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LOVE

Toward the end of the first century, the evangelist John wrote an open letter to the followers of Jesus to counter the false Gnostic doctrine that God had not become man in Jesus. In it he exhorts every follower of Jesus, already called Christians, to “love one another; for love is of God and he who loves is born of God” (1 John 4:7). Strong reason enough for Christians to love one another. John, however, goes on to make an even stronger statement: “God is love” (4:8). “No one has ever seen God” (4:12), he goes on to assert, and therefore, God is ultimately unknowable, and the unknowability of God became the unchallenged doctrine of the Catholic Church. Its greatest theologians have always testified to that. Saint Augustine of Hippo writes in the fourth century that “If you understand God, it is not God you understand.” Saint Thomas Aquinas would follow him in the thirteenth century, writing that “now we cannot know what God is but only what God is not.” Jesuit Karl Rahner would articulate that same doctrine in the twentieth century, albeit in different words, writing that “revelation does not mean that mystery is overcome by knowledge bestowed by God. On the contrary, revelation is the deepening perception of God [precisely] *as* mystery.” The God whom Christians believe in is a hidden God, a transcendent mystery, always present but humanly unknowable, and therefore infinite God.

Since God is ultimately unknowable, Christians have had to look over the years for ways to conceive and speak of God. They have conceived God as Almighty Father, Son, Spirit, Him, Creator, but these are all human terms describing human beings and, as Aquinas might say, God is definitely not a human being. These terms, along with all other human term for God in human languages, are metaphors, poetic ways of describing God who

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escapes all our efforts to know and describe God without remainder. Good Jew that he probably was, John knew this. As a firm follower of Jesus, the Christ, however, he had two ways to know God. He noted the first in his gospel: “No one has even seen God; the only Son [Jesus], who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18). He offers a second way in his Letter: “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us” (1 John 4:12).

The two ways John suggests for knowing God are in no way distinct. Jesus’ love for his disciples features throughout John’s gospel. He reports that Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, “that you love one another even as I have loved you” (John 14:34; 15:12). That “as I have loved you” is very instructive, for being in the Father’s bosom, that is, being one with God, Jesus loves as the Father loves (John 15:9). We may not be able to see the Father and his love, but we can certainly see Jesus and his love in the gospel reports of him, and what we see is a man of tender love for all, more tender than a mother’s love as Isaiah prophesied (Is 49:15). Jesus is the incarnation of God, Christians believe, and his tender love of all, friends and enemies alike, is the incarnation of God’s love of all. The incarnation makes God’s love present not only in Jesus’ love of all with whom he comes in contact but also in every *human* love. When I love another human being, friend or enemy, both God’s love and God’s self are present in my love. John is exactly right: if we love one another, God abides in us and can be discerned in faith as present is us. That does not mean that in every act of loving I need to be attentive to the presence of God. That would be well-nigh impossible, and also an interference with the total self-giving required in an act of true love. It does mean that in every act of true love the presence of God can be discerned on reflection.

SEXUAL LOVE

In every act of true love, I accept and affirm the identity of another human being. In the act of sexual intercourse, for example, I unconditionally accept and affirm the other persons, warts and all, with all her and his physical, psychological, and spiritual blessings and flaws. In a very real sense, every act of true love, including the act of intercourse, becomes a symbol, a sacrament the Catholic Church calls it, of God’s acceptance, affirmation, and unconditional love of us. God accepts us totally and unconditionally in our strengths and weaknesses as true and authentic lovers unconditionally accept one another in their strengths and weaknesses.

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Every act of loving sexual intercourse also accepts and affirms gender identity, a fundamental dimension of personal identity. Gender is concerned with the socially constructed meanings of femininity and masculinity. It is determined not only by individual, biological sex but also by culture and experience, and is expressed in actions, interactions, social roles, and sexual acts. This gender expression is a symbolic language in which a couple communicates with each other, and it is crucial that communication should be open and honest. If it is, then the act becomes humanly communicative at the deepest level; if it is not, then the same act can block the possibility for communication and formation of healthy personal and sexual identity. This is an example, only one example, of the essential ambiguity of human sexual activity.

Psychological studies repeatedly indicate that one of the greatest threats to healthy self-identity, including sexual identity, is poor self-esteem. The Catholic tradition has not always done an adequate job of emphasizing healthy self-love. Jesus' great commandment is well known: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12: 39-31; Matt 22: 37-39). Not so well known is the fact that there are actually *three* commandments here: love God, love neighbor, *and* love self. The Catholic tradition has typically interpreted self-love as egocentric and antithetical to the love of the gospel. This certainly *can* be the case, and modern cultures that emphasize radical individualism encourage egocentric love, but egocentric love is not the healthy self-love demanded by the gospel. Authentic self-love first accepts and affirms oneself as a good and lovable self-in-God, and then, in alliance with neighbor-love, turns towards the other and gives this good and lovable self-in-God unconditionally to another human being. As Aquinas argued, no one gives what he or she does not have. If a man does not truly accept and affirm himself, in both his wholeness and his brokenness, he can neither give himself fully to another person nor fully accept the other person. So it is, too, with a woman.

This self-giving to another person is achieved in a profound way through sexual intercourse, the giving of self that accepts and affirms the identity and goodness of both the other person and the self. Such self-giving also affirms and develops the self-esteem of both the giver and the recipient, and creates intercommunion. This is why it is so important that the other in sexual intercourse never be objectified, as is the case in promiscuous sexual encounters. Many people, unsure of themselves, seek affirmation of who they are and strive to build self-identity and self-esteem through casual sex but,

since casual sex is not an unconditional giving of self to the other, the search is constantly frustrated and neither self-identity nor self-esteem is ever truly accepted, affirmed, or established.

Loving sexual intercourse is *therapeutic*, it relieves distress. Women and men, Catholics believe, are composed of body and soul, and there is ongoing and constant dialogue between the two. In an act of love, each person brings to the experience all the psychological burdens that accompany daily life including worries about the self, the relationship, work, finances, children, and other responsibilities. An act of true love, not only loving sexual intercourse but also providing a home for the homeless and food for the hungry, makes possible the suspension of those anxieties and worries, at least for the moment, and has a healing effect on the partners. This relief of distress, however, depends on the nature of the relationship. If the relationship is just, loving, and honest, relief of distress is often provided. If, however, the relationship is egocentric, inauthentic, or dishonest, while the act of love can still suspend distress for the moment, the aftereffects of that experience can cause even more distress in the form of guilt, a sense of dishonesty, or objectification of the other.

Acts of love are also *reconciling*. There are no conflict-free relationships, not even in the most just and loving of marriages. Frictions, disagreements, misunderstandings of all kinds are inevitable aspects of any human relationship, and any and all of these experiences can create hurt, distress, and distrust of the other in the relationship. One is not likely to find couples who desire sexual intimacy at the peak of such quarrels. Intimacy comes after the resolution of the quarrel and may be an intrinsic component of that resolution. Some couples claim that the best sex they have is after an intense argument. This is because sexual intimacy heals the wounds created by the disagreement and reaccepts and reaffirms the bond and commitment that may have been threatened by it. It is difficult for a couple to have a fulfilling loving experience if the other dimensions of the relationship are not in sync. Sexual intercourse accepts and affirms self, other, and the relationship through healing and reconciliation.

Acts of true love are also profound acts of *thanksgiving* in a relationship. The embodied nature of human persons binds them to bodily expression, which is best exemplified, though by no means limited to, verbal language. Beyond verbal language there is body language, and beyond body language there is ritual language, symbolic actions filled with socially approved meanings. Couples can say to one another "I love you," or "I thank you," or "I forgive you," and in the spoken words they are reaching to meanings far beyond the words they say. They can say the same things in socially

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approved actions, by looks, by touches, by giving gifts, and in all these actions they are similarly reaching far beyond the actions to express love, acceptance, affirmation, forgiveness, thanksgiving. In the physical action of sexual intercourse, an action as symbolic as any spoken word, they express all these things in the most profound and total way available to an embodied human being, namely through the completely unmasked and, therefore, totally vulnerable body. They say to one another, in the words of the ancient Anglican wedding ritual, “with this *body* I thee worship.” They say, that is, in the etymological meaning of the word *worship*, I ascribe worth to you, to us, to our relationship, and for this worth I give thanks. The thanksgiving embodied in intercourse is yet one more profound acceptance and affirmation of the self, the other, and their relationship.

Couples who are Catholic might link these moments of ritual thanksgiving for human relationship with that other ritual thanksgiving for relationship with God-in-Jesus they call Eucharist. “This is my body which is given for you,” Jesus says to his disciples at the Supper; “This is my body given for and to you,” lovers say to one another in the act of intercourse. In both the Supper and the intercourse, the body and the person synonymous with it are vulnerable, even broken, but both body and person are given in love to the other, trusting that they will be received in love. The central theological point here is a very Catholic one. The God incarnate in Jesus who gives his body in the Supper for the salvation of all is the same God incarnate in the lovers and their act of mutual self-giving for the salvation of their relationship. In Catholic theology, the one ritual act is as sacramental of God as the other, which is why both are listed among the Catholic sacraments.

MARRIAGE

Loving sexual intercourse is essentially procreative. This essential procreativity, however, is not to be thought of in terms only of the biological procreation of a child; it extends also to the interpersonal procreation of loving union and communion between spouses and lovers. To understand sexual intercourse between spouses in terms of only its biologically procreative function is to reduce it to a non-human, animal sexuality. In his 1968 encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI called attention to the *two* meanings of sexual intercourse in marriage, “the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent in the marriage act” (n. 12). He prioritized the biological procreative significance in his ruling that “each and every marital act [of sexual intercourse] must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation

of human life” (n. 11). In the fifty or so years since it was made, that ruling has been much controverted by believing Catholics, laity and clergy alike, and research studies show that today the vast majority of them believe that it is simply wrong and ignore it.

In his 2016 Apostolic Constitution *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis echoes the Second Vatican Council’s judgment, that Pope Paul VI ignored, that “man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16). The use of the word “man” here, of course, means human being, woman and man together. “Family planning,” Francis teaches, “fittingly takes place as the result of a consensual dialogue between the spouses...The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 222). He writes later that “individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 303). Some of Francis’ naysayers argue that this doctrine of conscience he advances is a new doctrine in the Catholic Church, but they speak out of ignorance of history, for Catholic doctrine on the authority and inviolability of conscience can be traced back to, at least, the thirteenth century and Thomas Aquinas. It applies not only to moral decisions spouses have to make in marriage, about which Francis is explicitly speaking, but also to every moral decision they have to make.

An apparently simple question about marriage has an apparently simple, though on reflection, really profound answer. The question is *why* would a woman and a man choose to give up their individualities and become a coupled-we for life? The answer is because they want to be best friends for life. The bedrock of every genuine friendship is generativity, the capacity to nurture life beyond one’s own. The *first* life nurtured in a marriage, the life on which all other lives in the marriage depend for their viability, is the life and communion of the spouses together, what we term the coupled-we, and what Genesis terms the two in one body (Gen 2:24). The just and loving communion of the spouses is, in fact, the very reason they decided to marry in the first place. A spouse who is also a friend daily reflects to me an honest appraisal of myself; she offers daily support against loss of interest in and commitment to our coupled-we; she provides me with daily opportunities to love a neighbor as myself and, therefore, to bring the God who is love into my life and hers; she calls me to constant virtue in and out of our marriage.

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If she is a *Christian* spouse, she also calls me to live our coupled-we union in imitation of Jesus, whom we both confess as the Christ. Though Jesus was biologically childless, he was enormously fruitful, generating and nurturing all those people called by his name, Christians. He nurtured them specifically to address his God as *Abba-Father* (Mark 14:36) and to look upon all the children of God, therefore, as sisters and brothers. A marriage between Christians must accept, affirm, and nurture self-love and communion, not only in the spouses, not only in their family and among their relatives, but also in the human community in which they live. To be a truly Christian coupled-we, spouses must generate and nurture a world of love, compassion, reconciliation, peace, and justice for all their neighbours, especially for those who are barely surviving on the margins of modern societies. Only in this way, by loving all within their reach, can they hand on to their and all children a world in which they are not only biologically generated but also socially and religiously nurtured in fruitful life and adulthood. We end where we began: only by loving all their neighbours are they loving the God who is Love and incarnating that Love anew in their world.

Far Reaching Influence on Vatican Councils. At the Second Vatican Council, Abbot Butler said that he felt that Newman's spirit was 'brooding over the council'. According to Ian Ker, Vatican II, which has been called 'Newman's Council', inaugurated not only extensive changes and reforms in the Roman Catholic Church but opened in effect a whole new era in Christian history. The almost revolutionary return by Catholic theology to its scriptural and patristic roots has invested Newman's own theology, which was so deeply, even exclusively, rooted in the Bible and the Fathers, with a wholly new importance and significance.

– BISHOP FINTAN MONAHAN, *A Perfect Peace, Newman Saint for Our Time*. (Dublin: Veritas). p. 65.