

“Sexuality - Does the Church really condemn it?”

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Da Vinci Code panel presentation

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Only a few weeks ago, in my position as Director of Marriage and Family I was meeting with an engaged couple. After developing a comprehensive theology of marriage and in particular its sacramentality I asked them, as I do every couple: who is the spouse of Jesus? Without missing a beat and with absolute sincerity they answered, “Mary Magdalene.”

My discussion tonight will examine the Church’s teachings on sexuality and then will apply this to an understanding of Jesus Christ as Bridegroom. We will see that the Church’s beliefs about sexuality, rather than being repressive or condemnatory, are intimately linked with our destiny, the nature of the Church and with an understanding of the very mystery of God.

1. Jesus’ teachings on marriage and celibacy

1.1. Understanding Human Sexuality

When we speak of sexuality today it is often understood that one is speaking of behavior. In other words sexuality is about what one does. When Pope John Paul II began his Wednesday catecheses on human love in the divine plan (today referred to as the *Theology of the Body*), his starting point was that sexuality is not so much what one does, but who one is. We are male or we are female. The key to this insight is the phrase in the first chapter of *Genesis*: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.”

Man, male and female, is made in the image of God. There are two qualities in particular that express our creation in God’s image and likeness. The first is our *self-awareness* (reason), that is we are conscious of ourselves, we know that we are not something but someone. The second is our capacity for *self-determination* (free will). We can freely choose our actions and in doing so we determine the type of person we become.

This is true of us as individuals but Pope John Paul II provides a new development in theology when he noted that the passage actually states: “God made man in his image and likeness...male and female he created them.” Thus, we image God, not so much as individuals but in relationship. In being created male and female, bodily beings who exist in relationship, we image and reflect God. Therefore, our bodies have a significance.

The *Theology of the Body* says that the body is not just part of the person or in some way irrelevant but that the *body expresses the person*. We express who we are through our bodies. Theologically speaking a person is a being with the capacity to know and act freely who exists in relationship through making a gift of self. The body, male and female, was created to express this self-gift.

1.2. The Nuptial Meaning of the Body

This leads me to my second point: how do our bodies image God? This is where we come across the central theme of the *Theology of the Body*: the nuptial meaning of the body. The human body, male and female, has the capacity to unite in a way that is life-giving and love-giving; procreative and unitive. Therefore, the body has the inherent capacity to unite in a way that is marital or spousal. The body is inherently spousal; the body by its nature says “gift.”

When we talk about the body being a “theology” we are saying that the body reveals something about God. The fact that we can unite, as man and woman, in a way that is love-giving and life-giving; in a way that is marital or nuptial, reveals something about the mystery of God. God is a communion of life-giving love. Marriage becomes a sacrament of, and a sharing in, God’s own life.

The body therefore makes present the very mystery of God – love. Consequently, inscribed into our bodies is the vocation to love as God loves. This is essential to understanding sexuality.

I have heard it contended that if celibacy is about being pure and good then does that not make marriage about being impure and bad. But we can see from the *Theology of the Body* that human sexuality makes present and points to the life and love of God, therefore, it must be holy. In fact the gift of sexuality and the union by which man and woman become one flesh is so holy and good that it is the manner by which God has freely chosen to bring other images of God, other human beings, into the world.

1.3. Marriage and Celibacy are Complementary

If our creation as male and female points to our call to love as God loves and to make a complete gift of self then it would seem that marriage is the fulfillment of our masculinity and femininity. Celibacy, which is the state of “not-being-married” would appear to be a denial of the goodness of sexuality.

Christ’s teachings on celibacy occur within the context of his teachings on the indissolubility of marriage (Mt 19:3-12). Christ stated this teaching in response to the Apostles’ claim that if one cannot divorce that it is better not to marry. Jesus did not affirm or deny their claim but rather taught about celibacy. Thus Christ’s words are not a denial of the goodness of marriage but rather the reference to another principle; that is those who are called to celibacy do not do so because of the value of marriage they do so as a choice in response to a call: “He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Mt 19:12).¹ Jesus does not set these vocations in opposition to each other but expresses that they are both a call.

Consequently, in the words of Pope John Paul II, marriage and celibacy “complete and...interpenetrate each other.” They are complementary ways of living the nuptial meaning of the body. Both marriage and celibacy involve a total gift of self as man and woman, both are marked by the call to fidelity, both are fulfilled in paternity and maternity.²

1.4. Celibacy is the fulfillment of the nuptial meaning of the body

¹ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston MA: Pauline Books and Media, 1997, p. 263.

² John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, pp. 277-278.

My next point is that celibacy is not only complementary to marriage but it is the fulfillment of the nuptial meaning of the body.

We see this in Jesus' debate with the Sadducees about the resurrection. This is the incident in *The Gospel of Matthew* where the Sadducees question Jesus about a hypothetical situation where a woman has seven husbands in this life. They ask Jesus in the resurrection to whom will she be married. Jesus responds, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Mt 22:30).

Note, Jesus does not say that we will be angels but like angels insofar as we will not live as husband and wife in heaven. We will still be bodily beings, male and female which is a central belief in the Christian tradition.

But if the body points to our call to live in relationship how does celibacy in the resurrection fulfill the body's meaning? The significance of being a body is that we are called to communion; to relationship. John Paul II referred to this as the nuptial meaning of the body. In summary, we are created for eternal communion with the Uncreated Eternal Communion of the Trinity. Our created communion in this life (marriage) points to our call to share in the Uncreated Communion of the Trinity. It is essential to understand that because our resurrection includes the resurrection of the body, marriage is not eradicated, rather marriage is brought to its fulfillment – which we see in the *Book of Revelation* in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9).

1.5. The Trinity and the Nuptial Mystery

My final point on the Church's teachings on sexuality is that when the body is understood as a sign of our call to communion but also as a "theology" the body reveals that the Trinity is a communion. Quoting *Theology of the Body*: "The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus become a sign of it."³ The body as a theology becomes a sign of God's life and love.

The body which has inscribed in it the inherent quality of the call to be a gift reveals that the mystery of God is a nuptial mystery – God is total gift – God is love! God wishes to communicate his own self-gift, his own life and love to us. He does so by first by making us man and woman. He does so in and through the life, death and resurrection of his Son whose self-gift continues in the Eucharist.

Man and woman who are called from the beginning to a union of life and love reveal and make present the mystery of God: that God is an eternal exchange of life-giving love. When we understand the nuptial mystery our whole way of looking at ourselves, our sexuality, God and the Catholic faith is radically changed. The previous Archbishop of Denver, Cardinal Stafford has stated that this nuptiality is specific to the Catholic faith when he said: "The Catholic experience of faith is doxological, sacramental, Incarnational, Trinitarian, relational, analogical and liturgical. All of these

³ John Paul II, *Theology of the Body*, p. 76.

can be summarized in one word: the Catholic experience of faith in time is nuptial.”⁴ The Church’s belief about sexuality permeates every aspect of the Catholic faith.

2. Christ the Bridegroom

The second part of our discussion will now examine Christ’s celibacy in light of the nuptial mystery.

2.1. The Redeemer as Spouse in Old and New Testaments

Christ’s union with the Church which is spousal is the fulfillment and consummation of the theme of nuptial love that runs throughout the bible. The bible begins and ends with a marriage. The first human words spoken in scripture are those of a bridegroom. At the end of the bible we hear, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev 22:17). In the prophetic texts of *Isaiah*, *Hosea*, and *Ezekiel*, God is often represented as a spouse and Israel’s abandoning of God is compared to adultery. In *Isaiah* 54:5 we read “For your Maker is your husband.” In *Hosea*, “And in that day, says the LORD, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ ...and I will make for you a covenant on that day...and I will betroth you to me for ever” (*Hosea* 2:16-19).

Thus when Christ comes as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies he comes as the Bridegroom. He presents himself in this light in several parables. Hopefully this will make clear the reason for Christ’s celibacy. He is celibate not as a denial of the goodness of sexuality or our call to communion. Christ’s celibacy rather reveals the true meaning of sexuality and the ultimate destiny of every human being.

Had Christ given himself to one woman this would have signified that human sexuality is exhausted by our temporal existence, that sexuality is definitively expressed in marriage. But his own celibacy and then his subsequent call of some of his followers to celibacy expresses that sexuality’s fulfillment is to be found elsewhere yet still in a way that is spousal.

Christ did not marry any one person as some claim but revealed the true significance of the nuptial meaning of the body through his laying down his life for the Church. Christ as bridegroom surrenders his body to the Church. He does so in a way that is truly life-giving. This is why some saints saw the Cross as Christ’s nuptial bed. This is why the Eucharist makes present the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, for in the Mass the Bridegroom truly gives his Body to his Bride the Church and they become one.

2.2. The eternal destiny of all – union with Christ through the Church

As stated Christ’s self-donation reveals the true meaning of sexuality which in turn reveals the ultimate destiny of every human being. We are called to communion with Christ in and through the communion of the Church. Sexuality which expresses our call to communion thus expresses our call to give ourselves to Christ. The Church who is always considered feminine; the Bride of Christ, Mother Church, receives the gift of divine life and communicates that gift to her members. Consequently, we share in God’s

⁴ J. Francis Stafford, “State’s Dinner Keynote Address to the Knights of Columbus”, Aug 3rd 2004, (www.kofc.org/news/events/detail.cfm?id=3925), no. 2.

nature through this communion and participate in the very communion of God. This is the meaning of human sexuality, this is why God created us male and female.

3. Conclusion

Does the Church really condemn sexuality? No. The Church teaches that sexuality is good and holy, that it points to our call to communion; with God and with others. Any expression of human sexuality is to be understood within the context to love as God loves, to love in a way that is life-giving and love-giving. Our embodiedness in general and our sexuality in particular provides us with the answers to many questions. It reveals something about the essence of God who is Love, God who is Trinity. It reveals something about the divinity of Christ who as the Bridegroom communicates divine life to his Bride the Church when he surrenders his life. It reveals something about the nature of marriage as a sacrament of Christ's self-gift and finally sexuality reveals the destiny of the human person that we have been created to share in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.