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Redeeming Sexual Love in Marriage

Ronda Chervin

SEXUAL LOVE can be fascinating, tormenting, sterile, jealous, adulterous, illicit, and perverse. It can also be reverent, faithful, passionate, loving, joyful, and fruitful.

Before the Fall we can image that sex between man and woman was not only to be abundantly fertile in the image of the God of creation, but also to be free from all the defects coming from differing expectations and desires.

After the Fall, we find a broken image: sexual love sometimes faithful and creative but often distorted by lust, jealousy, and perversity.

As so beautifully described by John Paul II in his first series of Wednesday audiences (September 5, 1979 to April 2, 1980), Christ meant to restore sexual love by recalling his disciples to understand its foundation in the unity "two in one flesh," a unity that God willed *from the beginning*.

To foster appreciation of our call to redeemed sexual love in marriage, I will first describe some negative modes of sexual expression, and then develop a contrasting framework concerning

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(1) the Trinitarian context of imaging God's self-giving love, (2) the incarnational mode of human sexuality, and (3) the child as gift. In the course of the presentation, I will include application of concepts to concrete problems in Catholic ethics.

Negative Modes of Sexual Expression

While some of the modes of sexual expression I will describe here are often thought of primarily in regard to immoral sexual acts, they are also frequently to be found in distorted attitudes within married love—more or less as a continuum with past attitudes outside of matrimony.

Release of sexual tension is so basic an element in masculine sexuality that it can easily become the central motive. Juli Loesch, the pro-life writer so prolific in inventing humorous phrases to describe sexual distortions, describes this as the "fast-food mentality"—I want it hot and I want it now! Psychologists now have come to realize that much sexual behavior outside and within marriage can follow patterns more often associated with alcohol and drug addiction. In this case the man views the woman simply as a means for his own pleasure. This negative mode of masculine sexuality, no doubt, is responsible for the deprecating street slogan that dubs marriage as legalized prostitution.

Closely related to the "release" mentality is the tendency to augment lust through vulgarity. This is an extreme form of what Dietrich Von Hildebrand calls isolated sex as opposed to the way physical love is integrated into a complete act of love in chaste affection.¹ I dare say many a pious, modest, Christian group of listeners or readers would be quite shocked to know of the degree of vulgarity that can persist in the language among men (and more recently among liberated women) to describe the sex act, even when these men are professed Christians. Such vivid though vulgar expressions may also seep into the performance of sexual acts, perhaps through a long psychological association, in the popular mind, of sex with baseness.

Another unredeemed way of living out sexuality, generally to be found more among men than women, is to experience sexual activity primarily in terms of dominance. In the extreme, this

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leads to brutality, rape outside of and within marriage, and sadism. Less extreme but also painful can be the kind of arrogance where the male assumes that sexual encounter is always to be when he feels like it, in his way, with no interest in what the woman might be feeling.

Masculine negativity about sex has been so much focused upon of late that feminine distortions are often ignored as too slight to deserve attention. Nonetheless female traits, if more subtle, can be equally devastating as obstacles to the kind of redeemed marital sexuality that would be so desirable for couples to enjoy.

In *Love and Responsibility* John Paul II explores the idea that whereas many men have trouble with lust, women's self-centeredness often takes the form of making a man a mere means for happy feelings of love in her own heart.² Sentimentality replaces genuine knowledge of and love for the individual man, who instead is idealized as one who can trigger off romantic emotions.

In the sexual sphere, this female tendency can lead to a certain touchiness, vanity, moodiness, or prudishness, wherein the more earthy aspects of sexual desire are smothered under veils of coyness or unwillingness to surrender.

Manipulativeness and possessiveness can often go together to fill the sexual sphere with selfishness and tension. One might think of the tragic, concluding scenes of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* or Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.

The self-centered woman quite naturally views sexual love as but one of many compartments in her life, rather than seeing her sexual union as flowing from an I-Thou relationship to her husband, all encased in a world-view where God is at the center.

We may want to think that such a self-centered world view is more characteristic of worldly women than of Christian women, and this would be true, but only to a certain extent, for religion may function for many presumably religious women simply as one other compartment labelled spirituality, without playing so central a role as to displace self—indeed for whom but for the saints is God truly the center of life?

Probably most Christian men would not be able to articulate why they find sexual union with their wives disappointing in spite of much good will on the part of the women. Most likely there is often a sense that the passion of total self-giving that might have been present in early stages of marriage has given way to a compartmentalized sexuality lacking not only in thrill but also in metaphysical depth.

The purpose of this excursion into the negative is to provide a contrast to the redeemed image of marital sexuality that is the gift God wants to give to Christian spouses.

The Trinitarian Image of Self-Donation

In the reflections to follow, I will try to give a brief outline of some of the ways the Christian can discover the sexual act as redeemed through Christ in the sacrament of marriage.

If we compare the revelation of the Holy Trinity with the idea of the divine to be found in such philosophers as Plotinus, it is most striking to know that God as Love includes the outpouring of love of the three Persons for each other. It is out of this love that our superabundant creation is willed with love flowing through the Incarnation, through Mary, through the Church in the sacraments, and into the life of prayer. Indeed, one way some agnostics come to know God as Father is through their own experience of fatherhood.

One of the most beautiful formulations of how marriage is related to God's love can be found in Von Hildebrand's *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love*.³ Human spousal love glorifies God because God wants us to see the unique preciousness of each person He has loved into being, as we do in ecstatic self-donation.

Commitment and responsibility bring out positive masculine and feminine traits. Men become more protective and tender. Sheltered in the vow of irrevocable spousal love, a woman becomes more secure and therefore less manipulative and possessive. Tendencies toward prudery can be healed by the affectionate reverence of a truly loving husband.

Because marriage is "till death do us part," forgiveness becomes even more necessary. Couples are encouraged to call upon

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the graces of the sacrament of marriage so that they might forgive each other. This is of the greatest importance for sexual happiness since many of us are simply unable to delight in sexual relations if resentment chokes off love. Sexual joy is a true comfort and refreshment in the midst of the burdens of daily family life for couples whose love is continually renewed through forgiveness.

If self-donation is the essence of spousal love, then we can see why sexual activity outside of marriage is so misguided and disastrous. Is it not precisely the whole self that is held back in premarital sex when someone claims "I really love you, but I don't know about the future . . . let's be intimate and leave marriage as a possibility"? Part of my self is my future. Saving it for me and leaving you out is not self-giving but a form of manipulative self-withholding. I give you my body and my heart but not my very self.

In the case of adulterous love, sexual union is also a broken image of the self-giving love of God we are to imitate; for adultery says: "I belong to my wife or my husband, but I will give you a little part of myself—my body, this hour, this year. . . ."

As related to the ethics of artificial fertilization where both egg and sperm come from the married couple, the recent Vatican document on bioethics⁴ explores the question of how self-donation is related to such acts:

. . . the procreation of a new person, whereby the man and woman collaborate with the power of the Creator, must be the fruit and the sign of the mutual self-giving of the spouses, of their love and of their fidelity. (*Instruction on Bioethics*, II, A, 1)

In artificial insemination, however, the child does not come from the self-giving act of spousal intercourse but is rather the product of a product, namely, the isolated part of the self that is the sperm or the egg. The life-giving sperm and egg are more like biological samples than outpourings of self-donating love.

The "Incarnational Mode" of Human Sexuality

Speaking by means of analogy, just as the God-man is God in human flesh, we can think of the sexual act as the incarnation of

the love between the man and woman.

The man's physical penetration of the woman has been viewed as an image of the way the masculine challenges the feminine, assertively demanding space. The man often experiences the woman's body as a home, a reentry into the primal womb where he was first conceived and nurtured.

An *animalistic* version of human sexuality is not incarnational because it omits the spiritual side of union that is to be expressed through the dynamism of bodily desire. But also lacking in an incarnational sense of being is the *angelistic* version in which only the spiritual side of love is important both to God and to the etherialized soul of the one who is in love; sexual love here is seen as a kind of descent, to be avoided or accepted with shame. (I think that the writings of Christopher Derrick about sexual love are the strongest in trying to overcome the angelistic approach.) Laughter rather than shame might be the Christian couple's response to the earthy realities of physical sexuality within marriage.

Some twentieth century moralists have been particularly keen on showing how anti-incarnational dualism is at the root of many dissenting views about Catholic sexual morality. If there is no objectively natural way that spousal love is to be linked to heterosexual intercourse, as the absolutely fitting mode of expression in view of structure and teleology, then why should not any physical act that brings pleasure be equally licit—from masturbation to homosexuality to bestiality? The dualism comes in because our psychological states of pleasure or self-fulfillment are ends in themselves with no relation to our physically incarnate nature as male and female, ordered to one another by the very laws of our creation. C.S. Lewis' novel, *That Hideous Strength*, presents literary images of the dualism inherent in contraceptive sex in a way that sometimes reaches those who would be less convinced by philosophical reasoning on the same subject.

The Incarnation of Christ was an incredible, supernatural drama. Understanding male and female sexuality as incarnational is also a way of experiencing it in all its inherent drama. For example, to see fertility as not simply a superficial *part* of one's

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self, a burden to be shuffled off with contraceptives, but instead as an amazing dramatic possibility, might set the fertile woman into a mood of seeing herself as a heroine eager to play the unbelievably rich role of mother. A cartoon version might show the infertile woman as a shadowy figure, suddenly all lit up with fertility at her special time. The woman might address her husband at such glowing times with the challenge to play his hero role. Great regret would come with the realization that, this month or this year, the great gift of fertility must be renounced. The couple would instead act out some other scene in their play, involving tenderness, but not the climax of intercourse.

Where natural family planning bows before the mystery of fertility, contraception desecrates it, much as a priest would do were he to enact a "black mass," reciting the liturgy, bringing the elements of bread and wine together for the consecration, then saying "This is *not* my Body, this is *not* my Blood." For the "condomed" sperm is not the fertile sperm that the male has ready to donate; and "the Pilled" egg is not the fertile egg the female may have donated.

The type of ethics that would say that it is the totality of acts that counts, not the individual contraceptive sex act, would make it possible for a priest to say some black masses, since most of them were holy masses. It is a denial of the incarnational weight of even one violation of what God meant to join together, words and truth, or fertile sexual times with openness to offspring.

With regard to artificial insemination of every type, there is something profoundly lacking in the sense of the incarnational in claiming that it does not matter whether the baby is "begotten" from the act of sexual love of the couple or whether it is "made" by others in vitro. A few analogies may help us to see why. Suppose a priest was suddenly struck dumb in the middle of the mass. Could he simply delegate any lay person to come forward to proclaim the words of consecration? Or, suppose a husband becomes impotent. Can he delegate another to perform his sexual role since the end he has in view is the physical happiness of his spouse? Or, could he buy her a sexual massage machine to play his role?

These may be peculiar examples but they serve to show that the ends do not justify the means. Means may seem attractive to those who are desperate, but they destroy the larger meaning of human acts when the means are in violation of primary elements of human nature. God as "Dramatist of dramatists" could have planned the human story differently. To angelists, it would certainly have appeared more fitting if a child emerged whenever any couple, in utter sincerity, spoke the words "I love you." Angels come from pure spiritual love, but not human beings. God has chosen a manner of the coming of new human life where hearts and wills and *bodies* meet together to provide a real physical nest, a home for the newborn, not in the clouds but on earth.

Note how much there is of dramatic sensibility in the way the *Instruction on Bioethics* describes married sex and the conception of the child:

The moral value of the intimate link between the goods of marriage and between the meanings of the conjugal act is based upon the unity of the human being, a unity involving body and spiritual soul. Spouses mutually express their personal love in the "language of the body," which clearly involves both "spousal meanings" and parental ones. The conjugal act by which the couple mutually express their self-gift at the same time expresses openness to the gift of life. It is an act that is inseparably corporal and spiritual. It is in their bodies and through their bodies that the spouses consummate their marriage and are able to become father and mother. In order to respect the language of their bodies and their natural generosity, the conjugal union must take place with respect for its openness to procreation; and the procreation of a person must be the fruit and the result of married love. The origin of the human being thus follows from a procreation that is "linked to the union, not only biological but also spiritual, of the parents, made one by the bond of marriage." Fertilization achieved outside the bodies of the couple remains by this very fact deprived of the meanings and the values which are expressed in the language of the body and in the union of human persons. (II, B, 4b)

In the case of the ethics of artificial insemination, I believe it is reflection on the nature of the child as gift that is the most important, and to this we shall now turn.

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The Child as Gift

The mystery of the child as gift is something understood even better, perhaps, by infertile couples rather than fertile ones. So often, the infertile couple, yearning to have a child, is told that medical science can give no clear explanation for their inability to bear children. Prayerfully such a couple perform their acts of marital love, wide open to the fruit of that love, only to discover month after month that a child has not been conceived.

Just as understanding of the Church's teaching on contraception was greatly impeded by the technological mind-set which views all problems as solvable by greater knowledge⁵ so, too, it is very difficult for people to see why new techniques of artificial insemination or surrogate motherhood could not be licit means of overcoming infertility.

Let me quote from the *Instruction on Bioethics* and then add a few reflections:

Homologous IVF and ET is brought about outside the bodies of the couple through actions of third parties whose competence and technical activity determine the success of the procedure. Such fertilization entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.

Conception *in vitro* is the result of the technical action which presides over fertilization. *Such fertilization is neither in fact achieved nor positively willed as the expression and fruit of a specific act of the conjugal union. In homologous IVF and ET, therefore, even if it is considered in the context of 'de facto' existing sexual relations, the generation of the human person is objectively deprived of its proper perfection: namely, that of being the result and fruit of a conjugal act in which the spouses can become "cooperators with God for giving life to a new person. . ."* (II, B, 5)

A true and proper right to a child would be contrary to the child's dignity and nature. The child is not an object to which one has a right, nor can he be considered as an object of ownership: rather, a child is a gift, "the supreme gift" and the most gratuitous gift of marriage, and is a living testimony of the mutual giving of his parents. For this reason, the child has the right, as already mentioned, to be

the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents; and he also has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception. (II, B, 8)

Only respect for the link between the meanings of the conjugal act and respect for the unity of the human being make possible procreation in conformity with the dignity of the person. In his unique and irrepeatable origin, the child must be respected and recognized as equal in personal dignity to those who give him life. The human person must be accepted in his parents' act of union and love; the generation of a child must therefore be the fruit of that mutual giving which is realized in the conjugal act wherein the spouses cooperate as servants and not as masters in the work of the Creator who is Love.

In reality, the origin of a human person is the result of an act of giving. The one conceived must be the fruit of his parents' love. He cannot be desired or conceived as the product of an intervention of medical or biological techniques; that would be equivalent to reducing him to an object of scientific technology. No one may subject the coming of a child into the world to conditions of technical efficiency which are to be evaluated according to standards of control and dominion. (II, B, 4c)

For some it seems paradoxical that a church which has asserted so consistently that abortion is a violation of the sacredness of human life from conception onward should be so reluctant to allow artificial insemination. From the standpoint of seeing the child as a gift, the darkness lifts.

Abortion is the denial that life is a gift, considering it instead to be something that has to prove itself valuable before it is cherished. Artificial insemination is also the denial that life is a gift; one wants to demand the child from the hands of God or of science as a right. It denies God the right to give the gift of life within conjugal love and, yet, mysteriously denies God the right *not* to give that gift so that He may give some other gift such as adoptive parenthood, ministries in child-care, or a life-style that receives and cherishes every human being sent as much as one would one's own child.

The type of legal suits that have followed on experimentation with conception begin to show us the bitter fruits of such seemingly harmless, humanitarian procedures. Nor can one ignore the ominous beginning in which products of conception are simply

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discarded if they turn out badly, like ill-made toys.

And, parenthetically, to what extent is the married love of infertile couples colored by the idea that one or both are ill-made men and women, perhaps to be "discarded" as not up to par? Respecting the mystery of God's providence in His love for each person, husband and wife included, is seeing oneself and one's spouse as more than the mere means for the birth of children.

Conclusion

In my opening description of negative modes of sexual expression, words such as release, manipulation, possessiveness, were used to designate unredeemed sexuality. By contrast, redeemed sexuality was characterized by love, commitment, responsibility, fruitfulness, reverence.

A society permeated by images of sex in terms of lust, desire, exploitation, and self-centeredness needs to be purified by the witness of those whose entire philosophy of sexuality is redeemed in the Christian realities of self-donation, the "incarnation" of the spiritual in the physical, and each individual as a gift from God.

Notes

- 1 Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1965), pp. 7-31.
- 2 Karol Wojtyla, *Love & Responsibility*, translated by H. T. Willetts (New York: Ferrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), p. 111.
- 3 Dietrich Von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* (New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1984).
- 4 *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to Certain Questions of the Day*, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, February 22, 1987.
- 5 For an explanation of when interfering with nature is licit and when illegitimate, see Dietrich Von Hildebrand's *Humanae Vitae: Sign of Contradiction* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1969), pp. 40-41.