

LOVE, LUST AND LIFE



Discussion paper

Council of Churches in the Netherlands

Contribution of the Advisory Group on Faith and Ecclesial Community of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands to the reflection process on human sexuality within the World Council of Churches and its constituency.

LOVE, LUST AND LIFE

Eros, passion for the possible good, and Christian agape

1. The Christian view of human life is the fruit of centuries of reflection on the specific calling and destiny of humankind to live in a way acceptable to God, as man and woman created in the image of God, destined to live according to God's criteria; God's rule, God's kingdom, *basileia tou theou*, as unfolded to us in the scriptures and as proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ (1 John 2:3-23; 3:21-24). At its core is the awareness of the gratuity of life as granted to humans and of the commitment to the good connected with it. We are to manage life in all its facets according to God's standards and in close conjunction with our environment: earth, water, air and light (the Law and the Prophets). Its highest norm, as Jesus proclaims, is love, where God can be found (1 John 4:7-16). It fosters peace, justice and respect for all living creatures. It is stronger than death (1 Corinthians 13).

2. We humans celebrate together the gifts of love; we sing the canticle of love. Eros, the lust for play together, the deep longing for intimacy, for the embrace, the union with the other and bodily pleasure, plays a great and natural role. In true love, this eros is embedded in a *passion for the good*: the joy, the happiness of the other and the desire to be a part of it. Here is where Christian agape is realised; in the love of God and one's neighbour. We humans are, after all, dependent on and dedicated to each other: we cannot do without the other, we are not born out of ourselves, we cannot get through life without each other, and no one lives or dies for him or herself alone. In friendship and partnership, respect and solidarity, longing and lust for each other, peace and rest with each other, we share body and mind, food and drink, breath and spirit, every morning anew, all the days of our lives. This gift of life is sacred to us, but no one has greater love than those who risk their lives for their friends. A full life is thus joy and play, but also compassion and solace, faithful care for each other on both good and bad days, full of confidence, full of longing, full of passion for the possible good, and full of resistance to evil: danger and illness, crime and misery, indifference and sin. A full life is a passion against death.

Our bodily life: a gift from God

3. All of this is fulfilled in our physical existence. As such, our bodies are God's good gifts of creation. Eyes and ears, nose and lips, skin and hair, hands and feet, head and heart and kidneys, marrow and bone, chest and belly and thighs, all vital fluids and all the cells of our bodies: everything expires the Spirit of God that is breathed into us. We cannot detect any parts of our body that are either noble or ignoble, clean or unclean, or holy or profane as such. The body provides the essentials of our human condition, by which we are who we are, this person, someone who can be spoken to, with a name and a face, from the baby in its mother's womb to the corpse of the deceased, from which we depart with respect. Our physical existence

determines where we live, our address, our habitat, our needs and instincts. Bible interpretation and theology have at times emphasized the body as the source of aggression and violence, of the domination of women by men, of the abuse of passion and lust and of the turning away from God's commandments. Reality forces us to recognise that much evil lurks in the human heart and that sin, which is acting against the will and the rule of God (*aversio a Deo*), is never far away. However, this sin does not reside in our physical existence, nor in the normal bodily functions of lust and pain, illness or health, or the desire to touch and to be touched. We can, after all, experience our physical life as a holy gift from God, as *kairos* in time, as a protest against death. None of this separates us from God's love; it is precisely in our fragile corporality that we also experience that nothing is permanently ours, that we cannot possess anything indefinitely. The finiteness of our life, which we share with all that lives, the limitations on our possibilities, the sexual differentiation and irrevocable alterity of sex and gender, the coincidence of our existence, the uniqueness of our biography: together these determine the gravity of everyone's life. However, it is not a 'brutish gravity', due to the freedom that remains thanks to our consciousness and our conscience, *con-scientia*: it is not without our knowledge that we are who we are through our bodies, our senses, our language, our views of the world, our different identities as man or woman. We become the unique person that we are in community with others. Being spoken to and being able to speak, the feeling of responsibility towards our own bodies and those of others, caring for one another and choosing freely between here and there, this or that, him or her, good or evil; all these human characteristics make us accountable for our way of life and turn our physical processes and actions into aims and intentions, and so into human behaviour. What we call 'free will' is always the interaction of physical data and conscious intentions and goals. This is not a dichotomy of flesh and spirit; neither is it an equivalence. We as free persons are more than well-functioning organisms or systems of stimuli (that odd illusion held by physiological determinism), but without these functions and reaction patterns our freedom would be rather restricted, we would lose the way, be relegated to the sickbed, and finally, rigid to the bone. Thus, as people we seek more than passion and lust in friendship and the love of a partner, we are more to each other than playthings of pleasure, yet without physical longing, our glances and kisses, and our inviting and caressing hands, the way we love each other would be much chillier and more distant.

To live together: an interactive path through life

4. Our conscience and our consciousness, which make us the people God intended, are the result of the cumulative experiences of people in interaction with each other. We do not arrive in the world alone, we do not grow up in solitude, but with language and symbols, and we are led by others who feed us, raise us, and show us the way. We are also stamped by our environment and by the context and the culture in which we grow up. In our present multicoloured and interactive society, we meet people with strongly contrasting values and convictions. This pluralism also carries through into our manners, the character of our relationships and our sexual

behaviour. We must therefore seek out what in this intercultural exchange is mere fashion and hype and what is truly durable and can remain, for that which is truly good and leads to peace, as well as that which is essentially bad and degrading.

We have begun to correct the patriarchal male-female relationships of the cultural inheritance of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Superfluous taboos related to the perception of our bodies and of the sexual experience of lust have been overcome. Yet in many places, this has not stopped violence towards women and children. The decline of taboos has also given way to shamelessness and the violation of the physical integrity of the other. Such sexual abuses as incest and rape, sexual intimidation and the trafficking of women, and forced prostitution to the profit of pimps, are unfortunately almost daily news and not just in far-away places.

In the face of this ambivalence towards human eroticism and sexuality, relationships and marriage, the church community has the right and the duty to speak directive words and to protest against sinful behaviour, but above all, to bring about an environment of faith and trust. The church community can work preventively through frank discussions about both the value and the abuse of sexual lust. The church will stand by the victims of guilty behaviour and help them. It will not support sexual injustice and abuse, or legitimate sexual violence; it will oppose impunity and not hinder the enforcement of just punishment. If it concerns church members, the church will exhort offenders to penance and seek atonement for the victims, and, if possible, help them on their way to respectful sexual behaviour and real love for people.

God's Word about our relationships and its explanation in the churches

5. Christians trace the directives for their behaviour back to the Word of God in the scriptures. However, it is not always possible to obtain direct links between the answers of the past and the questions of today. That is why the words of the scripture are discussed within the faith community of the church, in which the faithful learn to give direction to their lives. Over the passage of time and in various cultural contexts, the directive word of the church as its interpretation of the Word of God has not always been fortunate. Attitudes hostile to the body, chauvinistic Bible interpretation, misplaced views about normal or so-called natural sexuality and abnormal or perverse sexual behaviours, and prudish attitudes to uncontrolled sexual desire have not endeared the Christian church to many of our contemporaries. Instead, more efforts should have been put into protesting against the use of violence in relationships, even in legitimate sexual relationships.

Much traditional Bible interpretation does indeed require rereading. The story about the adulterous woman in John 8:1-12 serves as an example. It seems that on closer reading, it is not primarily a moralistic story against adultery, but a rather critical witness of Jesus' opposition to the male hypocrisy of his persecutors. In Matthew 19:2-10, Jesus turns directly against the male morality that allows men to send their wives away at their whim. Church tradition read these words of Jesus as saying that even when a woman is guilty of adultery, divorce is not automatic. The emphasis thus came to be placed on the permanence of the bonds of marriage for the

protection of women and children. However, can one actually read in Matthew 19 that Jesus meant that marriages could not be dissolved, even in cases of complete breakdown or persistent domestic violence, that after the drama of a broken marriage, people are not allowed to look for another partner, or that if they did, that they should be excluded from full participation in church life and the sacraments? The opinions of the various churches differ greatly on this point, and sometimes they adhere to rules of conduct that are no longer considered adequate by many faithful in the present social climate.

As regards the attitude towards homosexuals, there are Bible verses in Genesis 19 and Judges 19, but these have more to do with the rape of men than with homosexual love relationships or pairing. The same applies to verses in Paul's letters that convey his warnings against debauchery in the community, whether of heterosexual or homosexual nature. Following Israel and Paul, churches have tried to ban any evil related to sexual behaviour from the community. Should that be a reason to condemn homosexual orientation and homosexual friendships as such, let alone to discriminate against homosexuals?

Perhaps there are better means of changing and improving behaviour than anathema and condemnation. Justice and mercy only have a chance when we dare to see the evil in our midst, especially when we turn our attention to the victims of evil, instead of preoccupying ourselves with trying to keep our backyards tidy by excluding offenders from the community of God. That is why churches should first speak of the liberation and trust inherent in the wealth of joy and intense happiness that the gift of sexual pleasure contains, without losing sight of the possible abuse, ambivalence, dangers and potential sinful behaviour.

From what has already been said, our ecumenical convictions could be stated as follows: *There is nothing unclean or unholy about the human body, nothing threatening or sinful about our naked skin, nothing evil in passion and lust, nothing is wrong with friendship and the warm nearness of people.* The dance, the kiss, the play of lovers, their lovemaking and mating; all this carries its own meaning; it does not have any purpose or significance; it is just there, as a pure gift and source of joy. Believers may say that God has seen fit to create pleasure in man. God has also seen fit to do so through our sexual differences and through the otherness of a love partner.

At the same time, we are called as churches to joint protest against the dishonouring and violation of the other, through the trafficking of women and child pornography, and against sexual violence and abuse, which happen all too often in our own churches, and has been affecting women and minors over the centuries.

What might unite churches through all cultural differences is the acknowledgement that our body, our physicality and our ability to love, together with our capacity for erotic play, are God's gift of creation; a vulnerable gift that needs protection against the all-too-passionate human weaknesses; that within power relations this gift always becomes deformed and loses its creative power. In their theological, pastoral, liturgical and ethical reflection related to this life-granting gift from God, churches in various cultures should help one another as brothers and sisters, rather than become each other's judges.

We all live in cultures in which many people are harmed by a marked inability to maintain mutual respect in communities. We all also live in cultures in which many have nonetheless found the way to deep love and lasting mutual care. All of these human experiences can be a source of wisdom for churches so that they may be prudent and open in recognising and talking about this gift of God, and continue to pass it on to people who are trying to follow the path of living together in love.

Thus, we as churches can say together: *We earnestly repent for having not convincingly enough confirmed and confessed the blessings of sexual enjoyment, and for having not protested strongly enough against the curse of sexual violence and abuse.*

Men and women: created equal in the image of God

6. The sexual differentiation between women and men is an important biological and anthropological fact, not only because of relations of a sexual nature or of reproductive mechanisms, but on the grounds of the differences themselves. Being human and being different are so connected that it is precisely in the observation of the differences and their cultivation that we find the building blocks of human culture: language and gender, sex and role patterns, separate women's and men's cultures, and also male-female eroticism and lyricism: they are filled with the principle of differentiation that implies change and identity, relationship and dialogue, renewal and adventure. The irretrievable and unbridgeable difference is physically visible, yet does not betray its secret through culture and upbringing in various contexts. It is the boundary between masculine and feminine, patriarchal and matriarchal subjectivity determined through the fundamental alterity of the other, one of God's gifts of creation from the beginning (Genesis 1:26-27).

This alterity is not the only one, of course. Every human being is unique both as a centre of consciousness and activity and as the object of desire and relationship. The boundary with the other can never be bridged completely, neither can it between equals and friends, and certainly not with such differences in position as those between the old and the young, the hearing and the deaf, the blind and the sighted, or white and black. We have to live with these differences and to learn to experience them as enriching: myriads of opportunities for life, as creative ways of being human, of which none exhausts all the possibilities. Unfortunately, this alterity has also been the reason for alienation and xenophobia, suppression of one group by another and stereotypes based on cultural prejudices of one group against another. Racism, sexism, nationalism and chauvinism are their expressions. Because of the general nature of sexual alterity, sexism is perhaps the most prevalent form of alienation and prejudice among humans.

In all cultures known to us, from the cradle to the grave men have had more opportunities and their limitations are different from those of women, not only because of their biological differences, but also, and often even more so, based on deep-rooted cultural patterns that almost always seem to work to the disadvantage of women. Women in Western culture still have to carry out most of the caring tasks, while men determine policy and pursue a career. Women are

still the ones who take care of the children long after the fathers have left them and their children. The way in which Christian preaching and theology have interpreted the sex differences (with man as first created, the man as the head of the woman, women having to obey their husbands) has had far-reaching effects on these cultural tendencies, and continue to do so in some places. The 'sexual liberation' in the North Atlantic region has brought women a more equal position, but has at the same time decreased their chances for stable and enduring relationships.

There is thus still much to accomplish in bringing about the equality of men and women in sexual relationships. This is necessary because such equal partnerships between men and women in long-term intimate relations, with the bliss of eros and the passion for the good, provide us with a cloak of love that protects humanity. Furthermore, an equal relationship is a precondition for mutual respect. Meetings and relationships, friendship and love between people who differ from each other but treat each other equally, form the cement of social cohesion and the motor behind cultural evolution (see Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, New York/London, 2002).

Love, an art and a skill

7. Yet love and friendship, meetings and relationships, are vulnerable and require practice, maintenance and durability. They require time and are not born from one-night stands; they need the imagination of a thousand and one nights, intimate confidentiality, daily tenderness, concern and care, reliability and faithfulness. Loving is an art and a skill that has to be learned through experience. Committing yourselves to each other for life in a joint life project is thus a continuous adventure, a vulnerable covenant. Partners for life may or may not come across one's path, the choice of partner in the form we know it is a mutual event, relationships can break down, love can cool, divorce has become commonplace, broken families are a sad reality, deceit and abandonment are always a breach of a person's personal dignity, a disgraceful split in the biography of the parents, children and grandchildren, both for men and women, for heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. In the experience and in the imagination of the play of love and sex, brute force and power, aggression and violence may dominate. Commerce has conquered what was meant as a free gift of grace and love to one another: in advertising and films human bodies are turned into objects of lust to increase profit through higher viewer numbers. The abuse of women and children and tasteless pornography are excesses of sexual behaviour, products of the violence of the human heart, expressions of the beast in man. The Christian culture of sexual behaviour is keenly aware of all this and stands against it in powerful revolt. However, this must not lead to the abhorrence or rejection of sexual pleasure as such.

What we have learned in ecumenical dialogue is that it is not desire as such that is sinful, but the desire that violates the partner's integrity, freedom and dignity. Furthermore, it is not marriage as such that sanctifies, but it is a holy calling, indeed, to care for each other, to honour

and understand each other. In this way, love and sexuality become an art and a skill, a life-long calling.

Yet not for eternity

8. It is within the scope of human free will to choose not to engage in sexual relations and intimate partnerships with others. There are people who consciously choose to live alone, and there are others who are in that position after the loss of their partner or because they have never found a partner. No one has to remain alone, but being single may well be either one's lot or a conscious choice that deserves respect and that in its own way can bare the fruits of love. Throughout the ages, ascetics and monks have lived their lives without a partner, in lonely contemplation or in a community of people who wished to share the same way of life. Coenobitic or monastic life and celibacy, as required of priests and bishops in Western Latin churches and of bishops in Eastern Orthodox churches, has produced its own cultural and ideological fruits: it can be a sign of the eschatological reality of God's kingdom, in which, according to the gospel of Jesus, marriage relationships and physical lust are irrelevant. Celibacy allowed people to be free from the daily care of a family as well as to dedicate themselves fully to prayer, study, emergency relief, or mission. Celibate monastic life also made possible the renunciation of personal possessions and a life of austerity by way of prophetic criticism of all forms of excessive affluence and capital holdings. To live in such a way implies a special calling not given to many.

Where celibacy became required, it also produced constraints and sometimes hypocrisy, not to speak of such things as the misuse of the pastoral profession and immature sexuality. It has led to a dominant male culture in the churches of both the East and the West and to the high degree of clericalism that developed because of the protected world of celibates, who often had little to do with the concerns of everyday life. This is one of the reasons why the Reformers opposed celibacy and chose to separate ministry from celibacy. There are also cultures in which as a sign of the evangelical life in following the way of Jesus celibacy does not work because other values have greater priority; for example, having children, solidarity between men and women, the rejection of clericalism, the importance of intimate personal contacts and friendships in a mass culture such as that of the West. The question may be posed: how can the game of love and passion, how can all the joyful but sometimes also painful experiences around sexuality and relationships be adequately set on the congregation's agenda, if it is only men living in celibacy whose words are decisive?

Rules of life for good order

9. In the traditions of Christian anthropology and Christian ethics regarding friendship, pairing, eroticism and sexual behaviour, partnership and marriage, regulations have arisen around the creaturely fact of human sexuality. They serve as a protective cloak, but may also be

experienced as a straightjacket and a chastity belt, restraining and repressing passion and desire, leading to forced unions and fostering forbidden relationships. Reverence and recoil towards each other's very body have led to shame and a fear of nakedness even up to the quite recent past. In the history of the art of love (*ars erotica, ars amandi*), the sphere of the contract was often dominant: the right to each other's bodies, a partner selected by the parents, negotiations as to the dowry and the sharing of goods (see: John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion and Law in the Western Tradition*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1997). Sexuality was regulated from the viewpoint of duties and rights, reproduction and progeny, family possessions, the protection of the unborn child and the care of children, as well as people's care for each other for better or worse, on good and bad days. The present task is to recalibrate the regulations in such a way that they do not hinder love and passion, the zest for life and the joy of life, yet promote the protection of human dignity and the equality of marriage partners.

10. Christian churches have developed values and norms, rituals and forms that differ in time and place, social and economical circumstances, just as the Jewish people had done previously and as also occurred in Islam and other religions. They have contributed to the culture of human relations, but have derived even more from it (Jos van Ussel, *Geschiedenis van het sexuelle probleem*, Boom, Meppel, 1968; Michel Foucault, *The history of sexuality*, Penguin, London, 1987). Patriarchal structures derived from old Eastern family law, Hellenistic family patterns, and German tribal practices made the husband not only the protector and head of the family, but also the owner and master of his wife (or wives). Monogamous marriage gradually developed from polygamous forms of sexual relationships. The free play of eroticism and sexual pleasure became regulated within an 'economical' structure of reproduction and the care of offspring. To the extent that the main economic structure permitted it (mainly in periods of social growth and prosperity, or as an expression of festive outlet and waste in the midst of scarcity), there was a place for 'courtly love', for relationships outside the family, and for homosexual relations and forms of free sex without lasting bonds. The regulation of eroticism and sexuality is thus not a specific Christian fact, but a product of culture, which itself generates cultures, and that can change according to time and place.

11. The suggestion that religion and the church discovered rules regarding sexuality and imposed them on people based on the order of creation or the natural law of God, is clearly not in line with the long evolution of human sexual behavioural patterns. One form of sexual behaviour is no more 'natural' than any other, even though there are clear criteria for real humane sexuality that are anchored in culture and supported and protected by such religious convictions as: Thou shalt not dishonour one another; thou shalt not use violence; thou shalt not give free rein to thy desires at the cost of another; thou shalt not cause offence through improper behaviour; thou shalt not compel another to prostitution; thou shalt not perform incestuous acts; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt father children only with thine own wife and only from thy husband

shalt thou bear children; thou shalt not abandon thy partner and children (see Leviticus 18; 19:29; 20:10-21; Deuteronomy 22). Also, in the light of Jesus' gospel, we read: forgive each other, seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), who is without sin may cast the first stone (John 8:7), who flirts with another man's wife (or another woman's husband) or goes to bed with her (or him), has sinned already (Matthew 5:28).

12. Many of these rules have come to be seen in a different light through changed social and technical circumstances. Urbanization has taken over from the earlier agricultural economy. Social control is replaced by privacy and anonymity. Work and home are mostly separated. The individualization of income, tax and insurance, work and school, sport and free time have eroded the idea of the family as a unit of parents and children within a few decennia. The sharpening split in society also has different effects on relationships. While there is no shortage in the choice of sexual relationships for the affluent, a number of limitations are imposed on refugees and migrants as to partner choice and the reuniting of families.

Equal opportunities, roles and tasks for men and women have become new values in the West. The playful character of eroticism and sexual contact with one another has come to the fore. The openness and confidences regarding the *Intimsphäre* have become much greater. They create a new circuit of information and advice, exchange of experiences and stimulation of fantasy, but also a new pattern of expectation that unites happiness with a varied and gratifying sex life. The birth rate has dropped considerably; the wanted and cherished child is a contemporary ideal, and sexual contact without the risk of unwanted pregnancy has become possible through a wide choice of contraceptives. Procreation with the help of medical techniques and genetic counselling with a view to having healthy children has brought about a new 'economic structure' for the experience of sexuality. Increased life expectancy, delayed choice in committing to lasting relationships, and the increased prosperity that serial monogamy has made possible, put much more pressure on the life-long and indissoluble marriage of the past.

Beyond shame?

13. A new body culture has also arisen. We engage in sports more often, we live closer to one another, we have removed all veils, at least in the West, we pamper our bodies with fragrances and colours, baths and suntans. We want to be without wrinkles and blemishes, because that is how the ideal is conjured up to us in TV commercials and glossy magazines. We have liberated ourselves to proud physicality and cast off much shame. That also leads to the unabashed exploitation of physicality: the pressure to perform and the use of drugs in sport, pornography in every newsstand, a sexualized society in word and image and pop culture, unwanted intimacy, sexual abuse and commercial sex. Our free body and our sexual liberation need new rules for inoffensive, respectful relations with each other, and for body language that does not deny the divine in human life and that keeps the beast in us in check. The Jewish and

Christian vision of the human body, the holy temple of God's Spirit, the mysterious carrier of the image of God, the invaluable product of divine pottery (Genesis 2:7), divine transplantation technique (Genesis 2:22), or divine weaving (Psalms 139, 13), can form a healthy balance against an all-too-common culture of body-building and performance that has also come to dominate talk about sexuality. The unmarried, widows, the handicapped, the sick and the elderly are also welcome in the community of God and actually deserve a place of honour. In contrast, machos and sexists, whoremongers and debauchers are forcefully admonished and excluded from participation in the celebration of the new covenant without conversion and repentance.

The homosexual way of life

14. The increasing equality between men and women has not only changed the traditional patriarchal, male-dominated lifestyle, but has also put the predominant heterosexual cultural pattern under pressure. Homosexual contacts, friendships and relationships, although of all time, are no longer taboo. Homosexual unions are officially legalised in some countries, and church members are asking churches to bless homosexual relationships. It is expected nowadays that homosexual friendship and love, homosexual feelings and the gay culture have an equal place in the public domain. This has been an enormous liberation for many people. At the same time, many churches, church leaders and church members, as well as faithful Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, have fundamental objections.

Some people would distinguish between various forms and contexts of homosexual behaviour: incidental homosexual sex in situations in which heterosexual contacts over a prolonged period of time are difficult or impossible; experimental homosexual sex by adolescents in search of their identity or as an exploration of the physical experience of lust; the explicitly gay culture of free and unattached, or in any case, varying same sex contacts; the homosexual sex that occurs in prostitution, and finally, the lasting partnership of two homosexual lovers who may or may not have their relationship sealed or blessed in public in either a registry office or a church. It is unnecessarily hurtful to speak of these in terms of sickness or unbalanced growth, of sin and guilt, simply because two people of the same sex are involved. The respectful recognition of a person's homosexual orientation or inclination after his or her coming out has the effect of relieving guilt. Homosexual community members have to feel welcome in the faith community, and the church should publicly deplore the centuries of exclusion and discrimination.

Aside from the traditional Bible passages that seem to prohibit same sex relations or to support heterosexuality as God's order for creation (Genesis 1-2; 19:1-28; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; Romans 1:26-27), there is a whole gamut of theoretical approaches that try to 'explain' the phenomenon of homosexuality (deviant behaviour, a developmental disorder, a genetically determined trick of nature, a sexual variation as the result of cultural trends, or as a result of a long-term stay with a group of people all of the

same sex). There is also the appeal to tradition and the doctrinal authority of churches and religions that have rejected homosexuality throughout the ages. The theological anthropology that lies behind this rejection is based primarily on the concept of the law of nature: ‘same-sex acts’ do not have procreation as a main purpose, lifelong partnership is not usually their goal, and they disrupt the ‘normal’ heterosexual expectations of the culture: few parents of homosexual children are able to accept the fact readily and without pain or to share the news with their friends. Finally, it is alleged that homosexual behaviour denies the God-given natural difference between the sexes. Although the actual ‘coming out’ of homosexuals in Western societies seems to break open the ghetto character of homosexual subcultures, there is still a cultural ‘xenophobia’ as regards specific homosexual cultures. Some would even claim that the rejection of homosexuality could be traced back to the historical xenophobia associated with the idea of a chosen people and the exclusion processes that go with it. The Platonic, Gnostic, Augustinian and Cartesian dualism of body and spirit are also cited. Whatever the case, homosexuals have not had an easy time of it in the history of most religions. They are still viewed from the heterosexual perspective, which is considered to be normal and ‘well-ordered’ sexuality. They had no say in the Christian discourse. They took their refuge in a subculture that expresses itself mainly in literature and the theatre.

In many cultures, the taboo still stands. Even if we warmly endorse the idea that no one may be discriminated against on the grounds of their sexual orientation or homosexual lifestyle (which is actually supported in Christian churches and in many civil laws), questions remain as to the recognition of homosexual behaviour that in many cases is seen as deviant or unnatural, and over which the church can express forgiveness, but cannot declare the confirmation of its blessing. Why would the love of homosexuals not be blessed by God and be for them a blessing? Why should they not be called to search for the good in their passion, care and concern for each other, and be supported by the prayer of the church community?

That is not to say that all forms of homosexual behaviour are immune to criticism, any less than all forms of heterosexual behaviour. Such acts as varying sexual contacts, bought and sold lust, sex clubs and partner swapping, pornography, violence and rape, and sex with minors, can neither be considered humane sexual behaviour, nor can they be thought of as acceptable, whether in a Christian homosexual culture or in a Christian heterosexual culture. The ideals of fidelity on good as well as bad days, of care for each other, and of the marriage of eros and agape apply to both equally.

Standard values for love and lust

15. In the growth towards a truly humane experience of passion, bodily love and care for each other in an orderly and peaceful society, both believers and non-believers face the same challenges. None of the many forms of expression of human sexuality as such can be morally disqualified. Neither as an experience of lust, nor as a form of play or contact, or as a physical or spiritual adventure to the peaks of sensual experience, is sexual enjoyment wrong or misplaced

in itself. At the same time, human sexuality, through its disarming character and the vulnerable surrender to the other, requires great responsibility, tenderness and respect for the other. The expectations of the other play just as much a role as does keeping under control one's own feelings of lust, jealousy, attention and self-respect. It is thus that every culture develops human standard values for the quality of sexual relationships. It appears that most people prefer relatively stable friendships as a precondition for sexual relations above forms of unlimited promiscuity or self-gratification. The majority also strive for monogamy. Why? It is the otherness of the face-to-face contact and the sharing of each other's physical experience of security, tenderness, passion and warmth that are bound with the fact of sexual alterity and that, once shared, long for more, and require reliability and faithfulness.

16. Eros and passion for the good remain susceptible to misuse, double motives, egoism and *egoisme-à-deux*, parties can get out of hand, and relationships can fail. The experience of lust can become an obsession; sexual violence is an all-too-sad reality. Christian anthropology should look out for growth, and be aware of ambivalence and failure. The determination of punishment, prohibitions and taboos have been seen not to be the most appropriate way to foster and protect the ideal of Christian agape under the arrows of eros. The concentration on the physical sexual act as such, the sexual experience reduced to the sex act or coitus, often only described in masculine terms, offers no suitable pointers for right behaviour. The economic approach to sexuality from the primary focus on procreation leads to distorted attention to human intercourse and interaction: one cannot spend one's whole life thinking of sex as producing children: it takes too long before one is ready for that, and responsible parenthood demands that there are upper limits to the number of children and the age of having them. The same economic approach has also led to illogical and obscure taboos on the individual gratification of passion as defilement (*pollutio*) and the spilling of the seeds of life (*perditio seminis*). Even if individual sexual satisfaction does not attain the ideal of the creaturely potential of eroticism and sexuality, there is no reason to speak here of unnatural behaviour, let alone of sin, as a large part of the Christian tradition has done. As we have learned from psychiatry and pastoral care, much neurotic and psychic pathology has been born out of this religious taboo. The taboo on homosexual behaviour seems to have derived from this taboo. It would do well for churches if they were to openly confess their historical guilt regarding this, in order to attain greater credibility in honouring and preaching the ideal of a humane experience of sexuality.

The blessed marriage covenant: enduring faithfulness and painful ruptures

17. Since the twelfth century, in honouring the canticle of love, the Christian tradition has found liturgical forms to uphold the life project of company, commitment and faithfulness to a partner and to place this covenant under the protection of the Highest. In much of the Christian tradition, this is considered as a mysterious, sacramental reality, which Paul compared to the link between the living Christ and the community of his church (Ephesians 5). Marriage and the

family are spoken of as a ‘church in miniature’ (*ecclesiola*): where two or three are gathered in the name of the Messiah (Matthew 18:20), the gathering by God out of the dispersion, out of confusion and loneliness, is already begun, and the *koinonia toon haioon* forged and anchored. Forms of youth education and pastoral counselling have developed around the liturgical act of the blessing and confirmation of the marriage bond between people, in which the abovementioned values and rules may be dealt with and communicated.

In spite of their marriage bonds, ever more people, including a proportionate number of Christians, have seen marriages fail and end in divorce, with or without the consent of both partners. Most Orthodox, Anglican and Reformed churches have found ways to give the divorced and remarried a place in the faith community, on the condition that commitments regarding care of the previous partner and any children of the previous marriage are met with, and, if there was adultery, violence or dishonouring of the partner, that a confession of guilt and reconciliation have taken place. In many cases, it is not possible to trace who or what was guilty of the separation. It might come out that divorce was simply necessary so that both could again find peace and joy in life.

From the perspective of the unity of the church and from the perspective of certain situations (for example, mixed marriages), it is regrettable that churches do not follow a shared policy on this issue. There are churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church and a number of Evangelical religious communities, that hold strict regulations on this point, such that remarried divorced people in general cannot have a full place in the community of the church. The Roman Catholic Church denies remarried divorced people participation in the Eucharist and access to positions in the church, unless a church judge has annulled the first marriage or can dissolve it on certain grounds. According to the feelings of many, the correct care of the abandoned stands in the way here of real reconciliation with the remarried. Prevention of evil and punishment for sin (due to not keeping to the ideal of faithfulness in marriage, the injustice of a broken contract and the violation of a divine commandment), should not stand in the way of forgiveness and the granting of a second chance. Jesus’ words “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder” (Matthew 19:6) is a Christian marriage ideal, not per se a general injunction against divorce. Churches should be prepared to share and learn from each other’s interpretations of the Bible and pastoral experience. There are various contexts in which marriages fail: extreme poverty that forces migration or prostitution, times of war or dictatorships during which people lose each other, expulsion from parental authority, violence, alcohol abuse, theft of money or neglect of the partner, child abuse, and, finally, total breakdown of communication and a ruined atmosphere that counselling and therapy cannot restore. Many ask themselves how in these cases a general punitive sanction, such as the prohibition against a second marriage, could be at all just.

Love: lust and life to the glory and praise of God

18. According to Alain de Lille (1120-1203), entering into a Christian marital covenant for life is an exceptionally risky enterprise that deserves the respect and the prayers of the whole church. The couple wish to follow the example of Jesus and devote their lives to each other unto death. Such a marriage should not be taken for granted; it is more an evangelical vocation than a generalised Christian duty. Whoever takes this on does so with the church's promise of support, because it is a covenant chosen out of free will that is celebrated in front of the church community and that few are able to or dare to take on. This union is to the glory of God and to the salvation of both partners and their children, never to their doom, fear or oppression. That is why no one should be forced into it. Couples who are not ready for this level of commitment must be dissuaded from entering into it. In the case of complete breakdown, it must be possible for the church to dissolve it.

It would be good if Christian churches were to follow a joint code of conduct for the confirmation of marriage, for pastoral protocol in cases of permanent marriage breakdown, and for divorce and new marital relationships. Unfortunately, as regards this area of life, great differences between churches in various cultural circumstances have developed such that discussion has hardly begun. It would be even better if they could apply the principles of the canticle of love so that these principles infused the cultural forms of expression of human eros and our passion for the possible good without ignoring or despising them, or rejecting them as sinful. Religious criteria for the sinful and the holy have changed over time and place, and this is especially so as regards eroticism and sexuality. What in olden days was experienced as mysterious and dangerous (for example, orgasm, pregnancy and labour), has since been physiologically unravelled. What was considered unclean has now become anything but dirty thanks to hygiene. In the passing of the centuries there has been a strong 'sexualization' of sin and evil, first of all in Augustine's time, in debate with Manichaeism, in the medieval struggle for monasticism and celibacy, then after the Reformation and after the Council of Trent via a growing control on the lifestyle of church members through the exercise of discipline and confession, and finally through the adoption of Victorian morality in denominational education and in catechisms from the 19th century. We now see much more clearly that sin and evil lie in the use of violence in society, in exploitation and domination by people of one another, and in the violation of human rights and the debasement of a person's integrity. It is not only Adam and Eve's transgression that characterises us humans from the beginning, wanting to determine for ourselves what is good and what is evil (Genesis 3), but also the rivalry and jealousy between their sons Cain and Able: claiming God's favour, if necessary to the cost of another's life (Genesis 4).

On the other hand, Jesus asked his followers to hesitate before removing the weeds from among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30) and to leave the judgement of people over to God, to forgive seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22), and to confess one's own sins before stoning others for theirs (John 8:7). He was not concerned with his own gain, but gave his life for the welfare of all; his passion was a passion for the perfect good according to God's will. In love, lust and life, Christians are invited to follow his example. That also makes them aware that love

and lust are aspects of earthly life, which will be followed by even greater favours from God after this life: getting married and being married are then no longer relevant, death and mourning and tears even less so; the abandoned and eunuchs will sit with fathers and mothers and children, and also with monks and sages who lived their lives in celibacy by way of prophetic sign. Christians will also realise that relatives, family and descendants are not the only important people in one's life; nor the physical gratification and union with the other, but only the honour and praise of God, who can also be served and glorified in solitude. It is those who have sung the canticle of love with heart and soul, body and mind, who will experience the joy of the kingdom just as much as any ascetic, "for the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink [that is, the rules of the Law], but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17).

Utrecht, March 7, 2005

Council of Churches in the Netherlands
Advisory Group on Faith and Ecclesial Community