**The Catholic hierarchy’s problem with sex — Part I**

**An obsolete understanding of the differences between men and women**

**Le problème de la hiérarchie catholique avec la sexualité, I**

**Une compréhension dépassée de la différence entre hommes et femmes**

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September 17, 2018

*This is a three-part series exploring the Catholic hierarchy’s problem with sex.*

**Part I** *looks at the Church’s outmoded understanding of the biological basis of sex itself, and what that means for beliefs about the differences between men and women.* [**Part II**](https://international.la-croix.com/news/the-catholic-hierarchys-problem-with-sex-part-ii/8425) *compares the Church’s view of men and women with the way we used to think about race, and describes it as an ideology.* [**Part III**](https://international.la-croix.com/news/the-catholic-hierarchys-problem-with-sex-part-iii/8426) *shows how Church teachings based on this view of men and women contradict other longstanding moral teachings of the Church, and have not been received by the faithful.*

*Il y a 3 parties dans ce document qui examine le problème de la hiérarchie catholique avec le sexe.*

*La première s’intéresse à la compréhension dépassée des bases biologiques de la sexualité ; la deuxième compare la vision de l’Eglise des hommes et des femmes avec la pensée sur les races et montre qu’il s’agit d’une idéologie et la troisième montre que cet enseignement de l’Eglise contredit d’autres de ses avis moraux et que les fidèles ne l’acceptent pas.*

It’s not just the crisis of sexual abuse and cover up, which is ghastly enough. If we think back over the span of time since Vatican II, almost every divisive controversy within the Catholic Church has been about sex.

Depuis Vatican II presque tous les sujets de controverse dans l’Eglise sont sujets à la sexualité.

Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical [*Humanae Vitae*](http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html) kicked it off by declaring the use of artificial contraception a mortal sin. That ban generated enormous dissension among the faithful, clergy, and theologians, and even among many bishops.

It quieted down after a while, with the tacit agreement between the parties that the faithful and the clergy would ignore the ban and the bishops would ignore them ignoring it.

L’encyclique Humanae vitae faisant de l’usage de la contraception artificielle un péché mortel a généré un énorme fossé parmi les fidèles, le clergé les théologiens et même les évêques. D’un accord tacite les fidèles et le clergé ignorent la condamnation et les évêques ignorent qu’ils l’ignorent.

Sex still roils the Church today: insurance coverage of contraception; mandatory priestly celibacy; homosexuality and gay marriage; the ordination of women; cohabitation before marriage.

The fight over the reception of the Eucharist for the divorced and remarried has generated threats of schism.

La sexualité bouscule encore l’Eglise aujourd’hui : remboursement de la contraception, célibat des prêtres, homosexualité et mariage gay, ordination des femmes, cohabitation avant le mariage.

La bataille sur la communion des divorcés-remariés est un autre sujet de menace de schisme.

The Synods of Bishops in 2014-2015 and the recent World Meeting of Families all ended up getting stuck on sex. The Catholic hierarchy simply can’t stop litigating who should have sex with whom, and how they should have it.

Yet when it comes to sex, the institutional Church regularly behaves in a way that is either painfully hapless or tragically destructive. Why is this so?

Quand elle en vient à la sexualité la manière dont l’institution se comporte régulièrement est soit inutilement douloureuse soit nuisible. Pourquoi ?

The failure in dealing with sex is driven by a host of things, including enforced priestly celibacy, a clerical culture, and an autocratic governance structure that expects obedience and rewards secrecy.

La difficulté à parler de la sexualité est basée sur plusieurs choses : le célibat des prêtres, la culture cléricale et une gouvernance autocratique qui suppose obéissance et récompense le secret.

This is especially true of the crisis of sexual abuse and coverup. But underlying it all is an outmoded understanding of the biological basis of sex itself, and what that means for the differences between men and women.

This understanding affects not only its teachings, but ultimately the way in which the Church governs itself and behaves in the world, so it is well worth illuminating.

La compréhension dépassée des bases biologiques de la sexualité et ce qu’elle signifie des différences entre hommes et femmes affecte non seulement l’enseignement de l’Eglise mais aussi sa gouvernance et la manière dont elle se comporte dans le monde.

**The Feminine Genius**

**Le génie féminin**

Pope Francis has always admired women, even describing us as having a special “feminine genius” that men do not share.

He expressed it like this when he spoke to the Union of Superiors General in May 2016: “... women look at life through their own eyes and we men cannot look at it in this way. The way of viewing a problem, of seeing things, is different in a woman compared to a man. They must be complementary, and in consultations it is important that there are women.”

François a toujours admiré les femmes, leur reconnaissant une espèce de génie que les hommes n’auraient pas.

As flattering as such an attitude may be, what comes along with it is a bit more fraught.

Cette attitude flatteuse n’en est pas moins un peu périlleuse.

In Church teaching on the subject, the feminine genius is defined by four key attributes. Women have a receptive nature, both biologically as they are built to receive new life, as well as spiritually.

They are sensitive, and are able to see the deepest needs of the heart. They are generous, and available to meet the needs of the surrounding community, and they are maternal, both within the individual family and among the whole human family.

The feminine genius of women nurturing children, one child at a time, can change the face of society.

Dans l’enseignement de l’Eglise le génie féminin est défini par quatre attributs majeurs. Les femmes sont naturellement « réceptives », biologiquement et spirituellement. Elles sont sensibles et capables de sentir les plus profondes aspirations des cœurs. Elles sont généreuses, maternelles. Le génie féminin peut changer la face de la société.

The pope sees this feminine genius as a matter of ecclesiology – the theology of the Church itself, its nature and structure.

As Pope Francis explains, “In Catholic ecclesiology there are two dimensions to think about, the Petrine dimension, which is from the Apostle Peter and the Apostolic College, which is the pastoral activity of the bishops, as well as the Marian dimension, which is the feminine dimension of the Church.”

The Petrine dimension includes Peter and the apostles, and the roles of priests and bishops building and maintaining the life of the Church.

The Marian or feminine dimension includes the maternal work of bearing and raising children. This exercises the feminine genius and should be generalized to society so that women can humanize its structures and make society more homelike.

Le pape voit ce génie féminin comme un aspect ecclésiologique, une théologie ecclésiale, quand il parle de la dimension pétrinienne et pastorale qui construit et fait vivre l’Eglise (les apôtres, le collège apostolique, les prêtres) et de la dimension mariale qui est la dimension féminine de l’Eglise dans son travail maternel d’élever les enfants. Cet exercice du génie féminin peut être étendu aux sociétés pour les rendre plus chaleureuses.

This view of men and women as innately different and complementary is foundational in the Church’s concept of itself and its response to the world.

Cette vision de différences foncières et complémentaires fonde la conception qu’à l’Eglise d’elle-même et de sa place dans le monde.

The idea that men and women are innately different and complementary underpins its view of marriage as a partnership between a man and a woman as the root of the family; it is seen as a God-given certainty in an uncertain time, with the Church as the last bulwark against an encroaching secular West that seeks to blur sexual identities.

Since sex is proper only within the bounds of marriage and only if it is always open to procreation, birth control and sex outside of marriage are morally wrong.

Cette vision sous-tend celle du mariage comme partenariat entre un homme et une femme, racine de la famille ; elle est reçue comme une certitude divine, l’Eglise devenant le rempart contre les tendances séculaires à relativiser l’identité sexuelle. Puisque le sexe n’est acceptable que dans le mariage et dans l’objectif de la procréation, le contrôle des naissances et la sexualité hors mariage sont moralement inacceptables.

Since male-female complementarity is essential to marriage, homosexual acts are disordered, and any attempts to make same-sex unions the equivalent of marriage are also wrong because they disregard the essential nature of an institution established by God.

Puisque la complémentarité est essentielle au mariage, les actes homosexuels sont désordonnés et les unions entre même sexes sont inacceptables car elles contredisent la volonté de Dieu.

And since men make up the Petrine dimension of the Church and women the Marian dimension, ordination to the priesthood (and thus Church governance) is reserved only to men.

Puisque la dimension pétrinienne est masculine et la dimension mariale féminine les ordinations et donc la gouvernance de l’Eglise sont réservés aux hommes.

The question is, is this an accurate way for the Church to think about men and women?

Obviously, it’s hard to argue with the fact that men and women *in general* are different. That’s a no-brainer.

In fact, much of feminist thought is taken up with identifying the ways in which sex affects how we see and interact with the world, and understanding and experiencing those different perspectives.

Est-ce une bonne vision ? Naturellement homme et femme sont différents.

En fait beaucoup des mouvements féministes cherchent à comprendre comment la sexualité nous fait voir et interagir avec le monde.

The groundbreaking 1982 book *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* by Carol Gilligan is a classic example of this. Of course, men and women are different. That’s not the issue.

The issue is that in Church teachings, men and women *must* be different, must *all* be different, and their immutable, complementary differences must go on to define and constrain what each *individual* is obligated to do, as well as that from which each is excluded.

Men to one side, women to the other, each with their own innate sexual essence. And therein lies the problem.

Le problème est dans l’enseignement de l’Eglise : homme et femme doivent être différents, toujours différents, leurs immuables et complémentaires différences doivent définir ce que chaque individu doit être et ne pas être. Là est le problème.

We’ve seen this business of innate difference before, back in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in how we used to think of race.

Nous avons vu à quoi cette vision des différences innées pouvait conduire en termes de pensée sur les races.

In [**Part II**](https://international.la-croix.com/news/the-catholic-hierarchys-problem-with-sex-part-ii/8425), we’ll explore how the Church’s view of the innate differences between men and women is eerily similar to the old, now-debunked understanding of race, and show that it is in fact an ideology.