Book Reviews. Le Mystère de la Sexualité: Essai sur la signification des sexes, by André Cantin. Reviews in Religion & Theology

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Contrary to the title, this is not a book about sexuality in the sense of sexual intercourse or sexual desire, but a book about sexual difference, as signified in the subtitle. The author always speaks of sex, of male and female, rather than of gender. Nevertheless, he does not neglect the social dimension of human sexual difference. One of the primary questions Cantin asks concerns the place of women in society. Although Cantin uses the language of sex rather than of gender, he is not concerned with human biology either. He specifically discounts the view that human sexuality is merely about instinct and the survival of the species. What Le Mystère de la Sexualité is concerned with, is theological anthropology. It seeks to develop an analogy between the relations of the divine persons in the Trinity and the relation of man and woman.

Cantin's Essai is constructed of twenty-four short chapters ranging from two to seven pages long. There are no footnotes or bibliography, but there are some in-text citations; these are chiefly taken from Scripture. The texts most often cited are the creation accounts in Genesis, Jesus' sayings in the Gospel concerning his relation to the Father, and the Pauline texts concerning the relations of man and woman, husband and wife, and Christ and the Church. Of non-biblical writers, the one most frequently cited is the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941); Cantin's thought and vocabulary reflects the influence of Bergson's L'Évolution Créatrice (1907). Though Cantin never explicitly or implicitly refers to it, his book covers some of the same topics as the late Pope John Paul II's Love and Responsibility (1960). A further frequent reference point in Le Mystère de la Sexualité is the female visionaries and saints, above all, St Thérèse de Lisieux. Thus, Cantin manages to combine in a creative and interesting way a deep knowledge of Scripture, philosophy, and the Christian tradition.

Cantin's account of sexual difference is more often about woman than about man. The author sometimes becomes so fulsome in his praise of woman that he is in danger of exaggerating and stereotyping the sexes. He describes woman, based upon the creation accounts in Genesis as
primarily passive, receptive and loving. He continues this theme in discussing Mary Magdalene, who, he believes, was chosen by Jesus to be Apostle to the Apostles because as a woman she was more receptive and predisposed to welcome such a call. Similarly, he holds up the Virgin Mary as the supreme example of such loving receptivity. Cantin admits that if man is believed to be superior to woman in most things, such as physical strength, abstract thinking, and skill in crafts, woman is superior in love, and love is everything—the most important thing. There is also much traditional Catholic teaching on the restriction of the priesthood to men (because the priest represents Christ and Christ is a man) and on the perversion that is homosexuality. But this is modified by the admission that women do have important roles to play in the Church and that homosexuals, like all human beings, are deserving of love and respect.

The key argument of Cantin's book can be summarised as 'equality in difference'. Man and woman are equal, because both created in the image and likeness of God, but different, because created male and female. This is argued by analogy: the equality of man and woman is based on and finds its source in the equality of Father and Son; the same is also true of difference. Cantin also describes an evolution and progress in the position of women. If the first woman Eve was like a daughter to the first man Adam, in that she was taken from his side, the new woman Mary is mother to the new man Jesus. Moreover, he remarks that Marian apparitions have led to a growing public role for women in the Church. Cantin's argument throughout the book, if not argued systematically or exhaustively, is always consistent and concise. He wants to show above all that love is the key to equality in difference; without love there is no equality between the sexes. In this Cantin succeeds admirably. Le Mystère de la Sexualité may not be an entirely original work of theological anthropology, but it is a clear treatment of Catholic teaching on sexual difference.