

Chapter 1

Human Sexuality

Wonderful Gift and Awesome Responsibility

The Book of Genesis reveals that at the very dawn of creation, humanity was created in the image and likeness of God, male and female they were created. And God saw all creation, including sexually differentiated human beings, as “very good.”¹ Thus, our gender, our sexual identity as male or female persons, is an intimate part of the original and divine plan of creation. The mystery of what it means to be human—incarnate, embodied, and therefore sexual—is bound up in the mystery and purpose of God, who is the author of all life, and love itself.

So, from the outset, we want to be clear that we believe human sexuality is a gift. We approach the topic of human sexuality with a deep and abiding sense of appreciation, wonder, and respect. We are dealing with a divine gift, a primal dimension of each person, a mysterious blend of spirit and body, which shares in God’s own creative love and life.

Christian theology has long reflected on the revelation of God as a communion of persons, the Trinity. God’s inner life is a life of radical sharing and communication among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is in, through, and out of that mysterious love within God that all life and love come. Created in God’s own image, we find inscribed in our hearts one core universal vocation, that is, to love and to be loved.² Love is our origin; love is our constant calling on earth; and love will be our fulfillment in heaven.³

John Paul II speaks of each person “as an incarnate spirit, that is, a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by

1. Genesis 1:26-27 (*New American Bible* trans.). An overview of a theology of Creation is found in, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sharing the Light of Faith: National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1979), no. 85.

2. Cf. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 12; *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 11.

3. Cf. “Wedding Preface III,” *The Roman Missal*.

an immortal spirit.”⁴ Acknowledging that love is “the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” the pope goes on to say that “love includes the human body, and the body is made a sharer in spiritual love.”⁵ We are created not as angels or pure spirits but as human beings, embodied and sexual. We make incarnate God’s own goodness, love, and vitality in our frail human efforts to love.

In Genesis, chapter two, the second version of the story of creation, God says, “It is not good for the man (Adam) to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.” God then fashioned a woman to be Adam’s equal partner, out of his “rib.” When at last he sees Eve, Adam is ecstatic and exclaims, “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” And the inspired author concludes, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.”⁶ From this passage, and its usage across the Christian tradition, we see that sexuality is intimately related to our vocation to love, our natural yearning for committed relationships.

The Christian tradition has also understood this passage as illustrating a natural mutuality and equality that exist between man and woman. “The sexes are complementary: similar and dissimilar at the same time; not identical, the same, though, in dignity of person; they are peers so that they may mutually understand each other, diverse in their reciprocal completion.”⁷ Both man and woman are *persons*—equal yet distinct. “The gift of sexuality involves the whole person because it permeates all facets of the human personality: the physical, the psycho-emotional, the intellectual, the spiritual and ethical, and the social.”⁸

“Sexuality” and “Sex”: Related, but Distinct Realities

Sexuality is a relational power, not merely a capacity for performing specific acts.⁹ The Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education speaks of *sexuality* as “a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of com-

4. *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 11.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Genesis 2:23-24.

7. *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, no. 25; See also *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 22.

8. The Bishops of the Dioceses of New Jersey, *A Joint Pastoral Statement on Education in Human Sexuality* (1980), no. 2.

9. See Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, *Sexuality and Church Teaching* (September 29, 1980). Text prepared for delivery to the bishops gathered at the 1980 International Synod on the Family.

municating with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love."¹⁰ Sexuality prompts each of us from within, calling us to personal as well as spiritual growth and drawing us out from self to interpersonal bonds and commitments with others, both women and men. It includes the qualities of sensitivity, understanding, intimacy, openness to others, compassion, and mutual support.¹¹

Sexuality is a dimension of one's restless heart, which continually yearns for interpersonal communion, glimpsed and experienced to varying degrees in this life, ultimately finding full oneness only in God, here and hereafter. "In the fullest and richest sense, the gift of sexuality is both the physical and psychological grounding for the human person's capacity to love. . . . It is a gift shared by all persons, regardless of their state in life."¹²

In our own *National Catechetical Directory*, promulgated as guidelines for religious education in the United States, we proposed, "Sexuality is an important element of the human personality, an integral part of one's overall consciousness. It is both a central aspect of one's self-understanding (i.e., as male or female) and a crucial factor in one's relationships with others."¹³ Therefore, throughout this document, we distinguish between this broader, more inclusive and relational term *sexuality* and the more restrictive act-specific term *sex*:

Sexuality refers to a fundamental component of personality in and through which we, as male or female, experience our relatedness to self, others, the world, and even God.

Sex refers *either* to the biological aspects of being male or female (i.e., a synonym for one's gender) *or* to the expressions of sexuality, which have physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, particularly genital actions resulting in sexual intercourse and/or orgasm.

Since the divine vocation to love is deeply rooted in each person as a "unified totality," and since each cell of the human body bears the female or male genetic imprint, it is proper to speak of sexuality and one's sexual response in a wide variety of interpersonal situations in which genital arousal and response are not pertinent.

10. *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, no. 4.

11. See Bishop Francis Mugavero, "Sexuality—God's Gift: A Pastoral Letter," reprinted in *Catholic Mind* (1976): 54.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Sharing the Light of Faith*, no. 191.

Accordingly, we ought not to reduce our educational efforts related to sexuality solely to a study of specific acts and their moral implications.

The Incarnation: An Affirmation of Our Humanity

We find in the Paschal Mystery, the story of our redemption in Christ, further affirmation of our material world and our sexual nature. The *incarnation* of God's Word, the divine becoming fully human, adds even greater dignity or divine approbation to our being corporeal, sexual beings. The annunciation, birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ serve as a divine affirmation of the goodness and loveliness of humanity. Jesus of Nazareth, as revealed in the gospel stories, was fully embodied, like us in all things but sin. He was single and chaste, but he was not neuter. Jesus was a man of deep feelings, love, and commitment—to God, the Father; to his mother; to his disciples; and, in a particular way, to personal friends like Mary, Martha, Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Peter, James, and John, "the beloved disciple." Likewise, we who bear the name *Christians* are called to experience and express human love as whole persons—body, mind, and soul.

Precious Gift Implies an Awesome Responsibility

Like all our human powers and freedoms, sexuality, a gift from God, can be channeled for good or ill. Each of us is entrusted by God with the responsibility to guide and direct this gift wisely and lovingly. At best, our sexuality calls us to personal maturity and interpersonal commitments.

It should not be surprising that the power and pleasure which are part of sexuality will demand of us intelligence, honesty and sacrifice that might test our maturity to the utmost degree. But we do not fear sexuality, we embrace it. What we fear at times is our own inability to think as highly of the gift as does the God who made us sexual beings.¹⁴

Unfortunately, the story of Adam and Eve does not end at chapter two of Genesis, with blissful mutual happiness in the

14. "Sexuality—God's Gift: A Pastoral Letter," in *Catholic Mind*, p. 54.

Garden of Eden. Human insecurity, pride, and selfishness soon set in and with them come the effects of sin—relational hardships, painful human labor, and a tarnishing of the divine image. Salvation history is filled not only with stories of sexual fidelity and commitment but also with tales of sexual misuse or abuse. The adulterous affair of David and Bathsheba illustrates well how sexuality, when combined with other passions and motives, can lead to suspicion and jealousy rather than loving intimacy, to personal destruction rather than new life.¹⁵

The reality of *original sin* remains the inevitable counterpoint to all our efforts to promote a healthy, holistic, and Christian approach to life, including human sexuality. While we are called to incarnate the image of God in the way we live and love, the gift of human sexuality also can be abused, sometimes intentionally, sometimes through immaturity or ignorance. Given how important sexuality is to one's self-concept and interpersonal attractions, such errors in judgment frequently have a profound impact for ill on one's psyche, human commitments, and relationship with God.¹⁶

It is a fundamental belief of the Christian tradition that, left to our own efforts and without grace, we are unable to overcome sinful temptations and to attain our personal and eternal destiny. Temptations to subvert our human desires, including sexual ones, into purely selfish aims or to manipulate others in human relationships have become deeply rooted in our hearts and in human history. And many succumb to these temptations.

The Scriptures, the Nicene Creed, and our Christian faith assure us that only through the incarnation and redemption of Jesus Christ can we achieve true holiness, able to overcome temptation, whether sexual or otherwise. It is only by cooperating in the ongoing redemptive work of the risen Christ that we can confidently call all people to live out the image of God imprinted within.

Reflections on the Sexual Revolution

Beginning in the mid-1950s and continuing to the present, the people of the United States have been involved in what many have called a "sexual revolution." Believing that societal sexual values and mores were the product of an overly restrictive, somewhat anti-body bias, proponents of this revolution advocated a greater appreciation of the beauty, pleasure, and goodness both of being

15. See 2 Samuel 11—12.

16. Cf. *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, no. 44; *Sharing the Light of Faith*, no. 98.