
"It is illicit and shameful for a man to lie with even his lawful wife in such a way as to prevent the conception of offspring."

The sin of Onan revisited

By Brian W. Harrison

"Onanism," the term derived from Genesis 38:9-10 which in traditional Christian usage has designated both masturbation and unnatural intercourse between a man and woman, is not exactly a pleasant theme to write about. And in a sense, that fact itself is the short answer to those who claim that these sorts of acts are ethically indifferent or innocent. In other words, the spontaneous negative emotional reaction of ordinary, decent people to such practices is really a "message" from the God who speaks to us in the still, small voice of our moral conscience.

Most readers will recall that the subject of masturbation made headlines not long ago when U.S. President Bill Clinton dismissed Dr. Joycelyn Elders as Surgeon-General of the United States because of her public statement that in the present AIDS crisis, solitary sex acts might well be discussed sympathetically in school classrooms, as a part of health education. The controversy quickly spread to Puerto Rico, where the present writer resides. While the island's Health Secretary, Dr. Carmen Feliciano, expressed support for Elders' viewpoint, she did not lose her job for this statement, in spite of several calls for her dismissal on the part of Puerto Rican Church spokesmen.

Although much media attention was thus focused on the question of whether or not Elders and Feliciano merited dismissal for their "liberal" statements about masturbation, the substantive issue was of course whether or not this practice should be discussed as a "safe-sex option" in schools. And on this issue, Puerto Rico's Governor, Pedro Rossello, was very quick to adopt the same stance as President Clinton, assuring the island's electorate that any such discussion was "definitely not on the agenda" for Puerto Rican public schools.

As everyone knows, we live at a time when "enlightened" academic and mass-media opinion - as expressed during the aforesaid controversy by Professor Jose R. Echevarria in Puerto Rico's English-language daily, the *San Juan Star*¹ - is predominantly indulgent and "non-judgmental" toward masturbation. It seems significant, therefore, that in spite of eloquent and widely-publicized permissiveness on the part of our cultural elites, our political leaders nevertheless discerned firmly and swiftly that most ordinary voters were

not about to tolerate the use of tax money to sully their children's innocence by a benign endorsement of solitary vice.

Now, since the "progressive elites deny that there are any convincing objections to masturbation based on reason or the natural moral law, they try to ascribe this widespread popular "stigma" against the practice to purely fortuitous external influences: that is, to "social conditioning" or "brainwashing" originating with Christian moralists (whose teachings they often distort, as Echevarria distorts Saint Augustine's view of sex prior to original sin²). But the truth is exactly the reverse. *What has to be manufactured artificially by external social conditioning is not the belief that masturbation is bad or self-degrading, but the belief that it is good and natural.* That is to say, the experience of repugnance and/or guilt in response to the perversion of self-induced orgasm is the natural, reasonable, and profoundly human reaction of anyone whose moral conscience has not yet been anaesthetized by decadent cultural influences or habitual lewd behavior, and who is old enough to understand what the sexual organs are naturally designed for: loving and potentially procreative union with a person of the opposite sex. With due respect to Professor Echevarria, it is our own anatomy that teaches us this lesson, not some Kantian philosophical theory on the sexual habits of animals!³

Equally misleading is Echevarria's argument based merely on the Bible's silence: he insinuates that Christians should attach no "stigma" to self-stimulation, since "condemnation of masturbation does not issue from the Scriptures." Would he have us draw equally permissive conclusions from the Bible's silence regarding sodomy between a man and a woman, pornography, sado-masochism, and necrophilia? All these forms of human degradation were well known in the decadent Greco-Roman world of New Testament times, and common sense (not to mention common decency) will lead us to understand that the Bible - even prescindng from Gen. 38 - condemns them *implicitly*, along with masturbation, in its repeated global reprobation of "uncleanness" or "impurity" in general.⁴ Scripture, in any case, is not the sole repository of Christian doctrine: Catholics believe that God's Word also comes to us in Sacred Tradition, which, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes clear,⁵ has firmly and constantly condemned masturbation.

It is Scripture, however, which I wish to dwell upon in this essay - returning in particular to the case of Onan related in Gen. 38:7-10. I will argue that those biblical scholars upon whose works commentators like Echevarria depend are far from reliable in their exegesis of this passage. The text (in the Douay-Rheims version) reads as follows:

(7) And Her, the firstborn of Juda, was wicked in the sight of the Lord: and was slain by him.

(8) Juda therefore said to Onan his son: Go in to thy brother's wife and marry her, that thou mayst raise seed to thy brother.

(9) He, knowing that the children should not be his, when he went in to his brother's wife, spilled his seed upon the ground,⁶ lest children should be born in his brother's name.

(10) And therefore the Lord slew him, because he did a detestable thing.

Now, it has been fashionable among twentieth-century exegetes to maintain that in these verses the Bible condemns Onan's *coitus interruptus* only insofar as it in effect violated the so-called levirate marriage custom endorsed by the law of Moses at a time when polygamy was not forbidden.⁷ According to this ancient oriental practice, a man -whether he was already married or not - was expected to marry his deceased brother's wife if she was still childless at her husband's death; and the first-born son of this union was then regarded as a legal descendant of the dead man. In other words, according to those exegetes who focus their attention exclusively on this custom in their reading of Genesis 38, Onan's sin is presented here as consisting *only* in his selfish intent to deny offspring to his brother's widow, Tamar, and not even partly in the unnatural *method* he employed in doing so.

But, as I hope to show, this reading of Genesis has so little to recommend it exegetically that one can only assume that its popularity in recent decades is due mainly to the modern prejudices of theologians and exegetes who see intrinsically sterile types of sexual activity as morally unobjectionable in themselves (or even as necessary at times) - and who therefore have a strong vested interest in minimizing whatever biblical evidence there may be against these practices.

The classical Jewish commentators - who can scarcely be accused of ignorance regarding Hebrew language, customs, law, and biblical literary genres - certainly saw in this passage of Scripture a condemnation of both unnatural intercourse and masturbation as such.⁸ A typical traditional Jewish commentary puts it thus: "[Onan] misused the organs God gave him for propagating the race to unnaturally satisfy his own lust, and he was therefore deserving of death."⁹ And this is undoubtedly in accord with the natural impression which most unprejudiced readers will draw from the text of Genesis 38.

But is the first impression correct? Is the truth really more subtle? Was Onan perhaps slain merely for refusing to give offspring to his deceased brother's wife, as most contemporary exegetes maintain? In answering these questions one must take cognizance of the following significant fact: the penalty subsequently laid down in the law of Moses for a simple refusal to comply with the levirate marriage precept was only a relatively mild public humiliation in the form of a brief ceremony of indignation. The childless widow, in the presence of the town elders, was authorized to remove her uncooperative brother-in-law's sandal and spit in his face for his refusal to marry her. He was then supposed to receive an uncomplimentary nick-name - "the Unshod."¹⁰ But since he nonetheless became sole owner of his deceased brother's house and goods,¹¹ it is evident that his

offense was scarcely considered a serious or criminal one - much less one deserving of death. Death, however, is precisely what Onan deserved, according to Genesis. It follows that those who say his *only* offense was infringement of the levirate marriage custom need to explain why such an offense was punished by the Lord so much more drastically in the case of Onan than it subsequently was under the Mosaic law. If anything, we would tend to expect the contrary: i.e., that after the law was formalized as part of the Deuteronomic code its violation might be chastised more *severely* than before, not more mildly. Indeed, while it is clear from the Genesis narrative that the practice of levirate marriage already existed in Onan's time, there is no biblical evidence that he would have been conscious of any *divine* precept to observe that practice.¹² This problem seems to have been simply ignored, rather than confronted, by those exegetes who cannot or will not see in this passage any scriptural foundation for the orthodox Judeo-Christian doctrine against masturbation and contraception.

Indeed, a further problem faces this conventional modern reading of the passage. If simple refusal to give legal offspring to his deceased brother were, according to Genesis 38, Onan's only offense, it seems extremely unlikely that the text would have spelt out the crass physical details of his contraceptive act (cf. v.9). The delicacy and modesty of devout ancient Hebrews in referring to morally upright sexual activity helps us to see this. As is well known, Scripture always refers to licit (married) intercourse only in an oblique way: "going in to"¹³ one's wife, (i.e., entering her tent or bedchamber, cf. vv. 8 and 9 in the Genesis text cited above, as well as Gen. 6:4; 2 Sam. 16:22; 1 Chron. 23:7) or "knowing one's spouse (e.g., Gen. 4:17; Luke 1:34). When language becomes somewhat more explicit - "lying with" someone,¹⁴ or "uncovering [his/her] nakedness"¹⁵ - the reference is without exception to sinful, shameful sexual acts. And apart from the verse we are considering, the Bible's only fully explicit mention of a genital act (the voluntary emission of seed) is in a prophetic and allegorical context wherein Israel's infidelity to Yahweh is being denounced scathingly in terms of the shameless lust of a harlot (Ezek. 23:20).

From this analysis of different biblical texts referring to sexual acts, the link between choice of words and moral evaluation in the Hebraic mentality is clearly revealed: broadly speaking, the sacred writers' disapproval of different kinds of genital activity increases with the degree of explicitness with which they are described. Conversely, when sexuality is treated in its most sublime character - i.e., marriage as a sacred mystery symbolizing God's covenantal love with his people - the Bible's allusions to the conjugal act are predominantly indirect and allegorical.¹⁶ The implications of this for Genesis 38:9, wherein Onan's sexual act is described in starkly explicit terms, are clear.

It should be remembered also that we are here dealing with a culture which so abhorred that other form of "wasting the seed" - the homosexual act - that it prescribed the death penalty for this offense.¹⁷ In the light of this and the other factors we have considered, I submit that it would be not only exegetically unwarranted, but quite anachronistic, to suggest that the Genesis author, in line with the "political correctness" of late twentieth-

century Western liberalism, would have taken a relaxed, indulgent view of Onan's *method* of preventing conception - his "spill[ing] the seed on the ground." We should note also the parallel between the description of homosexual acts as a "wicked" or "abominable" thing in the Leviticus texts¹⁸ and the similar qualification of what Onan did in Genesis 38:10.¹⁹

Moreover, in the view of revisionist exegetes, Onan's sin is presented here as being essentially one of omission. We are asked to believe that, according to Genesis, Onan committed no sinful *act*; rather, that his sin was to *refrain* from acting appropriately toward his deceased brother because of some sort of selfish interior disposition. But why, in that case, does the text describe Onan's sin as a positive action ("he *did*²⁰ a detestable thing")? Coming directly after the author has mentioned what is certainly an outward act (i.e., "spilling the seed"), these words in v. 10 plainly indicate a causal link between the sexual act as such and the wrath and punishment of God.

After all, it is not as if the Old Testament vocabulary was lacking in concepts or words to express

sins of interior attitude, when that is the kind of sin the authors had in mind. The "heart" of man-

whether righteous or wicked - is a rich and important term of moral reference in Hebrew anthropology,²¹ and to the extent that Onan's fault was indeed this sin of omission, such lack of piety toward his dead brother would have been an example of what the Israelites called "hardness of heart" (cf. Exod. 7:13,22;8:15;Ps. 95:7f), perhaps motivated at bottom by personal vanity (not wanting to father any child who would not be legally his), or even by that sheer covetousness for his brother's property which was forbidden in the Tenth Commandment and in numerous other Old Testament passages.²²

Once again, however, we must ask what evidence there is that this degree of "hardness of heart" would have been seen in Onan's time as sufficient to merit death. If today revisionist exegetes are right in claiming that "spilling the seed on the ground" is not, *per se*, censured in this text, it would follow that even if Onan had simply declined to marry Tamar and so abstained from intimacy of any kind with her, this complete abstinence would have been viewed by the Genesis author as not less offensive to God than the course of action which Onan chose in reality - and which earned him a divine death sentence! But we have already pointed out that such a conclusion leaves unexplained the relative leniency of Deuteronomy 25 in penalizing such offenses against the levirate marriage custom.

On the other hand if, Judeo-Christian tradition has always insisted, "wasting the seed" by intrinsically sterile types of genital action violates that *natural* law to which all men, Jew and Gentile alike, have always had access by virtue of their very humanness, (cf. Rom.

1:26-27;2:14), this will explain perfectly why Onan's sexual action *in itself* would be presented in Scripture as meriting a most severe divine judgment: it was a perverted act - one of life-suppressing lust. Indeed, over and above its prohibition by natural law, such deliberately sterilized pleasure-seeking could well have been discerned as a form of contravening one of the few divine precepts which already in that pre-Sinai tradition had been solemnly revealed - and repeated - in positive, verbal form: "Increase and multiply" (Gen. 1:27-28;9:1).

Our commentary on this passage can now be summarized. The cumulative weight of the evidence - the structure and sexual explicitness of the text itself and the much greater severity of Onan's punishment than that prescribed for levirate marriage infringements in Deuteronomy 25:5-6 - leads us to conclude that while Genesis 38:9-10 very probably includes disapproval of Onan's lack of piety toward his deceased brother, it is nonetheless the unnatural sex act *in itself* which is presented as the most gravely sinful aspect of this man's treatment of Tamar - the aspect for which God cut short his life. If the inspired author, while knowing the same historical facts, had evaluated them in the way most modern exegetes would have us believe he did (i.e., with complete moral indifference toward Onan's contraceptive act as such), then we would expect quite different wording: "spilling the seed," being irrelevant to the author's interest and purpose on that hypothesis, would probably not even have been mentioned. Instead, we would expect to be faced with an account stating more discreetly that even though Onan took Tamar legally as his wife, he refused to allow her to conceive, so that God slew him for his "hardness of heart," his pride, or perhaps his avarice (in wanting his brother's property to pass to himself and his own sons).

Thus, the traditional interpretation of this passage as a divinely revealed condemnation of contraceptive acts - not as a provision of mere positive law (cultic or disciplinary) given temporarily for a specific ancient cultural context, but as a particular manifestation of that divine will for the entire human species which had been revealed through nature ever since the Creation - must be seen as supported by serious exegetical arguments. Indeed, quite apart from those arguments, and even without any appeal to the Catholic theological principle that Church tradition must be our guide to the interpretation of Scripture, a purely historical awareness of the unanimity of *Jewish* tradition on this point highlights how implausible and anachronistic is the view we are criticizing. That view involves the gratuitous suggestion that the ancient author of Genesis 38 was a lone "liberal" who, in contrast to every other known Jewish commentator until recent times, was unaccountably permissive about unnatural sex acts while at the same time, paradoxically, showing himself (and God) to be unaccountably severe in regard to infractions of the levirate marriage custom.

The witness of Christian as well as Jewish tradition on this point should be emphasized in conclusion. That Onan's unnatural act *as such* is condemned as sinful in Gen. 38:9-10 was an interpretation held by the Fathers and Doctors of the Catholic Church, by the Protestant Reformers, and by nearly all celibate and married theologians of all Christian

denominations until the early years of this century, when some exegetes began to approach the text with preconceptions deriving from the sexual decadence of modern Western culture and its exaggerated concern for "over-population." Sad to say, these preconceptions have since become entrenched as a new exegetical "orthodoxy" which can no longer see even a trace of indignation in this passage of Scripture against intrinsically sterile forms of genital activity as such. We shall give the last word here to Pope Pius XI who, in quoting the greatest of the Church Fathers, summed up and reaffirmed this unbroken tradition in his encyclical on Christian Marriage, *Casti Connubii* (31 December 1930). After roundly condemning as intrinsically contrary to the natural moral law all practices which intend to deprive the conjugal act of its procreative power, the Pontiff gave an authoritative interpretation of this biblical text which not only confirms the tradition, but is itself confirmed by impartial and historically well-informed exegesis:

Wherefore it is not surprising that the Sacred Scriptures themselves also bear witness to the fact that the divine Majesty attends this unspeakable depravity with the utmost detestation, sometimes having punished it with death, as St. Augustine recalls: "For it is illicit and shameful for a man to lie with even his lawful wife in such a way as to prevent the conception of offspring. This is what Onan, son of Judah, used to do; and for that God slew him" (cf. Gen. 38:8-10).²³

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Reverend Brian W. Harrison, O.S., S.T.D., a priest of the Oblates of Wisdom, is currently Chairman of the Theology Department in the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico in Ponce, P.R. Fr. Harrison, who was born in Australia, is a convert to the Catholic faith and is well known as a speaker and writer. His last article in HPR appeared in December 1993.

¹ "Sins of Onan? Not really," *San Juan Star*, January 8, 1995, p. V42. Professor Echevarria teaches Philosophy in the University of Puerto Rico, Bayamon campus.

² Echevarria claims that, according to Saint Augustine, "the pleasure that attaches to [sexual union] is an evil rooted in the Fall from Paradise," so that "In Paradise, sex acts were, like handshakes, pleasureless" (*loc. cit.*). In fact, Augustine never expressed such a cold and puritanical view: the professor fails to distinguish between "pleasure" and "passion." What Augustine said is that during sexual orgasm as it is now, the temporary suspension of reason - which he considered an indignity, like a momentary delirium or drunkenness - is a result of original sin's debilitating effect on our rational and volitional powers (*City of God*, XIV:16). He held that in Paradise an unweakened spiritual nature would have prevented that temporary loss of voluntary control over the body and its movements during intercourse which he calls "passion," or "the disease of lust" (*ibid.*, 17,24,26). In a telling phrase, he spoke of Paradise thus: "Nor yet did the flesh by its disobedience testify against the disobedience of man." This is clearly quite different from saying that there would have been no sexual pleasure

- or even less pleasure - if man had not sinned.

³ Echevarria makes much of the fact that zoologists in recent times have sometimes observed masturbatory and homosexual activity among animals. He states triumphantly that this scientific discovery overthrows the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant's conviction that animals are incapable of acting in such ways, and undermines the belief that such sterile types of sex act are "unnatural." The objection is urged that it would be absurd to qualify as "unnatural" acts that are now observed to occur "in nature" (cf. *loc.cit.*). But there is no absurdity or self-contradiction, because the concept of "nature" is not being used univocally in the objection. To say that an act is sinful because it is "unnatural" uses this concept in a different sense from that which is used when we speak of "nature" to signify the sub-human, material world studied by the so-called "natural sciences." It means that the act contradicts the intention of the Creator, as revealed by the clearly purposeful structure of our anatomy. In a world that is no longer Paradise, the desires and actions of animals can indeed be "unnatural" in this sense of disordered and abusive, even though there cannot of course be any sin on the part of creatures with no free will, and hence no moral responsibility.

⁴ For example: Rom.1:24,6:19;Gal.5:19,Eph.4:19,5:3;Col. 3:5.

⁵ No. 2352.

⁶ In the parable of the sower, the idea of seed which falls *upon* the ground, rather than *in* it, symbolizes a fundamental sin; rejection of the Word of God (cf. Luke. 8:5-6, 12-13). In Hebrew poetic thought a woman's body in its capacity for fruitfulness and motherhood is sometimes alluded to under images of a "garden" *in* which seed is to be sown (cf. Song of Songs 4:12-16; 5:1; 6:1-2). Indeed, the very fact that in Hebrew the same word (*zerah*) is used for both "semen" and "seed" suggests that the potential for fruitfulness is understood as essential to any sexual activity.

⁷ Cf. Deut. 25:5-6.

⁸ The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Vol.4,p.1054, article "Birth Control") states: "Jewish tradition ascribed the practice of birth control to the depraved humanity before Noah (Gen. R. 23:2,4; Rashi to Gen. 4:19,23)." (For further confirmation of Jewish views on this point, cf. H. Hirsch Cohen, *The Dunkennes of Noah* [University of Alabama Press.]) The Encyclopedia article adds that on the basis of Gen. 38:9-10, "the Talmud sternly inveighs against 'bringing forth the seed in vain', considering it a cardinal sin (Nid. 13a). . . . Strictly Orthodox [Jews, . . . for religious reasons, refuse to resort to birth control." In the same Encyclopedia, under "Onanism" (Vol. 12, p.1495), it is stated that the act of Onan "is taken . . . by the Talmud (Yev. 34b) to refer either to unnatural intercourse or (cf. Nid. 13a) to masturbation. The Zohar [a 13th century work] expatiates on the evil of onanism in the second sense." Other works by Jewish authors corroborating this tradition include D. Feldman, *Marital Relations, Birth Control and Abortion in Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974) and J. Cohen, *Be Fertile, Increase, Fill the Earth and Mater It* (Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁹ *Bereshis: Genesis - A New Translation with a Commentary Authorized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1980, Vol.5, p.1677).

¹⁰ Cf. Duet. 25:8-10.

¹¹ Cf. Jerusalem Bible note on this passage.

¹² In Gen. 38, Judah, in exhorting his son Onan to marry Tamar, makes no appeal to any *divine* mandate: he appears to be relying upon only his paternal authority. It is true that the silence of Scripture on this point does not, in itself, demonstrate conclusively that Onan would *not* have been conscious of any such divine command: to insist that it does demonstrate this would involve an un-Catholic, *sola Scriptura* position. But the burden of proof would surely be on someone who wanted to maintain that there is some extra-biblical evidence that these

early descendants of Abraham believed the levirate marriage custom was mandated by God.

¹³ The very expressions "going in to/entering" carried overtones of sacredness for the Israelites: cf., for example, Exod. 28:29,35; Lev.16:2,23, where we read of the high priest "entering into" the sanctuary. It might be objected that since Gen.38:9 speaks of Onan "going in to" Tamar, my argument is self-refuting: for it, as I am claiming, this indirect expression is used in Scripture for *legitimate* sexual acts, then it might seem that, on my own terms, Onan's sexual act, in itself, is presented here as legitimate - which would contradict the whole thesis of this essay. In fact the language used by the Genesis author is consistent with my argument, because it must be recalled that, if my thesis is correct, the situation narrated in 38:9-10 is biblically unique in precisely such a way as to make the author's choice of language more ambivalent than usual in its connotations or implications. That is, no other passage of Scripture speaks of a sexual relationship which (if I am right) is presented as morally complex in the sense of involving both licit and illicit aspects, i.e. the unlawful *use* of a lawful relationship. As is obvious, the euphemism "go in to" refers literally to a man's *approach* to his wife in view of intercourse; and so the Genesis author's use of that verb in v.9 need reflect nothing more than his consciousness that Onan had every right to approach Tamar sexually, given the levirate marriage law. It was what he did *after* initiating the marital act that was wicked.

¹⁴ Cf. Gen. 19:34-35;34:2;38:16;39:7-8;Exod.22:16;Lev.18:20,22-23;19:20;20:11-13;Deut.22:22-29;27:20-23; 1 Sam.2:22; 2 Sam.12:11-14;13:11;Job31:10;Dan.13:20,37;Ezek.23:8;Bar.6:43. The contrast in language, corresponding to that in attitude, is particularly clear in 1 Sam.2:21-22. In v.21, referring to holy Anna, the hitherto barren mother of Samuel, it is said that "the Lord visited her" so that she conceived the future prophet. Then, in the very next verse, the priest Heli laments the profligacy of his own sons, who have been "lying with" loose women.

¹⁵ Cf. Lev.18:7-17;20:18-21; Ezek.22:10. Even when no sexual act is involved, the concept of "uncovered nakedness" is always presented as shameful or disgraceful: cf. Gen.9:21-23;Exod.20:26;Isa.47:3;Nah.3:5;Jer.13:22;Apoc.3:18.

¹⁶ Cf. the citations from Song of Songs referred to in note 6 above.

¹⁷ Cf. Lev. 18:22,20:13.

¹⁸ Cf. note 17.

¹⁹ Even involuntary nocturnal emissions were seen by the rabbinic commentators as a result of man's primordial fall.

²⁰ The Hebrew verb used in v. 10, *asah*, ascribes a positive action to Onan.

²¹ See any standard reference work of biblical theology, e.g. the article "Heart" in X. Leon-Defour (ed.), *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (2nd edn., London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), pp. 228-229.

²² Cf. in Leon-Defour, *loc. cit.*, the articles "Hardness of Heart" (pp. 222-223); "Pride" (pp. 457-459), "Arrogance" (pp. 31-33) and "Cupidity" (pp. 104-106).

²³ "*Quare mirum non est. ipsas quoque s. Litteras testari, divinam Maiestatem summo prosequi odio hoc nefandum facinus illudque interdum morte punisse, ut memorat S. Augustinus: 'Illicite namque et turpiter etiam cum legitima uxore concumbitur, ubi prolis conceptio devitatur. Quod faciebat Onan, filius Iudae, et occidit illum propter hoc Deus' (cf. Gn. 38, 8-10)" (Denzinger-Schonmetzer 3716). The passage from St. Augustine quoted by the Pope is *De adulterinis coniugiis ad Pollentium* 1b.IIc.12 (PL 40 [1887]479B).*

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