

Paul Flaman, *Sex, Love and Marriage  
in the Light of Following Jesus.*

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This original and stimulating volume is the fruit of Paul Flaman's teaching of undergraduates for well over thirty-four years at St Joseph's College in the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, where he is a professor of Christian theology. There are fifteen chapters, and each begins with "reflection and discussion questions." The author's dialogic style is of a great benefit to the individual reader and is present throughout the book. Indeed, the study's arrangement means it does not have to be necessarily read in a sequential manner. It is easily accessible and readable as a textbook for students and staff at universities, colleges, and seminaries, and it could also be profitably used by parish or local study groups. Particularly striking is the author's unique

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approach, which he sets out from the beginning of his work. The Christian understanding of "sex, love and marriage" cannot be understood in a vacuum but emerges, as Flaman says, "in the light of following Jesus" (10). In taking this approach, he does not risk any type of abstract moral obscurantism. Flaman asks, "What would Jesus say? How would He deal with or live this situation?" So, the author uses a richly Christocentric perspective in seeing the moral life through the "eyes" of Jesus and uses a "person-centered" view in sharing the life experiences of others. If in philosophy we can observe the collapse of the priority of the theoretical and a turn toward the reality of the human person, we can equally see this in Flaman's insightful vademecum on moral theology.

Paradigmatic of this perspective is the distinctive methodology Flaman employs. Interspersed throughout the work is the traditional "triumvirate" of Scripture, tradition, and the magisterium, although not necessarily in that order, as foundational sources for dealing with the various moral issues. But to this another all-important "fourth-dimension" is added, that is, "lived-experiences," which are sometimes positive and sometimes negative in nature. Actually, this approach impressively enhances the whole enterprise. Flaman uses life stories of different people and examples drawn from his own marriage and family life; these are a rich resource, because they are examples of human lives in love with Love itself. Flaman also deals with the important biblical perspectives and Christian traditions and gives a contemporary Christian anthropology on sex and marriage in chapters 4 through 6. There is a novel discussion on "new Christian movements" and their significant contribution to the whole in chapter 7. He presents the understanding of Christian marriage as a sacrament in chapter 9. Recognizing that "no one of us humans has a monopoly

on, or complete understanding of truth,” (88) he offers an interesting discussion on the similarities and differences among the various Christian denominations on sex and marriage and the lessons that can be learned from each (see chapter 5). Flaman never shies away from the challenges involved in living out Catholic values in daily life. In a chapter on “Marital Growth and Crises, Separation, Divorce, Annulment, and Remarriage” (274–312), he examines some of the factors in or causes of marital breakdown. Beautifully etched into his text are spiritual and practical insights and gems that move us beyond mere considerations of immediate problems to see the wider horizon and mystery of the human-divine journey of life we are all called to participate in. For example, concerning the challenge of the “over idealization of the other” in human relationships, he insightfully explains how “some people have unrealistic expectations regarding marriage or a spouse, which no human being with his or her limitations can fulfil. From a Christian perspective only God can fulfill our love needs completely” (275).

Throughout the book, Flaman discusses present-day questions of morality. In chapter 8, for example, he examines “gender roles of men and women in the family and the Church.” He considers Ephesians 5:21–33 on the themes of “headship” and “submission” in terms of the marital relationship and the great controversy it often creates in modern debate. Flaman sets out the differing perspectives and then beautifully shares experiences from his own marriage and life. The submission referenced in Ephesians describes the reality of mutual losing and finding that is experienced in relationships based on Christian love. The “mutual prioritization” of the “other” in married love is a living up “to the requirements of truth and love.” It is not a one-way relationship but an experience of “mutuality.” It is because of its “reciprocity” that married love

can willingly be submitted to, as it is constitutive of the new commandment of Jesus, that is, to engage in “loving as He loves” (128). Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas spoke of a “new saintliness” or holiness encountered in human persons through living the “priority of the other.” Flaman agrees that “what Jesus calls us to is indeed very radical” (171). It is a call to become saints. He says: “Although this is a high ideal which we cannot achieve by ourselves, it is realistic with God’s help and grace” (101).

Questions about “homosexuality, same-sex marriage and same-sex parenting” appear in chapter 13 of the book. As a theologian, Flaman does not shy away from the relevant issues for Catholics and other Christians. He gives a tremendously useful and insightful treatment of the matters. He sets out the Christian traditional and revisionist perspectives clearly, and he surveys the relevance of experience and science to the debate (242–260). In this chapter, we see Flaman’s “fourth-dimension” (the existential turn toward the human person) emerging, as it does in many other parts of the investigation. As human beings, the author acknowledges, we all need healing in terms of our sinfulness; as human persons we live in light of the eschatological nature of existence. This means that if we “cooperate freely with God’s grace and love, our healing will be completed in the next life with eternal life and the bodily resurrection” (259). What we experience in this earthy existence is “incomplete,” and that incompleteness relates even to our own personal identity. The unfinished nature of our reality and our clear recognition of this fact can stimulate us to keep us “turning to God to ask Him for His help” in realizing who we fully are as human persons in God’s loving plan (260). Earlier in the study, Flaman recalled how Jesus’s first public teaching was a radical metanoia (100). The call to conversion, he argues, is not “dinosauric” and

nor is it “conservative.” It is the invitation “to love as He [Jesus], as God, to be perfect in love. . . . It calls us not to support the status quo but to a profound conversion and change” (171). Our goal is to try to live as Jesus lived, and in this way, we will reach heaven (see chapter 6 on the Christian vocation [100–102]). The author briefly references the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his book *The Cost of Discipleship* (264). Indeed, a golden thread running throughout Flaman’s book is the idea, not unlike Bonhoeffer’s, that Christ paid the “costly price” for each one of us in His redemptive love. The “choice of God” in our lives means putting God in the first place and being “obedient” to the dynamics of that type of Love. The costly gift is “the treasure hidden in the field” (Bonhoeffer). It is God who we want to “welcome in our midst. Jesus is the Light of the World . . . the one who can help us understand each other better and grow in the truth” (88).

Professor Flaman’s investigations truly enrich the reader’s understanding of Christian moral principles. *Sex, Love and Marriage in the Light of Following Jesus* is also a major contribution in the field in terms of its ability to reach to students, staff, and the general reader. Flaman is truly a scholar who brings out of the treasury of Christian life things both old and new, all seen in the light of following Jesus (11).