

# *Being Catholic Today*

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## **Lecture 5: Catholics & Sexuality**

We have seen that being Catholic means being in Christ. Catholics are those who through faith have accepted Jesus as Lord, risen from the dead and active in the world. Through baptism they have been incorporated into his body. To be Catholic means to live with the life of Christ, to live as a son in the one Son of God, calling God Father, united to Father and Son by their Holy Spirit. This Spirit makes all the baptized into a community of persons ruled by charity. Catholics throughout the world and throughout the centuries are drawn into the family of God as brothers and sisters of each other. The life of Christ in them makes them one, as the Father and Son are one. This is a communion that shows itself in mutual service and forgiveness. It is a community wherein each seeks to build up the other in Christ.

Catholics on earth are part of this Trinitarian communion but are not yet fully gathered into it. They are on the way to full communion but still fight against the old Adam that prefers self to God. Remember Cardinal Journet's dictum: "The Church is without sin but not without sinners; her boundaries pass through our heart." We struggle against the powers of darkness and of this world. As we gain mastery over our inordinate passions and our need to be in control, we become freer to live by the Spirit, to live by charity.

By the loving gift of the Son to the Father made present in the Eucharist we become one body, one spirit in him. Henceforth we live a divine-human life. Our

body is sanctified so that our activity becomes the action of Christ. In the last talk we saw how this being in Christ empowers Catholics to transform all human activity. It is particularly the vocation of the laity to imbue their work and pursuits with the energy of Christ, to bring them into harmony with God's plan. The Eucharist, because it is the act of Christ, has the power to transform the universe through us. Catholics have the privilege and the duty of helping to shape the world according to the mind of Christ.

Tonight's topic is similar to that of last session. As men and women who are part of the body of Christ, Catholics seek to order their sexuality according to the mind of Christ. Just as their work in the world is not separate from their Christian being, neither is the body something outside of their union with Christ. The human person was made male and female by God. The key insight of Catholic teaching on sexuality is that the body with its gender is part of the person; it is the expression of the person's spirit. Through the body the human spirit expresses itself. Man is a unity and his activity is the activity of the whole person, not just of body or of spirit. What man does in the body must be the expression of his spirit.

What is a person? A being capable of giving himself. Man was created in the image of God. This means he has a likeness to God, a likeness that consists in the ability to know and love that which is true and good. He can take into himself the truth of things, understand, order and rule the world—that is his vocation. Because of this likeness he can enter into relationship with God, a relationship of knowledge and love, even though in this life he does not experience God directly. A human person is one who can know the truth, committing himself to truth, affirming it and loving it. As a created

spirit the human person is oriented to its Creator, that is, toward a knowledge and love of him who is infinite Spirit. He is called to give himself to the one who has given himself to him in creation. “Love is the power given to the human person to participate in the love with which God himself loves in the mystery of creation and redemption” (John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* 127:1, hereafter cited as TOB, i.e., “Theology of the Body”). In fact God himself is gift, each of the three persons of the Trinity giving himself ceaselessly to the other. Through God’s gift of himself in love we “realize in us the eternal life of God, which consists in participating in the total and complete gift of the Son to the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit” (John Paul II @ Buenos Aires, 3.10.87).

And so man is made for relationship with the three persons of God; in this is his fulfillment. In this life we know God only dimly (“as in a glass, darkly”) through creation, and this knowledge is largely implicit, manifesting itself in conscience. Man knows he is related to a greater being, a higher power, with the free choice to accept or reject that profound orientation of his being. But God saw it was not good for man to be completely alone in this world and made Eve as a helpmate for him. In the creation of man as male and female he gave them to each other in order that they might express love in a bodily way. Man is oriented to woman by his very body and woman to man. Through the body man and woman exercise their power to give themselves to each other in love in imitation of the love that is in God himself, of whom they are the image.

God is a communion of persons, a Trinity of persons giving themselves to each other eternally in love. When persons in the image of God express their love for each

other through the body as male and female, their likeness to God is expressed in their total gift of self to each other in love. In that complete self-giving each finds himself. The gift comes to fruition, if it is God’s will, in the generation of new life. Archbishop Chaput of Denver puts it simply and clearly: “In God’s wise plan, he has chosen the ‘one flesh’ union of husband and wife to be the point at which his love comes into the universe to cooperate with the love of husband and wife in bringing about, according to the mystery of his own will, the creation of a new human person” (“Serving as a Catholic in the Third Millennium,” Address to the Couple to Couple League, July 1, 1998).

These truths, in the mind of Karol Wotyla, were at the heart of the Second Vatican Council, which he understood as “the call to deeper personal awareness of love as self-gift rooted in the Trinity” (Michael Waldstein, Introduction to TOB, 90). This teaching of the Council has still to enter the consciousness of the ordinary Catholic. In Wotyla’s mind, “increased awareness of the mystery of trinitarian communion—this is what allows a correct growth of the believer’s consciousness of the nature of the church as the people of God” (Ibid.).

The total mutual self-gift of the spouses in marriage is the way God wished human beings to mirror his eternal love. Marriage is a “sacrament” of the love that is God himself. This is the teaching proclaimed by John Paul II in a series of catecheses delivered over a period of four years early in his pontificate. The talks form a book entitled *Man and Woman He Created Them* and commonly known as the Theology of the Body (TOB). The following paragraph conveys the depth and richness of the Pope’s theology:

There is a strong link between the mystery of creation, as a gift that springs from Love, and that beatifying 'beginning' of man's existence as male and female, in the whole truth of their bodies and of their sexes, which is the simple and pure truth of communion between the persons. When the first man exclaims at the sight of the woman, "she is flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones" (Gen 2:23), he simply affirms the human identity of both. By exclaiming this, he seems to say, *Look, a body that expresses the 'person'!* Following an earlier passage of the Yahwist text, one can also say that this 'body' reveals the 'living soul' which man became when God-Yahweh breathed life into him (see Gen 2:7). His solitude before all other living beings began in virtue of this act. Exactly through the depth of that original solitude, man now emerges in the dimension of reciprocal gift, the expression of which—by that very fact the expression of his existence as a person—is the human body in all the original truth of its masculinity and femininity. The body, which expresses femininity 'for' masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity 'for' femininity, manifests the reciprocity and the communion of persons. It expresses it through gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is the *body: a witness* to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness *to Love as the source from which this same giving springs.* Masculinity-femininity—namely, sex—is the original sign of a creative donation and at the same time the sign of a gift that man, male-female,

becomes aware of as a gift lived so to speak in an original way. This is the meaning with which sex enters into the theology of the body. (TOB 14:4)

Through the body man and woman express life-giving personal love in the image of the Trinity.

When man sinned and rejected God's plan for him, God did not cease to love him. Rather he poured out his love for his wayward people by sending his Son to bring them back to him. The Bible sees this compassionate love as the love of a Bridegroom for his bride. Coming in the flesh, Christ takes his people to himself as the Church, washing away her sins in the bath of new life. Through this spousal love marriage has been raised to a new dignity: it is now the sign of Christ's love for his Church, and at the same time it helps us to understand the nature of divine love. Christian marriage has a new significance: it is now not only a sacrament of God's love for humanity shown in the act of creation but also a sacrament of Christ's love for his Church and her response to this love. "In the light of Ephesians [5:21-33]—precisely through participation in this salvific love of Christ—marriage is confirmed and simultaneously renewed as the sacrament of the human beginning, that is, as the sacrament in which man and woman, called to become one flesh, share in the creative love of God himself" (TOB 102:2). In addition the celebration of the sacrament of marriage in the Church becomes the means by which Christ himself enters into the communion of the spouses to strengthen them with his grace. In Christian marriage the spouses become one as Christ is one with the Church. The indissoluble bond between them is a sign of the unbreakable bond between Christ and his Church.

This is the vision that explains the rest of the Church's teaching on sexuality. The love between the spouses is a total self-giving: it holds nothing back. The spouses welcome each other in the full reality of their bodies. That is why any destroying of the life-giving capacity of the conjugal union is not consonant with the true nature of marriage. It accepts just so much of the other person but rejects a constituent part of the person and so is not total. In John Paul's words, "The innate language of [intercourse] that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other" (John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio* 32). That is the insight behind the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae*, Paul VI's condemnation of artificial birth control in 1968. Pope John Paul II interprets that teaching in the context of a global vision of masculinity and femininity in God's plan, a vision rooted in the Scriptures and the consistent teaching of the Church from the beginning. All Christian bodies agreed on this teaching until 1930 when first the Anglican Church and later every Christian body except the Catholic Church abandoned it.

The total gift of the spouses to each other is by nature exclusive—one cannot divide the gift of self and still call it total. Premarital or extramarital intercourse is a bodily union without the spiritual commitment and undivided gift of self. Sexual activity between members of the same sex is a use of the sexual organs in a non-sexual way, since male and female are oriented toward one another to express love open to fruitfulness; no life can result from homosexual activity. In all these acts "the sexuality of the person is separated from that person and used (abused) as something apart from the person" (Ralph Wright). In vitro

fertilization separates the creation of a new human being from the loving bodily union of the spouses. Abortion is a destroying of the fruit of sexual love. Embryonic stem-cell research has the same consequence. Pornography fosters the appropriation of human sexuality for one's own enjoyment. All of these practices denature the meaning of sexuality as gift and treat the body as an object to be manipulated for one's own use. They violate what has been called the essence of John Paul's teaching which one commentator has expressed in the single sentence: "Gift expresses the essential truth of the human body" (P. Ide, cited by Waldstein in Introduction to TOB, p. 124). Behind every misuse of sexuality is some kind of withholding of love, a using as opposed to a giving.

This view of sexuality is countercultural. Many people, including Catholics, find the teaching impossible to accept. Our society presents a completely different view of sexuality, which can be traced back to the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Up until then man had accepted the material world as an objective given, of which he was a part and which he could understand. The mind was able to discern the natures of things which they received from the creator. Man could find fulfillment by conforming his behavior to the inner laws of nature. With the development of natural science came a fascination with the power over nature which science could give. Science became no longer the search for the objective truth of things but the study of what one could do with matter. The human mind became autonomous from the natural world and sought to become master of it, to dictate its meaning, to become "arbiter of reality." Eventually truth came to be seen as what the human mind makes it to be. Nature was not a world to study and understand but material to be manipulated.

When a divine creator of the world is removed, man takes his place. There is no objective truth, but the individual mind creates its own truth. No longer is the human mind subject to being, seeking to fathom its mystery and purpose. Rather it creates its own meaning, makes nature serve its own purposes. This is understood to be freedom. It is easy to see how this attitude has led both to the various totalitarianisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to a culture of relativism. The human mind, divorced from the constraints of the objective nature of things, is free to make use of the physical world for its own ends, regardless of any purpose of these things. A major task of man in our day is to rediscover his place in the natural world that is dependent on a creator, a Supreme Being from whom emanated all that is. Only such a worldview can help people understand the innate meaning of human sexuality. We must seek to learn the inner nature of sexuality and to conform our practice to that inner truth. This clearly requires of man both humility and a desire to discover the truth.

A more profound difficulty we have in accepting the theology of the body is that God's original plan for man and woman was disturbed by sin. Before the Fall man and woman were naked and felt no shame (Gen 2:25). John Paul analyzes this original innocence: "It is a question of such an 'acceptance' or 'welcome' in reciprocal nakedness that it expresses and sustains the meaning of the gift and thus deepens its reciprocal dignity. This dignity corresponds deeply to the fact that the Creator has willed (and continually wills) man, male and female, 'for his own sake' (GS 24:3). Innocence 'of heart'—and as a consequence, innocence of experience—signifies a moral participation in the eternal and permanent act of God's will" (TOB 17:3). After the fall

man and woman experienced shame before each other. Failing to trust in God's love for them and seduced by the devil, they chose their own plan for happiness. Rejecting God's love, they lost the freedom to give themselves in love. They decided to become arbiters of their own existence, becoming "like gods." The freedom to express love through the body was now hampered by a desire for one's own gratification, the urge to use the organs of sexual love for one's own pleasure, which we call concupiscence. This is the manifestation in the sexual area of the weakness introduced into human nature by sin. Christ alluded to this concupiscence in his words about looking at a woman in such a way as to commit an adultery of the heart (Matt 5). There is a fine but clear line between noticing the attractiveness of a person, even enjoying this attractiveness, and objectifying the person in one's mind as a source of physical gratification.

How does man gain the self-mastery needed to live the truth of his God-given sexuality? How does he learn the language of the gift? He must first rediscover the true meaning of the Church's teaching, and this takes time. More importantly he needs to avail himself of the help the Lord has given in his Church: prayer, listening to the word of God in the Scriptures, practicing a serious spiritual discipline, and above all drawing strength from the Eucharist and Penance. In John Paul's words, the sacraments "infuse holiness into the terrain of man's humanity: they penetrate the soul and body, the feminine and masculine of the personal subject, with the power of holiness" (TOB 117b:2). A true conversion of heart is needed if man is to become free of domination by the passions and able to give himself in genuine love. Failures in this area are means of growing closer to the Lord if they lead us to turn regularly to him for

forgiveness and strength. The more we realize the poverty of our own resources, the more we can expect and receive from God. We soon realize that our growth in virtue is not primarily our work but his, as we learn to surrender to his Spirit working in us.

At bottom what is asked of Catholics today is a deepening of faith in Christ, and so we come back to the very beginning of these talks. We must learn to center our lives on Christ. Mature Catholics are those who have made an option for Christ, seeing in him the way, the truth, the life, the one who loved us to the end, the one who offers us friendship with God for eternity, the one who has triumphed over the sin of man which has caused so much bloodshed and anguish in human history. This faith in the Incarnate Son of God can take different forms but always involves some personal choice, some kind of Yes to Jesus as Lord. As John Paul says, “The man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—he must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into Him with all his own self, he must ‘appropriate’ and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and redemption in order to find himself.” (*Redemptor Hominis* 10) From the beginning of his pontificate John Paul’s cry was, “Open wide the doors to Christ.”

The Pope gave the qualities of this faith: it must be “personal, free and convinced, embraced with one’s entire being, an ecclesial faith, confessed and celebrated in communion in the Church, a praying and adoring faith, *matured through the experience of communion with God*” (*Maestro* 2). Through faith, the believer is

able to carry out his mission with joy, “grasp[ing] his own identity as a person who has come to share in the Person of the Son in relation to the Father by the gift of the Spirit. Mission is thus not in the first place an attitude of moral commitment in response to a moral duty, but a way of being that is rooted in the person of Jesus as the Son of God” (Waldstein 93). Only this rootedness in Christ can give us the strength to grow to our full humanity. That is why it is tragic that young people are not being taught to strive for self-mastery but instead are being taught to indulge their desires “safely.”

The world sees the Church as imposing antiquated restrictions on human freedom, while in fact she proclaims the way to authentic happiness and cultural health. It cannot be said that the sexual revolution has produced either of these. It is difficult not to see in the present crisis of the family a direct result of the contraceptive mentality of the mid-to-late twentieth century. The facts are obvious: the high incidence of divorce, the lowering of the birth rate to the point of cultural suicide, children being raised by one parent or alternate “care givers,” the killing in the womb of one million children a year in this country alone. The contraceptive mentality sees children as the enemy.

Does the Church want to eliminate sexual pleasure? This would be to succumb to Manicheism, the heresy that regarded matter and the body as evil. The Pope explicitly and repeatedly rejects this view. To reject the body is to reject the person. Christian maturity liberates the emotions from selfishness and restores them to their true vitality. The Pope is not hesitant to exalt the erotic element of marriage; he comments at length on the Song of Songs as a celebration of the erotic and personal dimensions of love. He writes, “Through gestures and reactions, through the whole

reciprocally conditioned dynamism of tension and enjoyment—whose direct source is the body in its masculinity and femininity, the body in its action and interaction—through all this *man, the person*, “speaks” (TOB 123:4).

The Church is developing her pastoral approach to persons struggling to be faithful to her teaching. She knows the pain of couples trying to renounce the contraceptive mentality that has introduced a “culture of death.” She knows the cross, which men and women with a same-sex orientation bear in trying to live chastely. Every diocese in the country now has a Natural Family Planning office, which offers help to, couples and disseminates information on the theology of the body. The organization Courage offers support to gay men and women who wish to follow the teaching of Christ. Catholics in these movements testify how Christ’s teaching has led them through suffering to a deeper joy and love. On the handout you will find websites for these organizations, and samples of their literature are found on the table.

Does one need to engage in sexual activity in order to be happy, to be fully human? Our society takes for granted that one does. But we believe that marriage is a sacrament or sign created by God pointing to the communion of persons for which man was made. That communion is ultimately a communion with God, with the Three Persons of the Trinity, in which our happiness is found. Christ teaches that there will be no giving in marriage in heaven, where men and women will enjoy the direct vision of God. Man’s capacity to give himself will be totally fulfilled in the beatifying love of God. As the Pope put it, “...as a consequence of the vision of God ‘face to face,’ *a love of such depth and*

*power of concentration on God himself* will be born in the person that it *completely absorbs the person’s whole psychosomatic subjectivity*” (TOB 68:3). At the same time this love will be the discovery in God of the whole ‘world’ of personal relations that make up human life. We will live what the Pope calls a “new, perfect *intersubjectivity of all*” (TOB 68:4). This is the communion of saints. It is to this future reality that the vocation of consecrated religious points in the church. God calls some persons to witness already in this life to the eternal communion with God to which all are called. The consecrated religious lives a spousal love for the Lord, which bears fruit in love for all his people. In this way marriage and religious life complement each other, each offering to the other the support of a powerful sign of the love with which God has loved the world.