

Embracing Christian Sex in a Pagan World

by Rev. Joseph A. Sirba

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In *Embracing Christian Sex in a Pagan World*, Rev. Joseph A. Sirba sets out to specify a theologically consistent way to approach all areas of sexual intimacy, centering his reflection on the thesis that the pagan world poses a grave threat to relationships by distorting the true meaning and purpose of sex. In contrast, the author presents a right way to enjoy sexual relationships, a way that honors God, and he offers very specific answers to a vast array of questions associated with this subject.

Historically, many lay Catholics have felt that the Church has shied away from speaking clearly about sex, leaving them without specific guidance. Sirba offers specific, direct advice to correct this perception, but he does not address the controversial *conversations* surrounding human sexuality. There is a broad spectrum of Christian thought on issues regarding human sexuality, and topics such as birth control, divorce, and homosexuality are widely debated. The book's chief strength is its willingness to address sensitive topics frankly and unapologetically. Its greatest weakness is its anachronistic treatment of the Christian perspective as unified and without nuance, internal detractors, or fluidity. Consequently, the author ignores various opinions and informed voices within Christianity.

Sirba divides *Embracing Christian Sex* into six main sections. First, he addresses how Christians have strayed from the correct teachings on issues of sex, and he identifies three epochs of human sexuality. Beginning with the pre-Christian pagan world, he then examines Christianity's influence and the subsequent resurgence of pagan influences on Christendom. He laments this third epoch and believes that today's Christians have been negatively influenced by pagan culture, which they should seek to identify in their own lives. Using this framework, the author admonishes Christians to cease participating in distinctly pagan activities. He does not, however, treat

sex as a taboo but rather states that it is a gift from God that should be celebrated under the correct circumstances, which he defines by Catholic doctrinal statements.

In the second and third sections, Sirba addresses how Christians should talk about sex and love. "*Christian sex is that kind of intimate behavior which follows from a Christian understanding and teaching about human sexuality*" (44, original emphasis). Fundamentally, he argues that sex is meant to be enjoyed, but its true purpose is not pleasure but the creation of life. Consequently, any sexual act that is not open to creating life is in direct conflict with the correct Christian view of sex, and Sirba mercilessly attacks any viewpoint that runs contrary to this belief. For example, he alleges that married couples who choose not to have children are selfish. "For a married couple to reject their fertility would be similar to a skilled surgeon declining to perform surgery to save a life or a farmer refusing to plant crops to feed the hungry" (98).

In the fourth section, Sirba addresses guidelines for sex within the marriage relationship by outlining practical principles that couples can use to live according to the theme of creating life in their relationship. This section includes very specific encouragements and prohibitions for married couples regarding the physical act of sex, and incorporates some helpful principles about respect, love, and the boundaries necessary to stay true to the Christian purpose for sexual intimacy. Sirba also addresses the pain of infertility and offers a clear explanation of the different types of assisted reproductive technologies, critiquing each through the same lens of Christian versus pagan. Because many Catholics are not well educated on the intricacies of assisted reproductive technologies, this was the most helpful section of the book. While not every reader will agree with his stance, Sirba does a good job of describing the options and explaining

why, in his view, they are or are not valid options for Christians. The final two sections address many other subjects, such as celibacy, divorce, homosexuality, and pornography. In keeping with his Catholic convictions, the author explains the virtue of the first and the vice of the rest.

While *Embracing Christian Sex* may be an accurate summary of Catholic doctrinal teachings, its tone is confrontational and at odds with Pope Francis's timely call for an emphasis on mercy. Furthermore, Sirba does not fairly represent the views of Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, or subgroups among Catholics. His options are only as varied as Christian or pagan. Consequently, his delivery is, at times, directly offensive to those who do not hold his specific view on

every topic, and his decision to refer to any dissenting opinion about human sexuality as "pagan" puts the reader on the defensive position from the outset. He realizes that the word is pejorative but defends its use for the sake of contrast. The goal of this book and its usefulness will not be found in inspiring conversation. Ultimately, *Embracing Christian Sex* offers practical suggestions for living consistently with Catholic doctrine. However, it is not likely to attract readers who do not already firmly agree with its conclusions.

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