

Michael F. Valente



Michael F. Valente was born in Albany, New York, in 1937. He attended Stonehill College from 1955 to 1959 where he graduated *magna cum laude* with an undergraduate degree in philosophy. Stonehill College is a private Roman Catholic liberal arts college in Easton, Massachusetts.

From 1959 to 1962, Michael attended Notre Dame University. He received a masters degree in mathematics from that institution in 1961, and a masters in theology in 1962. Michael obtained a doctorate degree in the philosophy of religion from Columbia University in 1968.

As a doctoral candidate in 1966, Michael showed signs of breaking with traditionalism by publicly speaking out on the Catholic Church's prohibition against contraception, even for married couples. A [story](#) published by the South Bend Tribune, titled "Contraceptive Use By Catholics Grows," stated: "Michael F. Valente, a doctoral candidate in religion at Columbia University, conceded that 'Catholic behavior patterns are not as easily predictable as before.' He pointed out that many confessors now advise Catholics to follow their own consciences on the birth control issue. It is clearly unjust, he said 'that many Catholics cannot justify attending church' because of their feeling on using birth control."

His doctoral dissertation at Columbia was titled "The Sexual Ethics of Martin Le Maistre." It was published in 1969. A Catholic theologian during the era of St. Thomas Augustine, Le Maistre (1432-1481) rejected Augustine's pronouncement that the only morally acceptable form of sexual conduct was sex within marriage for the purpose of procreation.

In his journal article, Michael wrote: "The modern development of sexual ethics has led to the separation of human sexuality as such from human sexuality as necessarily procreative. The significance of Le Maistre is that he suggested the beginnings of such a separation."

Michael's teaching career began in 1967 when he became a member of the Department of Theology at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. The following year, he was elected to be the chair of the department. During his three year tenure in this position, Michael initiated significant changes in the department's culture and curriculum. He is believed to be the first layperson to chair a theology department at any Roman Catholic university in the United States.

Although Michael's liberal views in the field of theology predated his tenure as chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Seton Hall, it continued during and after. In 1970, he published *Sex: The Radical View of a Catholic Theologian*. In the preface, Michael wrote: "In a primary sense, this book is about freedom – freedom from the past and freedom for the future." He explained:

"It is about freedom from the past because men of the past saw 'the natural' as a

static law within which man had to conduct his life. . . It is about freedom from the reactionary view of the unfree who see the liberated individual as a tremendous threat. . . It is about freedom from feeling threatened by long-haired boys or lesbians because one is imprisoned by a world view that imputed sacredness – and hence gives sanction – only to a fixed order of things. . . It is thus about freedom from the burden of a static world view. And it is more. It is about freedom for recognition of and creative participation in the fact of man’s evolution, an evolution which man himself – because he is rational and free – can direct himself.”

Michael’s book shook up the Catholic clerical establishment. “How dare he question the Church’s sexual dogma of the ages,” was likely the feeling among theological traditionalists.

Arthur Warner learned of Michael after his book was published in 1970. Warner, who knew that criminal statutes against consenting sex had religious origins, reached out to Michael. Since the two men both lived in New Jersey, they developed an intellectual relationship. Michael was invited to become a member of the National Committee in 1972.

Michael testified on behalf of the National Committee at a hearing of the Assembly Judiciary Committee of the New Jersey Legislature in June 1972. He spoke in favor of legislation to remove criminal penalties from private consensual sex.

The following year, Michael met Thomas F. Coleman, a law graduate who was about to take the bar exam in California, at the meeting of the National Committee in Washington D.C. Michael and Tom developed a friendship as well as a comradeship for sexual law reform. The two men remained friends until Michael’s death in 2023.

Freelance journalist and once associate editor of Playboy Magazine, Robert Anton Wilson, published an article in *Oui Magazine* in 1975 titled “[The Future of Sex](#).” In it, he acknowledged the cutting-edge thinking of Michael Valente:

“Run this through your computer: ‘Our future will be one wherein sex is linked to procreation even less than it is now. . . . And procreation itself will be virtually emancipated from sexual intercourse in a world of sperm banks, surrogate mothers, test-tube babies and the utter asexuality of cloning. . . . Homosexual acts, for instance, will be seen as merely one sexual possibility among several open to every person, so long as he or she is not inhibited by contrary programming.’

“Now anyone who thinks that’s Dr. Tim Leary, Norman O. Brown, Charles A. Reich or some other prophet of futurism is missing the beat of the mutation. The speaker is a Roman Catholic theologian – Professor Michael Valente of the department of religious studies at Seton Hall University.

A more complete biography of Michael is available [online](#).