18 Peter Kreeft. *Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 369-399.

19 Peter Kreeft. *Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990); Augustine. *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Dover, 2002).

20 Servais Pinckaers. "Christ, Moral Absolutes, and the Good: Recent Moral Theology." *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no.1 (1991): 118-128.

21 John M. Finnis. "Natural Law Theory: Its Past and its Present" in Marmor, A. (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Law* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 16-30.

hedonistically ultimately ends in one becoming a slave to that very thing in which happiness was sought; one can become enslaved to one's own sexual desires as one can become addicted to alcohol or drugs. Just as a drug addict may engage in immoral behaviour to feed his addiction, so too may the person who is addicted to the satisfaction of his sexual desires. This is the danger that faces Irish children in the future should the NCCA report's recommendations be introduced to schools in a new RSE curriculum.

FREEDOM

At the heart of the NCCA report's recommendations is a misunderstanding of freedom. It is a freedom that is understood "perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil".²² Of course, proponents of expressive individualism would not agree that what one does is evil or immoral, so long as consent is given by those involved. For this reason, the recommendations propose a limit to the amount of immorality one can engage in by emphasising the necessity of consent; thus, one can do as one pleases, so long as it does not impinge upon the autonomy of others.

The expressive, individualistic philosophy of creating one's own truth gives fuel to the promotion of "gender identity and expression" mentioned in the NCCA report;²³ this philosophy is based on the belief that "man is the measure of all things".²⁴ Secular liberalism has sprung up from the West's dying Christian culture; this has given rise to the identity crisis of many young people.²⁵ They have no identity because they have been sold the lie of modern liberty: that man has no limits.²⁶ They are told that each person is free to create himself in every way; alas, he then cannot truly know himself and he sinks into the sandpit of desolation and subjectivism, born of relativism.

The false freedom of modern liberal secularism manifests itself clearly in the orthodoxy of expressive individualism. One of the dogmas of this worldview is that each person is free to make their final end in life; the sovereignty of each person extends to

22 Pope Paul VI. *Gaudium et Spes* [online] (Vatican.va., 1965), 17. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html> [accessed 30th December 2020].

23 NCCA. *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools* (Dublin: Government Publications, 2019), 64.

24 Plato. *Theatetus*, translated by R.H. Waterfield (London: Penguin, 1987), 160d9.

25 Richard Casey and Lydia Mannion. "Truth in Troubled Times: Catholic Education and the Mental Health of Young People in Contemporary Ireland" *The Furrow* 72, no. 1 (2021): 41-42.

26 Fulton J. Sheen. *Culture of Death*. [podcast] (World History & Today, n.d.) Available at: <<http://FultonSheen.com>> [accessed 5th January 2021]

“the construction of ultimate meaning”.²⁷ It is thus rooted in the denial of the natural world, natural ends and in an anti-teleological mindset. The NCCA’s recommendation for “LGBTQ+ matters” to be taught about in the new curriculum, without further explanation, makes it possible for this to be interpreted in a way that would result in a child being taught to choose their gender apart from their biological sex in order to construct their own meaning in life.²⁸ The problem with such expressive individualism is that it is not true; it does not take into account the fact that people are embodied beings.²⁹ It ignores human nature and humanity’s true end. Thus, it condemns people to an absurd existence apart from God and true friendship with others; “the unencumbered self is thus consigned to profound loneliness”.³⁰ The license to sin as one pleases not only has catastrophic effects on the personal level; it also leads to a “mass society of mutually antagonistic individuals, easy prey to despotism”.³¹ Thus the warning of the prophet Isaiah: “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter”.³²

The Catholic Church calls humanity to true freedom, to the freedom that God wants for it.³³ Freedom is truly a gift from God which gives to humanity the power to “seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him”.³⁴ Humanity is free, not to create its own truth, but to understand and accept God’s commands.³⁵ Sexuality, then, becomes a great chance to live out one’s purpose of returning God’s love. Each person has the chance to exercise true liberty by not selfishly using others for one’s own desires;³⁶ rather, Catholic teaching calls each person to the “gift of self and acceptance of

27 O. Carter Snead. *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 78.

28 NCCA, 2019a, p.74.

29 Snead. *What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics*, 12.

30 *Ibid.*, 93.

31 Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, Ann Swidler, William M. Sullivan and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 38.

32 Is 5:20.

33 Pope Paul VI. *Gaudium et Spes* [online] (Vatican.va., 1965), 17. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html> [accessed 30th December 2020].

34 *Ibid.*

35 Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor* [online] (Vatican.va, 1993), 35. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

36 Pope John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae* [online] (Vatican.va., 1995), 19. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

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another, in all the other's richness as a person".³⁷ The free person is certain that Christ is "the resurrection and the life ... whoever lives and believes in me shall never die";³⁸ he is freed from the slavery of sin, death and ignorance. Humanity becomes freed from the absurd idea that freedom, including sexual freedom, is absolute, so long as consent is given. Humanity's mind is opened to the truth that liberty is not the source of all other values.³⁹ Humanity knows that its freedom and dignity are dependent upon acknowledging "certain norms as valid always and for everyone, with no exception".⁴⁰

The Catholic position relating to sexuality education is superior because it is rooted in truth and in Christ. God has revealed the boundaries that one must not step over if one is to continue living in freedom, love and happiness; these are delineated in the natural and divine law.⁴¹ Such boundaries go beyond the morality of consent recommended in the NCCA's report and call each person to true freedom and love. Christ himself has told humanity that following his example leads to truth, life and freedom; "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".⁴² Christ is truth incarnate and so one can be certain that what he says is superior to the words of the deceiver, the confuser and the tempter. To say, then, that Christ is limiting one's freedom is anathema to the Catholic faith and to truth.

Each person submits to and worships something in this life. The expressive individualism that underpins the NCCA report's recommendations promotes a false liberty that makes oneself the arbiter of the true and the good; it leads to worship of the ego and enslavement to one's passions. The Catholic faith calls on people to freely use their sexuality in a positive and chaste manner so as to truly love others and to adore Christ who is "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end".⁴³

CONCLUSION

Both in terms of its philosophical and theological reasonableness and in the clearly perceptible goodness of its message, the Catholic teaching on sexuality leads one to a higher state of

37 Ibid., 23.

38 Jn 11:25-26.

39 Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor* [online] (Vatican.va, 1993), 32. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

40 Ibid., 97.

41 Servais Pinckaers. "Christ, Moral Absolutes, and the Good: Recent Moral Theology." *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no.1 (1991): 118.

42 Jn 14:6.

43 Rev 22:13.

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happiness, freedom and human fulfilment than the secular liberal recommendations of the NCCA. To know the truth about how one must live, one must turn to the ultimate authority.⁴⁴ Catholics believe that God is the ultimate authority and that he has given his divine teaching authority to the Church. Christ's divine law is in keeping with the natural law, for both derive from his person. For the modern secular liberal, it is hard to say who the authority is; it could be himself, a favourite liberal philosopher, or an international institution with major power to influence decisions. Regardless of whom he chooses, he rejects God.⁴⁵ This is the core reason why the Catholic faith has the superior position; all her teachings flow in accordance with divine and natural wisdom.⁴⁶ Only following Christ and his teachings will bring people to true happiness, as much as is possible in this life and fully in heaven. The purpose of knowing, loving and serving God better in this world is not a hindrance to people's happiness, freedom and love. It is neither an obstacle to be overcome, nor a constraint to be wriggled free from; rather, it is this yoke that truly sets humanity free from sin, so that people can happily labour in love with God for the glory of his majesty.⁴⁷ The spiritual pleasure of contemplating humanity's divine saviour and of living in accordance with that love is constitutive of humanity's true good.

Catholic schools, patrons and parents must keep these truths in mind as they face a battle for the future safety of their children's bodies and souls. They must affirm the teachings of the Church regarding RSE, so as to educate their children in faith, hope and charity. Only then will it be possible for these children to attain to the authentic human flourishing and fulfilment that is found in chaste relationships with others and in intimacy and communion with Jesus Christ.

44 Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor* [online] (Vatican.va, 1993), 8. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

45 Pope John Paul II. *Veritatis Splendor* [online] (Vatican.va, 1993), 102. Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html> [accessed 7th September 2020].

46 *Ibid.*, 12.

47 *Ibid.*, 17.