

Australian EJournal of Theology

AUGUST 2005 - ISSUE 5 - ISSN 1448 - 632



ABSTRACT

This is a continuation of a series about ideas, values and attitudes. It follows the previously published essays: 'Passionately for Peace: Virginia Woolf and Benedict XV in Conversation' ([AEJT Issue 2](#)) and 'In the Age of Dictators: Edith Stein and Pius XI in Conversation' ([AEJT Issue 3](#)). It is designed to bring together women and men in conversation in an atmosphere of mutual interest and respect. It brings together feminism and the Catholic tradition.

The structure adopted for this work is the literary device of the dinner party and two fictional friends, Monica and Catherine, are involved with the author in the project. The conversation of Simone de Beauvoir and Pius XII is based on their writings, with only the necessary adaptation to the dinner party situation. It focuses on religion and the Church before moving on to the problem of the Virgin Mary; the relationship between woman and man; marriage, motherhood and the family; sexuality and chastity; abortion; and World War II.

Some background information

Pius XI died on the eve of the Second World War. It fell to the lot of his successor, Pius XII, to steer the Church through the horror of the Second World War and its aftermath. The tragedy of this war involved acts of inhumanity that left people feeling hopeless, helpless and profoundly disillusioned. Existentialism, concerned with the broad phenomenology of human experience, emerged from the European philosophical tradition to speak to the anguish and alienation of the times, addressing such human concerns as suffering and death, the sense of cosmic absurdity and the limitations of human reason.

As in the case of the First World War, the Second World War opened up increased work opportunities for women, and many gained a degree of freedom from family control that they had not experienced before. In the aftermath of the war, however, both men and women sought refuge from the carnage in marriage and family life. Rapidly the independent woman, who had emerged in the first wave of feminism in the early decades of the century, became absorbed in the domestic sphere.

We chose as our feminist guest for this dinner party the French existentialist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir. She and Pope Pius XII had lived through the First and Second World Wars and their aftermaths. This time our feminist guest was an ex-Catholic and we agreed that it was going to be interesting to see what middle ground, if any, would emerge in the course of the conversation.

Introducing Simone de Beauvoir

When she died in 1986 Simone de Beauvoir was summed up in an obituary by the *New York Times* as a French writer, leftist, activist and one who shared the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, her long-term companion. She was said to be best known for her polemical works, especially *The Second Sex*, which was described as 'a long, angry treatise on the oppressed state of women in society ... that became a primer of the international radical feminist movement.'



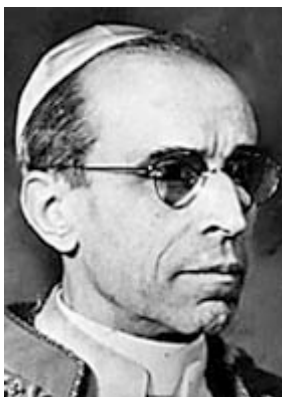
Simone, the elder of two daughters, was born in Paris in 1908 into a respected, conservative, middle class family of declining means. In contrast to the agnosticism of her father, Simone's mother was a devout Catholic. Both parents were extremely interested in her education and she was encouraged in every way to develop her talents, of which they were proud. She attended a convent school and harboured a secret childhood desire to become a Carmelite, but in adolescence, under the influence of her father, she moved into a more sceptical mode of thought.

After excelling in secondary school, Simone went to the Sorbonne, the University of Paris, where she studied philosophy and met Jean-Paul Sartre, who was eventually to be popularly hailed as the father of post-war existentialism. Sartre's thinking captivated Simone. As she rebelled against her parents' restrictions, she became, as she perceived it, more self-determining, and she entered into a non-contractual but intimate association with Sartre, who explained to her: 'What we have is an essential love; but it is a good idea for us also to experience contingent love affairs.' Such contingent affairs were engaged in by both - much more often, however, by Sartre.

Simone graduated brilliantly and held various teaching posts while engaging in writing. After experiencing problems with the educational authorities, from 1943 she gave her time fully to writing. In 1945 she joined Sartre in editing the monthly review, *Les Temps Modernes*. By 1954 she had become a successful, internationally known author.

Simone's outlook in life was never as pessimistic as that of Sartre. In her later years she engaged in public social and political action. Though a famous literary figure, she avoided literary salons and television appearances living quietly alone near to Sartre for whom she cared during his dying days – not, however, without a tussle with his current 'contingent love'.

Introducing Pope Pius XII



Eugenio Pacelli was born in 1876 into an aristocratic family, the son of the dean of the Vatican lawyers. From childhood Eugenio had been very pious, with a deep devotion to Mary. He early indicated his desire to be a priest. Being delicate in health he studied for the priesthood privately and was ordained in 1899. He was appointed professor of law at the Roman Seminary before being invited to join the papal secretariat of state.

Throughout World War I Pacelli supervised such works as the exchanging of prisoners and the transportation of wounded to

hospitals. In May 1917 he was sent as papal nuncio to Bavaria and was involved in presenting Benedict XV's peace plan to the German emperor. He served in Germany during the chaotic days which followed the defeat of that country.

In 1929 Pacelli was created a cardinal and in 1930 appointed Secretary of State. In 1935 Pius XI designated him Camerlengo, an office which carried with it responsibility for the properties and revenues of the Holy See.

On the death of Pius XI in 1939, Eugenio Pacelli was elected pope on the first ballot. Unlike his five immediate predecessors, he had had no experience as administrator of a diocese. In appearance distinguished, spare, almost fragile, and tending to asceticism in his lifestyle, Pius XII brought to the pontificate a long experience in dealing with people, high intelligence, competency in a variety of languages and a combination of charm and dignity in public and private. His previous work in the Church had given him close familiarity with the currents of the revolutionary age.

There had been a significant feminine influence in Pacelli's life. As a young priest attached to the curia, he had carried out some pastoral work in his boyhood parish. This included ministry at the Cenacle Convent, which was frequented by the daughters of the Roman aristocracy, and at the Via del Lucchesi, where the Sisters of Marie Reparatrice cared for young working girls.

He likewise ministered at the Convent of the Assumption near the Villa Borghese. It was said that he was attracted to these nuns because they had inherited from their foundress a special interest in things of the mind, a characteristic of the French. With our feminist guest being a French woman we thought that this predilection should help the dinner conversation along.

Another strong feminine influence in the life of Eugenio Pacelli was that of Sister Pascalina, formerly Josefina Lehnert, a Bavarian who was a member of the order of the Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross. As a young sister she nursed Pacelli back to health at the order's retreat house in the Swiss Alps, where he had gone to recover

from an illness during the First World War. Pacelli subsequently requested her services as a housekeeper when he was appointed nuncio in Munich. It is reported that she was intelligent, highly capable, domineering and intensely loyal to the Church and to Pacelli. She watched over Pacelli's always frail health and reputedly stood by his side and ordered the communist mobs out when in 1917 they stormed the nunciature in Munich. When Pacelli was recalled to Rome to be Secretary of State to Pius XI, he arranged for her to come to Rome and, after working in several capacities, she once more assumed the position of housekeeper-secretary to Pacelli, which role became increasingly important on his election as pope.

Sister Pascalina and Pius XII shared a deep faith, a strong piety and an idealism which saw the Church, the mystical body of Christ, as the saviour of the world. They both had an intense sense of the pope's responsibility in his mission to the world. Over the years with Pius' declining health Sister Pascalina became aggressively protective of Pius XII and was disliked and resented by most of the cardinals. [\[1\]](#)

Despite the protests of some cardinals, Pius XII insisted on keeping Sister Pascalina, and in this he showed a surprising lack of conservatism, which was also shown in his tendency to often bypass the inherited machinery of the Curia (the papal public service) and depend upon a self-chosen circle of advisers.

Catherine, Monica and I agreed that Simone and Pius XII should have in common, not only their rigorous philosophical training, but also their basic humanist stance. When he went to the Vatican, Eugenio Pacelli took with him several fine editions of Shakespeare. He was also a keen musician, playing the violin. When Cardinal Gasparri called upon him to enlist his services in the codification of Canon Law, he found him at home playing duets with one of his sisters, she on the mandolin, he on the violin. This human touch encouraged us to hope for a pleasant, if challenging, evening. [\[2\]](#)

The dinner party conversation commences

On the appointed evening Simone arrived a little before Pius, who apologised for his delay. He greeted Simone graciously and made an

appreciative comment about the fine tradition of French scholarship. As we served drinks Simone directed the conversation into the area of religion and the Church.

Religion and the Church

Initially Simone seemed to be somewhat on the defensive, and it soon became apparent that she was generally cynical about religion, in the anticlerical French tradition. She asserted provocatively: 'All religions like Christianity and Marxism display an embarrassing flexibility on a basis of rigid concepts.' [\[3\]](#)

Pius XII responded courteously but with a certain restrained passion in his voice: 'For all its technical and purely civic progress what age has been more tormented by spiritual emptiness and deep-felt interior poverty than ours?' [\[4\]](#)

Looking sorrowfully at Simone he asked: 'How many brothers and sisters have lost contact with the joyful and life-giving message of Christ?' (TEC 338)

Simone had held Pius' gaze unflinchingly and was clearly rather enjoying being challenged. She proceeded in turn to challenge Pius: 'In modern civilisations religion seems much less an instrument of constraint than an instrument of deception - woman is deceived into accepting an inferior position to man.' (TSS 589) By way of example Simone explained: 'Telling her beads by the fire, woman knows she is nearer heaven than is her husband gadding about to political meetings. There is no need to do anything to save her soul; it is enough to live in obedience. The synthesis of life and spirit is accomplished: a mother not only engenders the flesh - she produces a soul from God; and this is a greater work than penetrating the futile secrets of the atom. With the heavenly Father's connivance, woman can boldly lay claim to the glory of her femininity in defiance of man.' (TSS 590)



Then with an ambiguity which was often to emerge during the evening, Simone confessed: 'I must admit that due to my religious education I was never conscious of the inferiority of my status as a woman. I knew that God loved me just as much as he would if I'd been a man. As a result of this moral equality I developed the conviction that the difference between the condition of men and women was purely the result of cultural development.' [5]

Pius smiled and commented: 'True, the basis of the dignity of woman is the same as that of man since both are children of God, redeemed by Christ, with the same supernatural destiny.' [6] Looking around the dinner company with genuine wonderment Pius exclaimed: 'How can anyone speak of woman as having an incomplete personality, or of a minimisation of her value, or of a supposed moral inferiority, and claim to derive all that from Catholic doctrine?' (Lieb.183)

It was noticeable that Simone's initial confrontational mode was replaced by a more relaxed sincerity. She pointed out: 'Love has been assigned to woman as her supreme vocation, and when she directs it towards a man, she is seeking God in him; but if human love is denied her by circumstances, if she is disappointed or over-particular, she may choose to address divinity in the person of God Himself.' (TSS 633)

She conceded: 'To be sure, there have been men who burned with that flame, but they are rare and their fervour is of a highly refined intellectual cast; but the women who abandon themselves to the joys of the heavenly nuptials are legion and their experience is of a peculiarly emotional nature ... Human love and love of the divine commingle, not because love of the divine is a sublimation of human love but because human love is a reaching out towards a transcendent, an absolute.' (TSS 633)

Pius clearly agreed.

Reverting to her confrontational mode, Simone looked directly and accusingly at Pius as she asserted: 'The Church sees to it that God never authorises women to escape male guardianship; she has put exclusively in man's hands such powerful weapons as denial of

absolution and excommunication; obstinately true to her vision, Joan of Arc was burned at the stake.' (TSS 590)

Pius protested: 'It is impossible to separate the loving side of the Church from its juridical side. I acknowledge the sinfulness of those within the Church. If something is perceived in the Church which points to the infirmity of our human condition, this is not to be attributed to her juridical constitution, but to the lamentable tendency of individuals towards evil. A tendency her divine Founder suffers to exist even in the higher members of His Mystical Body .' [\[7\]](#)

He continued: 'Christ did not will sinners to be excluded from the society he had founded. If some members are spiritually infirm, this is no reason for lessening our love towards the Church, but rather for increasing our compassion towards her members.' (TMB 40)

As the conversation proceeded it became evident that Simone had a genuine appreciation of what she called 'a quite masculine firmness' in many of the great female saints, especially Teresa of Avila. (TSS 126, 590).

Responding to Pius' expression of interest, Simone elaborated: 'There is hardly any woman other than St Teresa who in total abandonment has herself lived out the situation of humanity ... Taking her stand beyond the earthly hierarchies, she felt, like St John of the Cross, no reassuring ceiling over her head. There were for both the same darkness, the same flashes of light, in the self the same nothingness, in God the same plenitude.' (TSS 671)

Pius seemed impressed with her insight.

Simone continued: 'Both admirers and critics of mystics think that to attribute a sexual content to the ecstasies of St Teresa is to reduce her to the rank of an hysteric. But what degrades the hysteric is not the fact that her body actively expresses her obsessions, but that she is obsessed, that her liberty is under a spell and annulled ... St Teresa in a single process seeks to be united with God and lives out this union in her body; she is not the slave of her nerves and her hormones: one must admire, rather, the intensity of a faith that penetrates to the most intimate regions of her flesh.' (TSS 636)

Since Simone was such a noted intellectual herself, we were not surprised when she declared: 'St Teresa is a class apart from other well known women mystics because of her most intellectual treatment of the dramatic problem of the relation between the individual and the transcendent Being.' (TSS 636)

In her final summing up of the situation of the mystics Simone asserted: 'The only way that the salvation of the mystic can be effected is in the service of humankind. There is only one way to employ her liberty authentically - to project it through positive action into human society. Teresa was well aware of this and demonstrated it in her life.' (TSS 636, 640).

Pius agreed: 'We are called to imitate the universality of Christ's love. It is true that Christ has only one Bride, the Church, yet the love of the divine Bridegroom is so universal that in His Bride He embraces without exception every member of the human race.' (TMB 58)

At this stage Monica succeeded in moving us into the dining room.

The Virgin Mary



As Monica and Catherine served the first course, with a wry expression on her face Simone observed: 'The divine Saviour who effects the redemption of men is male; but mankind must co-operate in its own salvation. In doing this, in great humility, it must accept that, though Christ is God, it is a woman, the Virgin Mary, who reigns over all mankind.' (TSS 187)

Looking challengingly at Pius, Simone went on to explain that, while recognising the power of Mary, she saw the exaltation of her virginity as unhelpful to the status of most women because she 'knew not the stain of sexuality. Like the war-like Minerva, she is ivory tower, citadel, impregnable donjon.' (TSS 188)

Pius was clearly interested in Simone's point of view and encouraged her to go on.

This she did: 'If Mary's status as spouse be denied her, it is for the purpose of exalting the Woman Mother more purely in her. But she will be glorified only in accepting the subordinate role assigned to her: "I am the servant of the Lord." For the first time in human history the mother kneels before her son; she freely accepts her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory, consummated in the cult of the Virgin - it is the rehabilitation of woman through the accomplishment of her defeat.' (TSS 188)

As Simone no doubt expected, Pius XII nobly defended the Virgin Mary and then went on to point out: 'Among other initiatives in honour of Mary I proceeded with the definition of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, which in fact honours the human body and acknowledges and dignifies the body-soul unity of the human person.' [\[8\]](#)

He added: 'The constant tradition of the Church in proposing Mary to Christian women as the sublime model of a Virgin and a Mother shows the high esteem in which Christianity holds womanhood. It demonstrates the immense trust which the Church has in woman's power for good and her mission on behalf of the family and of society.' (Lieb.180-81)

Simone was clearly not convinced and protested: 'It can be seen how since the birth of Christianity the figure of woman has become spiritualised ... She is the soul of the house, of the family, of the home.' (TSS 193)

In response Pius waxed eloquent gesturing with his long, expressive hands: 'Woman is the crown of creation, and in a certain sense its masterpiece. She is that gentle creature, to whose delicate hands, as man's helper, God seems to have entrusted the future of the world to such a great extent. Woman is the expression of all that is best, kindest, most lovable here below!' (Lieb. 181-2)

It was obvious that Simone was not to be swept off her feet by Pius! She was very aware of the tie between women and the Catholic

Church in France and the liability that this carried for women in the eyes of a radical government. Looking somewhat accusingly at Pius, she informed the dinner company: 'A woman-suffrage bill passed the Chamber in France in 1919 but failed in the Senate in 1922. The situation was complicated: to revolutionary feminism and the "independent" feminism of Mme. Brunschwig was added a Christian feminism when Pope Benedict in 1919 pronounced in favour of votes for women. The Catholics felt that women in France represented a conservative and religious element; but the radicals feared precisely this.' (TSS 144)

Pius sympathised with Simone: 'A woman's sensibilities play a great part in the life of a family. They often actually determine its course. These same sensibilities should play their part in the life of the nation and of mankind as a whole. There is no good reason why men alone should feel at home in questions that concern the whole human family.' (Lieb. 187, 188)

Simone agreed with this aspect of Pius' feminism and observed: 'The role of pity and tenderness is one of the most important of all those which have been assigned to woman. Even when fully integrated in a society, woman subtly extends its frontiers because she has the insidious generosity of life.' (TSS 196)

Catherine murmured to me: 'Shades of Edith Stein!'

Pius smiled appreciatively at Simone and commented: 'Specifically, if more attention were paid to the anxieties of feminine sentiment, the work of consolidating peace would move ahead more rapidly. Those nations which are well-supplied with the goods of this world would be more hospitable and more generous toward those who are in want. Those in charge of public property would often be more cautious in their dealings.' (Lieb. 188)

He continued: 'With women in charge certainly the organisations set up to take care of community needs in the fields of housing, education, hospitals and employment would get more done and be more foresighted.' (Lieb. 188)

But Simone was not to be won over by these words; her distrust of religion ran too deep. She again looked somewhat accusingly at Pius as she asserted: 'Religion sanctions woman's self-love; it gives her the guide, father, lover, divine guardian she longs for nostalgically; it feeds her day-dreams; it fills her empty hours. But, above all, it justifies her resignation, by giving her the hope of a better future in a sexless heaven.' (TSS 591)

Pius looked pained.

Simone drove her point home: 'This is why women today are still a powerful trump in the hand of the Church; it is why the Church is notably hostile to all measures likely to help in woman's emancipation.' (TSS 591)

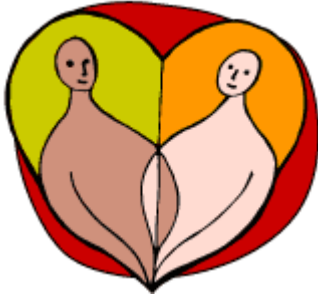
Pius protested and complained: 'You can still find some people who tend to play down or even completely ignore the Church's meritorious role in restoring womankind to its original dignity. They never tire of claiming that the Church is actually bitterly opposed to the so-called "emancipation of woman from a feudal regime."' (Lieb. 182)

Pius, usually so diplomatic, now let down his guard and sounded irritated: 'They use false or fragmentary evidence and give a superficial interpretation of customs and laws which were inspired by necessary proprieties of the day. They do this in an attempt to associate the Church with something that it has firmly opposed from its very beginning - that unjust status of personal inferiority to which paganism often condemned women.' (Lieb. 182-3)

Simone was still not to be persuaded. She vigorously moved the conversation into the area of the relationship between man and woman, in order apparently to challenge Pius further.

Monica cleared the table and prepared to serve dessert. We noted that while Simone was enjoying her meal, Pius was eating very little.

The relationship of man and woman



Simone complained: 'What irks me is that man is considered the norm for humanity and that woman is defined in relation to him as 'the Other'. While man is challenged to transcendence, woman is condemned through the circumstances of her life to immanence.' (TSS 27)

She continued: 'After having reflected upon the biological and economic condition of primitive society I have come to the conclusion that the female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species. The support of life became for man an activity and a project through the invention of the tool; but in maternity woman remained closely bound to her body, like an animal.' (TSS 91)

Somewhat affronted Pius responded: 'It really has to be admitted that woman's whole nature is geared to motherhood. Her very physical structure, her spiritual qualities, the richness of her sentiments, combine to make woman a mother, to such an extent that motherhood represents the ordinary way for woman to reach her true perfection - to achieve her double destiny - that on earth and that in heaven.' (Lieb. 184)

Noting Simone's challenging expression Pius added: 'Motherhood is not the ultimate foundation of woman's dignity but it does give her splendour and so a great role in the working out of human destiny.' (Lieb. 184)

Actually Simone could see his point of view and she admitted: 'The sexual relation that joins woman to man is not the same as that which he bears to her; and the bond that unites her to the child is *sui generis*, unique. She was not created by the bronze tool alone; and the machine alone will not abolish her. To claim for her every right, every chance to be an all-round human being, does not mean that we should be blind to her peculiar situation.' (TSS 85)

Taking yet another tack, Simone pointed out: 'For man Woman is Soul and Idea ... she is the divine Grace, leading the Christian towards God, she is Beatrice guiding Dante in the beyond, Laura summoning Petrarch to the lofty summits of poetry.' (TSS 195)

Pius looked as though this made sense to him and he rather liked it, but before he could formulate a response, his Gallic companion declared: 'But the reality is that Woman is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex,' by which she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex - absolute sex, no less.' (TSS 15, 16)

Pius was frankly appalled at this analysis. He protested: 'Need I repeat what the real foundation for the dignity of woman is? It is precisely the same as the basis of the dignity of man: both are children of God, redeemed by Christ, with the same supernatural destiny.' (Lieb. 183)

But the intelligent Simone, having depicted woman as the sexual victim of humankind, apparently felt obliged - in her openness to the truth - to balance her analysis and defend the importance of woman's sexual function. She stated matter-of-factly: 'Woman cannot in good faith be regarded simply as a worker; for her reproductive function is as important as her productive capacity, no less in the social economy than in the individual life. In some periods, indeed, it is more useful to produce offspring than to plough the soil.' (TSS 84)

Then, with a sudden burst of indignation, Simone pointed out that aging to the 'sex object,' the Other of the human race, was different from aging to man, the Norm. She complained: 'Long before the eventual mutilation, woman is haunted by the horror of growing old. The mature man is involved in enterprises more important than those of love ... the changes in his face and body do not destroy his attractiveness.' (TSS 506, 547)

Pius sympathised with this situation and commented with genuine concern: 'Woman, despite the deceptive appearances of being placed on a pedestal, is often the object of a lack of respect and sometimes of a subtle but positive contempt on the part of a world with tendencies toward paganism.' (Lieb. 182)

Simone observed realistically: 'Woman's power over man comes from the fact that she gently recalls him to a modest realisation of his

true condition; it is the secret of her disillusioned, sorrowful, ironical and loving wisdom.' (TSS 197)

She paused before elaborating: 'She heals the wounds of the males, she nurses the newborn and she lays out the dead; she knows everything about man that attacks his pride and humiliates his self-will.' (TSS 197)

Simone then strongly asserted: 'For loyalty and friendship to exist between man and wife, the essential condition is that they both be free in relation to each other and be equal in concrete matters. The woman must be economically independent.' (TSS 454, 641)

Pius by this time was obviously enjoying Simone's forthright, Gallic intellectualism and he responded: 'There is no field of human activity which must remain closed to woman; her horizons reach out to the regions of politics, labour, the arts, sports; but always in subordination to the primary functions which have been fixed by nature. The creator with His wonderful ways of bringing harmony out of variety has established a common destiny for all mankind but He has also given the two sexes different and complementary functions, like two roads leading to the same destination.' (Lieb.183, 184)

As she accepted a top-up of her wine Simone stated categorically if somewhat tangentially: 'An authentic love should accept the contingency of the other with all his idiosyncrasies, his limitations and his basic gratuitousness.' (TSS 619)

Catherine could not resist murmuring: 'Sartre!'

Looking reflective she asserted that healthy love needed to be outwardly oriented: 'If two lovers sink together in the absolute of passion, all their liberty is degraded into immanence; death is then the only solution ... Two lovers destined solely for each other are already dead: they die of ennui, of the slow agony of a love that feeds on itself.' (TSS 622)

Pius nodded agreement, saying: 'The Church rejects every concept of marriage which would threaten to throw it back on itself and to

make of it an egotistic quest for emotional and physical satisfaction in the interest of the spouses alone.’ (Lieb. 176)

By this time we had finished dessert, on which Simone complimented the cook, Pius had barely touched his serving. I assessed him as a lost culinary cause but felt compensated by his obvious enjoyment of the conversation.

As Catherine prepared to serve coffee, the conversation moved into the area of marriage, motherhood and family.

Marriage, motherhood and the family

Simone pointed out: ‘A great many girls - in the New World as in the Old - when asked about their plans for the future, reply as formerly: “I want to get married.” But no young man considers marriage as his fundamental project.’ (TSS 420-21)

She conceded, however: ‘Being only a secular institution, marriage has none the less a great social importance, and the conjugal family, although stripped of religious significance, has a vigorous life on the human plane.’ (TSS 97)



Her ideal was a marriage of equals, where the woman was economically independent and did not marry for economic security. Pius saw marriage as a sacrament, a source of holiness to the spouses and geared principally to the generation and education of children. (TSS 415; Lieb. 175)

As the conversation went on Simone highlighted the discomforts and burdens of marriage that man, the *male*, resents and rails against. She laughingly added: ‘The children, even more than their father, want to escape beyond family limits: life for them lies elsewhere.’ (TSS 462, 442)

But she declared: 'The burdens of marriage weigh much more heavily upon woman than upon man.' Among other things she asserted: 'It is the duplicity of the husband that dooms the wife to a misfortune of which he complains later that he is himself the victim ... he wants her to assume the monotonous daily round and not to bore him; to be always at hand and never importunate; he wants to have her all to himself and not to belong to her; to live as one of a couple and to remain alone - she is betrayed from the day he marries her.' (TSS 153, 462)

Pius listened courteously to Simone's litany of complaints, but was more troubled by the various pressures from the wider community on the family. He pointed out: 'That noble little cell, the family, bears the stress of our times, external as well as internal, material and spiritual alike.' (TEC 359)

He painted a distressing picture of the situation of the family in the grip of the Great Depression and concluded: 'Whoever has the care of souls and can search hearts knows the hidden tears of mothers, the resigned sorrow of so many fathers, and the countless bitterness of which no statistics tell or can tell.' (TEC 359)

Simone, who had lived through the Great Depression as a young woman, knew what he meant.

There followed a discussion on birth control. Simone lamented the fact that most French women did not have access to it. (TSS 153)

Pius looked troubled and declared: 'Surely, one of the most harmful aberrations in modern society with its pagan tendencies is the opinion of those who classify fruitfulness in marriage as a "social malady!" (Lieb. 218)

The conversation moved into the area of motherhood. Although Simone had never had children, she had obviously reflected considerably upon motherhood.

Pius' face lit up in appreciation as she declared: 'In a sense the mystery of the Incarnation repeats itself in each mother; every child born is a god who is made man: he cannot find self-realisation as a

being with consciousness and freedom unless he first comes into the world; the mother lends herself to this mystery, but she does not control it; it is beyond her power to influence what in the end will be the true nature of this being who is developing in her womb ... Caught up in the great cycle of the species, she affirms life in the teeth of time and death.’ (TSS 478-9)

Recognising the essential generosity of maternal love but with Gallic cynicism, Simone observed: ‘Maternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle day-dreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism.’ (TSS 492)

Pius looked bemused.

Simone warned: ‘As Stekel points out children are not substitutes for one's disappointed love, they are not substitutes for one's thwarted ideal in life, children are not mere material to fill out an empty existence. Children are a responsibility and an opportunity. Children are the loftiest blossoms upon the tree of untrammelled love ... They are neither playthings, nor tools for the fulfilment of parental needs or ungratified ambitions. Children are obligations; they should be brought up so as to become happy human beings.’ (TSS 500)

Pius nodded in approval.

Simone went on to lament the damage done by ill-educated mothers. (TSS 502)

Pius strongly agreed: ‘No one would dream of suddenly becoming a mechanic or an engineer, a doctor or a lawyer, without any apprenticeship or preparation, yet every day there are numbers of young men and women who marry without having given an instant's thought to preparing themselves for the arduous work of educating their children which awaits them. If St Gregory the Great could speak of the government of souls as “the art of arts”, surely no art is more difficult and strenuous than that of fashioning the souls of children.’ [\[9\]](#)

Simone supported this: ‘The most delicate and the most serious undertaking of all is the moulding of a human being.’ (TSS 502)

There followed a discussion on the problem of women balancing family commitments with an active role in the economic, political and social life of the times.

The topic of sexuality and chastity then commanded the attention of our dinner guests as Catherine served coffee.

Sexuality and chastity



Like our previous feminist guests, Simone deplored the double moral standard but she perceived chastity as simply a social constraint, rather than a virtue intrinsic to the good of the human person and she

commented: ‘Chastity is enforced upon woman for economic and religious reasons, since each citizen ought to be authenticated as the son of his proper father.’ (TSS 204)

She acknowledged that sexual freedom did not always come easily for women: ‘The young woman must overcome a certain repugnance before she can treat her body as a thing: she does not readily accept the idea of being pierced by a man, and she resigns herself no more cheerfully to being “stoppered” for his pleasure.’ (TSS 380)

Not without indicating a certain ambiguity she explained: ‘The penetration, regarded as union, fusion with the beloved, delights the woman in love but regains the surgical, indecent character it has in the child's mind if it occurs in the absence of sex excitement, desire and pleasure, as may happen in the planned use of preventives.’ (TSS 380-81)

With obvious concern Pius responded: ‘Over the last twenty years writings in this area have highlighted the “personal value” of the sexual act to the couple to the exclusion of its procreative purpose. Articles, pamphlets, books and lectures, dealing in

particular with the “technique of love”, have served to spread these ideas and to illustrate them with warnings to the newly-wed as a guide to marriage.’ (Lieb. 115)

He looked around the dinner company gravely and warned: ‘We are face to face with the propagation of a body of ideas and sentiments directly opposed to deep and serious Christian thought.’ Shaking his head ruefully he added: ‘The transgression of this law is as old as original sin.’ (Lieb.116, 120)

With conviction Pius continued: ‘Some would like to maintain that happiness in married life is in direct ratio to the mutual enjoyment of married relations. This is not so. On the contrary, happiness in married life is in direct ratio to the respect the husband and wife have for each other, even in the intimate act of marriage. Not that they should regard what nature offers them and God has given them as immoral and refuse it, but the Christian moral law does not permit the unrestrained satisfying of the sexual instinct.’ (Lieb.121)

He protested: ‘Our teaching has nothing to do with Manichaeism or with Jansenism, as some would like to make out in self-justification. It is simply a defence of the honour of Christian marriage and the personal dignity of husband and wife.’ (Lieb. 122)

With characteristic honesty Simone recognised the connection between private and public morality. (TSS 644)

The subject of abortion inevitably came up. By this time we were up to our second round of coffee.

Abortion

Simone lamented: ‘Enforced maternity brings into the world wretched infants, whom their parents will be unable to support and who will become the victims of public care or “child martyrs”.’ (TSS 468)



Looking at Pius accusingly she observed: ‘It must be pointed out that our society, so concerned to defend the rights of the embryo, shows no interest in the children once they are born ... society closes its eyes to the frightful tyranny of brutes in children’s asylums and private foster homes.’ (TSS 468)

After lamenting the fact that an excess of pregnancies can kill maternal feeling, Simone declared with considerable rancour: ‘It must be said that the men with the most scrupulous respect for embryonic life are also those who are most zealous when it comes to condemning adults to death in war.’ (TSS 468)

Looking serious, Pius was listening closely.

Simone challenged Pius on the uncompromising attitude of the Catholic Church to abortion. She pointed out that in the times of the Holy Wars the infidels were equally unbaptised as the unborn child and yet their slaughter was heartily encouraged. She added: ‘Doubtless the victims of the Inquisition were not all in a state of grace any more than the criminal who is guillotined today and the soldier dead on the field of battle. In all these cases the Church leaves the matter to the grace of God; it admits that man is only an instrument in His hands and that the salvation of a soul is settled between that soul and God.’ (TSS 469)

With her voice reaching a higher pitch she confronted Pius: ‘Why then should God be forbidden to receive the embryonic soul in heaven? If a Church council should authorise it, He would no more object than He did in the glorious epochs when heathens were piously slaughtered.’ (TSS 469)

Pius continued to listen with grave attention.

In a calmer voice Simone stated: 'The moral aspect of the drama of abortion is more or less intensely felt according to circumstances. It hardly comes in question for women who are highly 'emancipated', thanks to their means, their social position, and the liberal circles to which they belong, or for those so schooled by poverty and misery as to disdain bourgeois morality. There is a more or less disagreeable moment to live through and it must be lived through, that is all. But many women are intimidated by a morality that for them retains its prestige even though they are unable to conform to it in their behaviour; they inwardly respect the law they transgress, and they suffer from this transgression; they suffer still more from having to find accomplices.' (TSS 472)

If possible Pius looked even more sorrowful; there seemed to be tears in his eyes.

Simone shifted position somewhat in her argument as she observed: 'Some women are haunted by the memory of this child which has not come into being ... If the miscarriage has been voluntarily induced, the woman will have more reason to entertain the feeling that she has committed a sin. The remorse that in childhood may have followed the jealous wish for the death of a newborn brother is revived and the woman feels herself guilty of having really killed a baby. Pathological states of melancholy may express this feeling of culpability.' (TSS 473)

She continued sadly: 'Other women may gain from abortion the sense of having destroyed a part of themselves and feel resentment against the man who agreed to or requested this mutilation ... Men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature, but fail to realise fully the values involved.' (TSS 473)

She reasoned: 'Furthermore when man, the better to succeed in fulfilling his destiny as man, asks woman to sacrifice the reproductive possibilities, he is exposing the hypocrisy of the masculine moral code. Men universally forbid abortion, but individually they accept it

as a convenient solution of a problem; they are able to contradict themselves with careless cynicism. But woman feels these contradictions in her wounded flesh; she is as a rule too timid for open revolt against masculine bad faith; she regards herself as the victim of an injustice that makes her a criminal against her will, and at the same time she feels soiled and humiliated.' (TSS 474)

Simone informed us that, though she was very public in her support of abortion, she never failed to point out to her public that contraception was always preferable. But she said that in the meantime she was of the opinion that the majority of French women had virtually no alternative to abortion. (F&G 337, 338)

Having heard Simone to the end, Pius admitted that abortion was a subject on which he felt strongly and he explained why this was the case: 'Every human being, even a child in the mother's womb, has a right to life directly from God and not from the parents or from any human society or authority.' (Lieb. 104)

Looking intently at Simone he explained that no human authority had the right to directly dispose of an embryo. He stated unambiguously: 'To save the life of the mother is a very noble end; but the direct killing of the child as a means to that end is not lawful.' (Lieb. 104)

There seemed little more to say on either side, so the conversation moved on.

It was getting late and we were conscious that there were many experiences and interests shared by our two guests that had not yet featured in our conversation. Monica took the initiative and asked about their war experiences

The Second World War

Among other things Simone recalled: 'Sartre and I holidayed in Germany in 1934 and tried to convince ourselves that Nazism, of which we had evidence all around us, was a relatively insignificant or temporary phenomenon. Even the Munich Crisis of 1938 failed to shake our confidence that war would not happen.' [\[10\]](#)



As Pius described some of his war experiences, we became aware that every public spoken or written statement that he issued was scrutinised mercilessly by all combatants, and criticisms readily lodged by them. He made many appeals for peace and, although scrupulously neutral, he was accused by both sides of favouring the other. We knew that the Vatican had been involved in considerable humanitarian activities during and after the War, but we did not have time to discuss these. [\[11\]](#)

Simone described the development of her social conscience during the war which later involved her in various public issues.

She told us: 'I publicly opposed France's brutal resistance to Algeria's bid for independence. I opposed the war because I have a Christian, democratic, humanist conscience. I believed that there were legal ways to help Algeria attain its independence.' (F & G 274)

As Simone and Pius finished their war reminiscences, Pius minced no words when he declared: 'Gone are the proud illusions of limitless progress.' (TEC 364)

He concluded firmly: 'In the name of the commandment of love I reject racialism and extreme nationalism. The peoples of Europe need to rise above their egotistically nationalistic preoccupations. There should be a progressive disarmament of all nations and all wars of aggression should be recognised as unreservedly sinful.' (Lat. 49, 52-3)

After discussing the constant striving of the human person for authenticity, Simone asserted authoritatively, with an edge of contempt in her voice: 'I rejected both the sexual monism of Freud and the economic monism of Engels. The categories of "clitorid" and "vaginal" like the categories of "bourgeois" or "proletarian", are equally inadequate to encompass a concrete woman.' (TSS 85)

Pius nodded in agreement.

Simone and Pius also discussed communism and it transpired that they had both weighed it up and found it wanting from different but overlapping perspectives. (F & G 212; Lat. 54)

A final comment



Time was running out, but we asked Simone and Pius for a final comment.

Simone's came in the form of a warning: 'We must not believe, that a change in woman's economic condition alone is enough to transform her, though this factor has been and remains the basic factor in her evolution; but until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural and other consequences that it promises and requires, the true new woman cannot emerge.' (TSS 681)

She commented with some disdain: 'The new woman presently appears most often as a "true woman" disguised as a man and she feels herself as ill at ease as in her masculine garb. She must shed her old skin and cut her own new clothes. This she can do only through a social evolution.' (TSS 681)

Pius' final word came with considerable feeling: 'Modern states have taken steps toward meeting the basic aims of women. But what we might call their psychological and emotional demands are still

treated somewhat carelessly, as if they do not deserve any serious consideration.’ (Lieb. 187)

He explained: ‘These demands are indefinable and almost intangible from a statistical point of view, but they are still real values. We cannot afford to neglect them for they have their roots in nature. They are intended to play a part in human society by restraining extreme tendencies in important decisions and by establishing a fairer distribution of burdens and benefits among all citizens.’ (Lieb. 187)

With a certain tenderness in his voice, he expressed a special concern for those not officially allied with the Church: ‘I desire nothing better than that they should "have life and have it abundantly”.’ and he smiled at Simone. (TMB 61)

Simone smiled back and laughingly confided: ‘At fifteen I felt that becoming an author would compensate for the loss of eternity since by writing a work based in my own experience I would re-create myself and so justify my existence and at the same time serve humanity.’ (F & G 34, 44-46)

Pius laughed with her and they made their farewells. Pius was courteous and cordial, Simone showed warmth but with an edge of irony.

After the party

After bidding goodbye to Simone and Pius, we sat around chatting for a while.

Among other things we lamented the fact that our guests had not had time to discuss the philosophy of existentialism, which was espoused by Simone and rejected by Pius. We knew she saw it as challenging woman to the transcendent, whereas Pius saw it as a successor of idealism, immanentism and pragmatism and as denying all that is absolute in human experience. [\[12\]](#)

Catherine noted that Simone’s ambiguity concerning various aspects of women’s lives was indicated in that she did not

concentrate during the evening on her thesis of the overwhelming contribution of culture to the inferiority of women: man the Norm and woman the Other, but tended rather to highlight the natural differences between the sexes.

As we finished the cleaning-up we agreed that Simone and Pius XII had given us a thought-provoking evening and that the reserved Pius had coped very well with the lively Gallic woman.

Altogether there had been a surprising number of areas on which the thinking of our guests had overlapped, such as the importance of motherhood and the family, the participation of women in public life, the importance of the transcendent (though from different perspectives), attitude to war, rejection of communism and appreciation of Teresa of Avila.

FOOTNOTES

[1] P. Murphy, with R. Rene Arlington, *La Popessa*, New York, Warner Books, 1983.

[2] M. Derrick, *Portrait of Pius XII*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1956, 18. (Hereafter Pad.)

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H. M. Parshley, London, Jonathan Cape, first published 1953, reissued 1968, reprinted 1972, 65. (Hereafter TSS)

[4] *The Encyclicals of a Century*, Derby, New York, Daughters of St Paul, 1942, 337. (Hereafter TEC)

[5] C. Francis & F. Gontier, *Simone de Beauvoir*, translated by Lisa Nesselson, first published 1985, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987, 309. (Hereafter F & G)

[6] O.M. Liebard, *Official Catholic Teachings: Love and Sexuality*, Wilmington, N. Carolina, McGrath Pub. Co., 1987, 183. (Hereafter Lieb.)

[7] Pope Pius XII, *The Mystical Body of Christ*, Encyclical Letter, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1952, 40. (Hereafter TMB)

[8] Pope Pius XII *Apostolic Constitution on the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Sydney, Daughters of St Paul, 1950, 18, 19, 24.

[9] Pope Pius XII, *The Pope Speaks to Mothers*, Allocution, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1941, 5.

[10] T. Keefe, *Simone de Beauvoir – A Study of Her writings*, London, Harrap, 1983, 16, 17. (Hereafter Keefe)

[11] K.S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, Vol. 4, New York, Harper and Row, 1961, 50. (Hereafter Lat.); for Pius XII and the Jews see A. Rhodes, *The Vatican in the Age of the Dictators, 1922-1945*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1973, 339-51; F.J. Coppa, *The Modern Papacy since 1789*, New York, Longman, 1998, 11, 15, 122, 194, 209.

[12] F & G 210, 213, 219; Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, Encyclical, Sydney, Catholic Truth Society, 1951.

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