

Living a Catholic Life

The Meaning of Sex

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between dioceses, parishes, Knights of Columbus councils, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

It is no secret that Catholic teaching condemns abortion, sterilization, and the use of contraceptives. It is not at all well known that these prohibitions are only the backside of the Church’s positive teaching on sex. People who do not understand this often believe that the negative part of the teaching serves no other purpose than to make people’s lives difficult. This caricature ignores the much more fundamental teaching on the meaning of sex, which is based not in ignorance but in approximately two thousand years of experience with men, women, and babies.

The Church’s commitment to human dignity inspires an abiding concern for both the sanctity of human life from its very beginning and the dignity of marriage and of the marriage act by which human life is transmitted. The Church cannot approve of medical practices that undermine the biological, psychological, and moral bonds on which the strength of marriage and the family depends. This is merely an expression of revealed truth about the meaning and purpose of the whole of human life, which the Church has received and transmits. This includes a theological evaluation of sex. Although some people may think the Church has nothing to say about sex, it is too important for the Church not to have a teaching on it.

Sexual desire is a manifestation of need and incompleteness: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Sexual desire makes sense only in a needy, limited being. Indeed, provided that we do not ignore nature, it should be obvious that the urgency of sexual desire is intimately connected with human mortality. Adam and Eve’s recognition that they were naked is simultaneous with the recognition that they were not as God: the presence of reproductive genitalia is the original sign that the body will die. Acting on sexual desire is central to the acceptance of one’s own mortality and the willingness to provide for another generation. In this context, the celibacy of priests and religious acquires its power to be a sign of belief in a life beyond death.

The tension between the drive to satisfy one’s own desire and the responsibility to provide for the offspring thus generated is resolved by love. The Church’s teaching in this area is based upon the success achieved by various exemplary families over the centuries. These people have shown that when a man loves a woman and the woman loves that man and they seal their love with a public, permanent, exclusive commitment, this bond provides the ideal environment for both sexual activity and the children it yields. The intimacy of sexual union—the physical and personal exposure of two people to one another—calls for

the protection offered by mutually committed love. The unselfish character of the love between husband and wife becomes fully apparent in their acceptance of children, who also require the protection offered by a stable parental bond. What began as love for one another is completed in the generous provision for children, who are literally a physical expression of marital union.

The obvious objection to the above is that it is idealistic. Of course it is. Church teaching is not about what most people are but about what they can be. Church teaching on sex presents the best that sex can be. Undeniably, these are ideals, but they are not, in principle, unattainable ideals. The Church has centuries’ worth of experience and has seen what is possible based on the admirable example of ordinary people who have conducted themselves with great love. The ability of a given couple to approximate this ideal at any given time in their marriage depends upon their maturity and understanding but also upon countless circumstances of life and work that make it difficult or impossible to achieve the best in a particular case.

So even if not every marriage is ideal, and even if not any marriage at every moment is ideal, the teaching is not then unrealistic, and the ideal does not lose its power to encourage people to aim for a life that is better. As couples succeed or fall short in their efforts to fulfill this ideal, there is a difference between being hindered by circumstances (e.g., serious illness) and deliberately obstructing the ideal (e.g., infidelity). For example, the sex that is shared by an infertile couple (or by a couple during any period of natural sterility) does not have the fullest possible meaning that sex can have, but this is due to nature or chance. As far as the couple is responsible, the sex is open to its fullest meaning and is a sign or remembrance of their willingness to bear children together. By contrast, sterilization and contraceptives introduce sterility into lovemaking and transform an unconditional acceptance of one’s spouse into a conditional pursuit of gratification. The teaching is not that every act of intercourse must yield a baby but that no act should be deliberately deprived of its power to express the complete love of husband and wife.

Similarly, to give a child for adoption is not the ideal, but sometimes it is the best that is possible when a child has no parents or when parents are unable (for any of a variety of reasons) to raise a child. By contrast, hiring a surrogate mother or producing a baby in a laboratory are deliberate corruptions of the relationship that obtains between marital love and babies.