



# *Catholic Sexual Ethics*

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# Catholic Sexual Ethics

*by*

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# INTRODUCTION

In some ways the teaching of the Catholic Church on sexual ethics is well known. Most people know what the Church teaches. Her basic teaching is this: one can rightly choose to exercise one's genital sexual powers only when one, as a spouse, freely chooses to engage in the conjugal act and, in that act, chooses to respect fully the goods of mutual self-giving and of human procreation. From this it follows that it is never morally right to unite sexually outside of marriage, i.e., to fornicate or commit adultery, or to masturbate or commit sodomy, i.e., have oral or anal intercourse, whether with a person of the opposite or of the same sex, nor ought one intentionally to bring about or maintain sexual arousal unless in preparation for the conjugal act.

Unfortunately, a great many people, including large numbers of Catholics, do not know why the Church teaches this. Many believe that her teaching is anti-sex, rigoristic and repressive, completely unrealistic and indeed inhuman. Some, among them influential Catholic theologians, charge that "official" Catholic sexual teaching is based on an untenable, "physicalistic" view of natural law, one that makes persons slaves to their biology and one completely irreconcilable with a "personalistic" understanding of the moral order.

Here I hope to show that the teaching of the Catholic Church on sexual ethics, far from enslaving persons, liberates them and enables them to become fully themselves. It helps them come into possession of their desires and not be possessed by them. It does so because it is rooted in a profound reverence for human persons, male and female, as bodily, sexual beings, summoned from their depths to self-giving love. I will begin by considering (1) the dignity of the human person and (2) the existential, religious significance of human acts as freely chosen. Then, after identifying (3) the true moral norms necessary if our freely chosen deeds are to be morally good, I will consider (4) major issues of sexual ethics.

## 1. THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

According to Catholic teaching, human persons have a threefold dignity: (1) the first is intrinsic, natural, inalienable, and an endowment or gift; (2) the second is also intrinsic, but it is not an endowment but rather an achievement, made possible, given the reality of original sin and its effects, only by God's never-failing grace; (3) the third, also intrinsic, is, like the first, a gift, not an achievement, but a gift far surpassing man's nature and one that literally divinizes him.

The first dignity proper to human persons is their dignity as living members of the human species, which God called into being when, in the beginning, he "created man in his own image and likeness...male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Every human being is a living image of the all-holy God and can be called a "created word" of God, the created word that his Uncreated Word became and is precisely to show us how much God loves us.

When we come into existence we are, by reason of this intrinsic dignity, persons. In virtue of this dignity, every human being, of whatever age or sex or condition, is a being of moral worth,

irreplaceable and non-substitutable. Because of this dignity, a human person, as Karol Wojtyla affirms, “is the kind of good that does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such a means to an end” but is rather a “good toward which the only adequate response is love.”<sup>1</sup>

As persons, we are endowed with the capacity to know the truth and to determine ourselves by freely choosing to conform our lives and actions to the truth.<sup>2</sup> Yet when we come into existence we are not yet fully the beings we are meant to be. And this leads us to consider the second kind of dignity identified above.

This is the dignity to which we are called as intelligent and free persons capable of determining our own lives by our own free choices. This is the dignity we are called upon to give to ourselves (with the help of God’s unfailing grace) by freely choosing to shape our choices and actions in accord with the truth. We give ourselves this dignity by freely choosing to conform our lives to what the Second Vatican Council called “the highest norm of human life,” namely, the “divine law itself—eternal, objective, and universal—by which God orders, directs, and governs the whole universe and the ways of the human community according to a plan conceived in wisdom and in love.”<sup>3</sup> Human persons can come to know this highest norm of human life because God has made them so that they can, through the mediation of conscience, recognize his wise and loving plan, his divine and eternal law.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey.... For man has in his heart a law written by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged.”<sup>5</sup> To give ourselves this dignity we must choose in accord with the truth, a subject taken up below.

The third kind of dignity is ours as “children of God,” brothers and sisters of Jesus, members of the divine family. This kind of

dignity is a purely gratuitous gift from God himself, who made us to be the kind of beings we are, i.e., persons gifted with intelligence and freedom, because he willed that there be beings inwardly capable of receiving, should he choose to grant it, the gift of divine life. And God has chosen to give us this utterly supernatural gift in and through his Son become man, Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus truly shares our human nature, so human persons who are re-generated in the waters of baptism and into whose hearts the love of the Holy Spirit has been poured share Jesus' divine nature and become one body with him. This dignity obviously is of crucial significance in considering the goodness of human choices and, in particular, of sexual choices, as I will show at the conclusion of this essay.

## 2. THE EXISTENTIAL RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF HUMAN ACTS AS FREELY CHOSEN

Human acts are not merely physical events that come and go, like the falling of rain or the turning of the leaves, nor do they, as Karol Wojtyla emphasized in *The Acting Person*, "happen" to a person. They are, rather, the outward expression of a person's choices, for at the core of a human act is a free, self-determining choice, an act of the will, which as such is something spiritual that abides within the person, giving him his identity as a moral being.

The Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, are very clear on this. Jesus taught that it was not what enters a person that defiles him; rather it is what flows from the person, from his heart, from the core of his being, from his choice, that does this (cf. Matthew 15:10f; Mark 7:14-23).

Although many human acts have physical, observable components, they are morally significant because they embody and carry out free human choices. Because they do, they abide within the person as dispositions to further choices and actions of the same

kind, until a contradictory kind of choice is made. Thus I become an adulterer once I freely adopt by choice the proposal to have sex with someone other than my wife. I commit adultery in the heart even before I engage in the outward, observable act. And I remain an adulterer, disposed to commit adultery again, until I make a contradictory choice, i.e., until I sincerely repent of my adultery, do penance, and commit myself to amending my life and being a faithful husband.

Pope John Paul II emphasizes this in his Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*. Reflecting on the question the rich young man asked of Jesus, “Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16), the Holy Father says: “For the young man the question is not so much about rules to be followed, but about the meaning of life.”<sup>7</sup> The rich young man’s question has this significance precisely because it is in and through the actions we freely choose to do that we determine ourselves and establish our identity as moral beings. “It is precisely through his acts,” John Paul II writes, that man “attains perfection as man, as one who is called to seek his Creator on his own accord and freely to arrive at full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him.” Our freely chosen deeds, he continues, “do not produce a change merely in the affairs outside of man, but, to the extent that they are deliberate choices, they give moral definition to the very person who performs them, determining his most profound spiritual traits.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, each choice involves a “decision about oneself and a setting of one’s own life for or against the Good, for or against the Truth, and ultimately, for or against God.”<sup>9</sup> Through our freely chosen acts we give to ourselves our identity as moral beings, our character, which can be described as “the integral existential identity of the person—the entire person in all his or her dimensions as shaped by morally good and bad choices—considered as a disposition to further choices.”<sup>10</sup>

We are free to choose what we are to do and, by so choosing, to make ourselves to be the kind of persons we are. But we are not free to make what we choose to do to be good or evil, right or wrong. We know this from our own sad experience, for at times we have freely chosen to do things that we knew, at the very moment we chose to do them, were morally wrong. We can, in short, choose badly or well; and if we are to make ourselves to be fully the beings God wills us to be, we need to choose well, i.e., in accordance with the truth. To this issue we will now turn.

### **3. NORMS FOR MAKING TRUE MORAL JUDGMENTS AND GOOD MORAL CHOICES**

Human choices and actions, whether morally good or morally bad, are intelligible and purposeful. Sinful choices, although unreasonable and opposed to the order of reason, are not irrational, meaningless, absurd. All human choice and action is directed to some end or purpose, and the ends or purposes to which human choices and actions are ordered are considered as “goods” to be pursued. The “good” has the meaning of what is perfective of a being, constitutive of its flourishing or well-being. Thus the proposition good is to be done and pursued and its opposite, evil, is to be avoided is a practical proposition to which every human person, as intelligent, will assent once its meaning is understood.<sup>11</sup> This is a principle or “starting point” for intelligent, purposeful human choice and action. It is indeed the first principle of natural law.

Moreover, this is not a vacuous or empty principle. It is given content and specified by identifying the real goods perfective of human persons, aspects of their flourishing or well-being toward which they are dynamically ordered by their nature as human persons. Saint Thomas Aquinas identified a triple-tiered set of such human goods which, when grasped by our reason as ordered to action (“practical reason”), serve as first principles or starting points

for practical deliberation—“what am I to do?” Aquinas’ first set includes being itself, a good that human persons share with other entities, and since the being of living things is life itself, the basic human good at this level is that of life itself, including bodily life, health, and bodily integrity. His second set includes the sexual union of man and woman and the handing on and educating of human life, a set of goods human persons share with other sexually reproducing species but, of course, in a distinctive human way. His third set includes goods unique to human persons, such as knowledge of the truth, especially truth about God, fellowship and friendship with other persons in a human community (friendship and justice, peace), and the good of being reasonable in making choices or what can be called the good of practical reasonableness. The practical principles directing us to these goods are first principles of natural law rooted in the fundamental principle that good is to be done and pursued and its opposite avoided.<sup>12</sup>

The practical principles based on these goods, principles such as life is a good to be preserved, knowledge of the truth is a good to be pursued, etc. direct us to the goods perfective of our being as persons. But they do not, of themselves, help us to discriminate between possibilities of choice and action that are morally good and morally bad. Indeed, even sinners appeal to these goods and the principles directing that they be pursued in order to “justify” or, better, to “rationalize” their immoral choices. Thus a research scientist who unethically experiments on human persons, lying to them about the nature of the experiments because he realizes that they would never consent to undergo them if they knew the truth about them, rationalizes his immoral behavior by appealing to the good of the knowledge to be gained through these experiments and its potential benefits for the life and health of other persons.

If these principles of practical reason do not help us determine, before choice, which alternatives of choice are morally good from

those that are morally bad, then what principles enable us to do this? Let us see what Saint Thomas teaches here. In showing that all of the moral precepts of the Old Law can be reduced to the ten precepts of the Decalogue (which he considered to be the proximate conclusions of the natural law from its first and common principles), Saint Thomas taught that the commandments that we are to love God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves, while not listed among the precepts of the Decalogue, nonetheless pertain to it as the “first and common precepts of natural law.” Consequently, all the precepts of the Decalogue must, he concluded, be referred to these two love commandments as to their “common principles.”<sup>13</sup> Thus for Saint Thomas the very first moral principle or normative truth of the natural law enabling us to discriminate between morally good and morally bad possibilities of choice can be articulated in terms of the twofold command of love of God and love of neighbor. This is hardly surprising, for Saint Thomas was a good Christian and knew that Jesus himself, when asked, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?,” replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:32-40; cf. Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28; Romans 13:10).

In short, for Saint Thomas – and the entire Judeo-Christian tradition – the very first moral principle or normative truth to guide choices is that we are to love God above everything and our neighbor as ourselves. Moreover, and this is exceedingly important, there is an inseparable bond uniting this first moral principle to the first practical principles noted above that direct us to the goods perfective of us as human persons. For these goods are gifts from a loving God that we are to welcome and cherish; and it is obvious that we can love our neighbor as ourselves only if we are willing to

respect fully the goods perfective of them, the goods that enable them to become more fully themselves. We can love our neighbor only by willing that these goods flourish in them, and by being unwilling intentionally to damage, destroy or impede these goods, to ignore them or slight them or put them aside because their continued flourishing keeps us from doing what we please to do here and now.

Pope John Paul II has well expressed the indissoluble bond between love for the goods of human existence—the goods to which we are directed by the first principles of practical reasoning—and love for our neighbor. Commenting on the precepts of the Decalogue concerned with our neighbor, he reminds us (as Aquinas did) that these precepts are rooted in the commandment that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, a commandment expressing “the singular dignity of the human person, ‘the only creature that God has wanted for its own sake.’”<sup>14</sup>

After saying this, the Holy Father continues, in a passage of singular importance, by emphasizing that we can love our neighbor only and respect his inviolable dignity only by cherishing the real goods perfective of him and by refusing intentionally to damage, destroy, impede, ignore, neglect these goods or in any other way close our hearts to them and to the persons in whom they are meant to flourish. Appealing to the words of Jesus, he highlights the truth that “the different commandments of the Decalogue are really only so many reflections on the one commandment about the good of the person, at the level of the many different goods which characterize his identity as a spiritual and bodily being in relationship with God, with his neighbor, and with the material world.... The commandments of which Jesus reminds the young man are meant to safeguard the good of the person, the image of God, by protecting his goods.... [The negative precepts of the Decalogue]—‘You shall not kill; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You

shall not bear false witness' express with particular force the ever urgent need to protect human life, the communion of persons in marriage," and so on.<sup>15</sup>

In saying this Pope John Paul II is simply articulating once again the Catholic moral tradition, which centuries ago was summarized by Saint Thomas Aquinas when he said that "God is offended by us only because we act contrary to our own good."<sup>16</sup>

This fundamental normative truth is further clarified, in my opinion, in the formula proposed by Germain Grisez, namely, that "in voluntarily acting for human goods and avoiding what is opposed to them, one ought to choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with integral human fulfillment," i.e., with a heart open to every real good meant to flourish in human persons.<sup>17</sup>

If we are to choose in accordance with this basic normative truth, other normative truths help specify its requirements. First of all, to choose in accord with it we must take into account the real goods of human persons at stake in specific choices and actions—to ignore them or disregard them is to manifest a will, a heart, not seriously concerned with them. Likewise, we are to pursue real goods of human persons, the intelligible goods grasped by practical reason, and not substitute for them merely sensible goods such as pleasure. Moreover, each of these goods requires us that, when we can do so as easily as not, we avoid acting in ways that inhibit its realization and prefer ways of acting which contribute to its realization. In addition, each of these goods requires us to make an effort on its behalf when its realization in some other person is in peril and we are in a position to be of help in protecting it. Other requirements necessary if we are to shape our choices and actions in accord with this basic norm can be spelled out, for instance, fairness (the "Golden Rule"). One crucial requirement is that we ought not

choose, with direct intent, to set these goods aside, to destroy, damage, or impede them either in ourselves or in others. We can be tempted to do this either out of hostility toward certain goods or persons or because we arbitrarily prefer some goods to others and the continued flourishing of some of the real goods of human existence inhibits our participation, here and now, in some other good that we prefer.<sup>18</sup> In short, we are not to do evil so that good may come about (Romans 3:8).

#### 4. MAJOR ISSUES IN SEXUAL ETHICS

Like all choices, sexual choices must conform to the truth, if they are to be morally good and enable men and women to give to themselves the dignity to which they are called from the depths of their being. This means that sexual choices must respect the inviolable dignity of human persons as made in God's image and to this they must respect the real goods of human persons.

##### *The Goods at Stake in Sexual Choices*

What goods are at stake in making sexual choices? What goods come into focus (or ought to come into focus) when one is thinking about exercising his or her genital, sexual capacity? They are the following: (1) the good of life itself in its transmission, or the procreative good; (2) the good of intimate human friendship; (3) the good of marriage itself; (4) the good of personal integrity, a good intimately related to what Pope John Paul II calls the "nuptial meaning" of the body.

The first two of these goods are obviously at stake when one considers engaging in genital sex. That the good of life itself in its generation is "in focus" in the exercise of one's genital sexual powers is clearly indicated by the fact that the powers in question are called "genital." The act of sexual coition is the sort or kind of act

intrinsically apt for the generation of human life. The practice of contraception confirms this, for a person does not contracept if he or she is about to go fishing or read a book or shake hands, etc., for one realizes that acts of these kinds are not intrinsically apt for generating human life. One contracepts only when one (a) chooses the kind of act, genital coition, which one reasonably believes is the kind of act intrinsically apt for generating life and (b) chooses to make it to be the sort of act through which human life can not be given. As is easily seen, (b) is the contraceptive choice. Contraception makes no sense otherwise. That the good of intimate human friendship is also at stake in genital coition is evident from the fact that genital coition is possible only between two persons, one male, the other female. In short, when one chooses to engage in genital coition the goods at stake are those identified as the “unitive” and “procreative” goods of human sexuality. Even if one chooses to exercise his or her genital sexuality solitarily, as in masturbation, or in sodomitical or non-coital acts (anally or orally or what have you), one realizes that one is exercising a personal sexual power that has inherently both life-giving (procreative) and person-uniting (unitive) dimensions.

Also at stake in genital choices is the good of marriage itself. Marriage is truly a basic human good, complex in nature. But it is an intrinsic good of human persons, inwardly perfective of them and a component of human flourishing. It is indeed, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “an intimate partnership of life and marital love” (*intima communitas vitae et amoris coniugalis*), a covenant of love ordered by its very nature to the procreation and education of children,<sup>19</sup> who are indeed the “crowning glory” and “supreme gift” (*praestantissimum donum*) of marriage.<sup>20</sup>

Another good intimately affected by the choice to have sex is the good of “personal integrity.” This good, as John Finnis notes, requires “fundamentally, that one be reaching out with one’s will,

i.e., freely choosing real goods, and that one's efforts to realize these goods involves, where appropriate, one's bodily activity, so that that activity is as much the constitutive subject of what one does as one's act of choice is."<sup>21</sup> The good of personal integrity entails one's own bodily integrity, for one's body is integral to one's being as a human person. Hence this good of personal integrity is basically an aspect of what John Paul II calls the "nuptial meaning" of the body. The human body is the "sacrament" of the human person, the revelation of the person. And since the human body is inescapably either male or female, it is the revelation of a man-person or a woman-person. Precisely because of their sexual differences, revealed in their bodies, the man-person and the woman-person can give themselves to one another bodily in the act of genital coition. The bodily gift of the man-person to the woman-person and vice versa is the outward sign of the communion of persons existing between them. The body, therefore, is the means and sign of the gift of the man-person to the woman-person. This capacity of the body to express the communion of persons existing between the man-person and the woman-person constitutes its nuptial meaning.<sup>22</sup>

Human choices and actions, including sexual ones, are not morally good and in conformity with the truth and dignity of the person if they fail to respect fully the goods perfective of human persons, goods such as life itself, friendship, marriage, and personal, bodily integrity. If one acts contrary to any of these human goods, one violates personal dignity and closes one's heart to integral human fulfillment.

### *Evaluating Specific Kinds of Sexual Acts*

I will now consider (1) marriage and the marital act; (2) contraception, whether by the married or the nonmarried; (3) heterosexual coition outside of marriage; (4) solitary genital activity (masturbation) and sodomitical intercourse (anal and oral sex) with

another person, whether of the same sex (homosexual activity) or of the opposite sex.

## 1. Marriage and the Marital Act

Marriage comes into being when a man and a woman, forswearing all others, through “an act of irrevocable personal consent”<sup>23</sup> freely give themselves to one another as husband and wife. At the heart of the act establishing marriage is a free, self-determining choice through which the man and the woman give themselves a new and lasting identity. The man becomes this particular woman’s husband, and she becomes this particular man’s wife, and together they become spouses. Prior to this act of irrevocable personal consent, the man and the woman are separate individuals, replaceable and substitutable in each other’s lives. But in and through this act they make each other irreplaceable and nonsubstitutable persons.<sup>24</sup>

By their choice to give themselves to one another in marriage husbands and wives capacitate themselves to do things that non-married persons simply cannot do. First of all, they capacitate themselves to give one another conjugal or marital love, a love universally regarded as utterly distinctive and exclusive.<sup>25</sup> Husbands and wives, moreover, capacitate themselves to engage in the marital or conjugal act, an act exclusive and proper to them. It is absolutely imperative to recognize that a marital act is not simply a genital act between persons who “happen” to be married. Husbands and wives have the capacity to engage in genital acts because they have genitals. Unmarried men and women have the same capacity. But husbands and wives have the capacity (and the right) to engage in the marital act only because they are married. Precisely as marital, the marital act inwardly participates in the goods of their marital union, their one-flesh unity, one open to the gift of children. The marital act, in other words, inwardly

participates in the different goods or “blessings” which go to make up the marital good itself, i.e., the good of steadfast marital fidelity (the mutual self-giving, the unitive good of marriage) and the good of children (the procreative good of marriage).

The marital act is unitive, i.e., a communion of persons. In it husband and wife come to “know” each other in a unique and unforgettable way, revealing themselves to each other as unique and irreplaceable persons of different but complementary sex.<sup>26</sup> In this act they “give” themselves to one another in a way that concretely expresses their sexual complementarity, for the husband gives himself to his wife in a receiving sort of way while she in turn receives him in a giving sort of way. The “nuptial significance” of the husband’s body, which expresses his person as a male, enables him personally to give himself to his wife by entering her body-person and doing so in a receiving sort of way, while the “nuptial meaning” of the wife’s body, which expresses her person as a female, enables her to “receive him” personally into herself and in doing so to “give” herself to him.<sup>27</sup>

The marital act is also a procreative kind of act. In giving themselves to each other in this act, husband and wife become, as it were, one complete organism capable of generating human life. Even if they happen to be infertile, their marital union is the sort or kind of act intrinsically apt for receiving the gift of new human life should conditions be favorable.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, and this is crucially important, husbands and wives, precisely because they are married, have capacitated themselves, as nonmarried persons have not, to cooperate with God in bringing new human persons into existence in a way that responds to their dignity as persons. Marriage itself has capacitated husbands and wives to “welcome life lovingly, nourish it humanely, and educate it in the love and service of God and neighbor,”<sup>29</sup> to give this life the “home” it needs and merits in order to grow and develop.

In short, the marital act is open to the good of human life in its transmission (the procreative good), to the good of marital friendship, and to the good of personal, bodily integrity, for in this act the bodily activity of husband and wife is as much the constitutive subject of the act as is their choice to engage in it. This act thus also respects the nuptial meaning of the body, for in it the man-person gives himself to his wife in a receiving sort of way, while the woman-person, in turn, receives her husband into herself in a giving sort of way. Thus the marital act fully respects the good of marriage itself considered as a complex whole. In choosing to engage in the marital act, husbands and wives commit themselves to the pursuit of real human goods, executing this commitment by an interpersonal bodily act of communication and cooperation. The marital act actualizes and allows the spouses to experience their real common good—their marriage itself, with the other goods of procreation and friendship and personal bodily integrity which are the parts of marriage's wholeness as an intelligible common good even if, independently of the spouses' will, their capacity for parenthood will not be fulfilled in a given marital act. The marital act is, consequently, a morally good kind of act.

## 2. Contraception, Whether Marital or Nonmarital

Pope Paul VI provided a clear description of it. He identified it as any act intended, either as end or as means, to impede procreation, whether done in anticipation of intercourse, during it, or while it is having its natural consequences.<sup>30</sup> When persons engaging in coition contracept they execute two choices. First (1), they choose to engage in sexual coition, an act that they reasonably believe is the kind of act through which human life can be given. But because they want to engage in this act of coition but do not want new human life to come to be through it, they then choose, secondly (2) to do something prior to, during, or subsequent to their

freely chosen act of sexual coition precisely to impede the beginning of the new life that they reasonably believe could begin otherwise. Choice (2) is the choice to contracept.

Although persons engaging in genital sex may have good reasons to avoid causing a pregnancy (e.g., the health of the woman, the fact that the sexual partners are not married, etc.), and although they may appeal to these good reasons to rationalize their behavior, their present intention is precisely to impede the beginning of a new human life. They do not want that life to be, and thus do something in order to prevent it from being. In other words, the precise object of their choice<sup>31</sup> is to prevent new human life from beginning. Contraception is, therefore, an anti-life kind of an act, as a long Christian tradition, extending to the Fathers of the Church, has taught.<sup>32</sup> In choosing to contracept, therefore, one is choosing to violate a basic human good: human life in its transmission.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, should new life come to be despite one's efforts to impede it, that life will come to be as an unwanted child. This does not, of course, mean that all those who contracept will be willing to abort the life conceived despite the efforts to prevent its conception, but this temptation will be present, and it is for this reason that contraception can be regarded as the "gateway to abortion."<sup>34</sup>

Contraception is not only anti-life, it is also anti-love, and for this reason it has an added malice when married couples choose to contracept. When they do so, their freely chosen genital union can no longer be considered truly a marital act, which, as we have seen, is open to the goods of marriage, including the good of human life in its transmission. When spouses contracept, "they 'manipulate' and degrade human sexuality – and with it themselves and their married partner – by altering its value of 'total' self-giving." As John Paul II says, "the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely,

that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality.”<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Heterosexual Coition Outside of Marriage

When nonmarried men and women choose to have sexual coition, their choice is immoral because it violates the goods of human life in its transmission, of marriage and human friendship, and of personal integrity and the nuptial meaning of the body.

Nonmarital sexual coition (fornication or adultery) violates the good of human life in its transmission precisely because this life has a right to a home where it can grow and develop. But nonmarried persons simply cannot give new life this home precisely because they have not capacitated themselves, as married couples have, to “welcome life lovingly, nourish it humanely, and educate it in the love and service of God.” Practically all civilized societies, until recently, rightly regarded it irresponsible for unattached men and women to generate new life through their acts of fornication, and it is a sign of a new barbarism, completely opposed to the “civilization of love,” that many today assert the “right” of “live-in lovers” and of single men and women to have children, whether the fruit of their coupling or the “product” of new “reproductive” technologies. Fornicators can – and usually do – attempt to avoid generating life by contracepting, but, as we have already seen, by doing so they add to the immorality of fornication the immorality of contraception.

Fornicators and adulterers also act contrary to the good of friendship and of marriage. Although they may whisper to each other, “I love you,” as they engage in fornication or adultery, their chosen act of coition is not and cannot be a true act of love. It cannot be such precisely because they have refused to “give themselves” to

one another in marriage, to make each other irreplaceable and nonsubstitutable. Their genital act, far from uniting two irreplaceable and nonsubstitutable persons, in reality merely joins two individuals who remain, in principle, replaceable, substitutable, and disposable. The partners may have some deep feelings of tenderness and affection for one another, but such feelings are far different from authentic human love, which takes such feelings, the “raw material of love” as Karol Wojtyla calls them, and integrates them into an intelligent commitment to the personhood of the other.<sup>36</sup> The genital union of the nonmarried cannot be the sign and expression of a full personal giving. Rather, it merely simulates this sign and falsifies it. It is, in short, a “lie.”<sup>37</sup>

Not only does nonmarital sexual coition violate the goods of human life, marriage and marital friendship; it also violates the good of personal integrity insofar as those choosing this act are not reaching out with their wills and bodies to participate in authentic goods of human existence. They are rather using their bodies to participate in the sensibly experienced pleasure of genital orgasm separated, precisely because of their free choice, from the intelligible goods (those of human life itself, marital friendship) into which this pleasure is to be integrated.

Finally, if one of the parties to nonmarital coition is married to another, adultery is committed, an utterly unjust act insofar as it is specified by the choice to put into the marriage bed someone other than the one whom one had made nonsubstitutable by one’s free choice to marry.

#### 4. Masturbation and Sodomy

**Masturbation.** Masturbatory sex does not directly violate the goods of human life in its transmission and of marriage and marital friendship, although it is definitely a choice that scorns these goods.

But masturbation directly attacks personal integrity and the body's capacity for self-giving, its "nuptial meaning."

The immediate intention of the masturbator is to have a sentient and emotional experience: the sensation of orgasm and the accompanying emotional satisfaction. Masturbation is the choice to have the sentient and emotional experience of sexual orgasm by the manipulation of one's own sexual capacity. But, as Grisez says in a very perceptive passage:

In choosing to actuate one's sexual capacity precisely in order to have the conscious experience of the process and its culmination, one chooses to use one's body as an instrument to bring about that experience in the conscious self. Thus the body becomes an instrument used and the conscious self its user. This is done when one works and plays, and also when one communicates, using the tongue to speak...the genitals to engage in marital intercourse. In such cases, the body functions as part of oneself, serving the whole and sharing in the resulting benefits [in short, in such cases the body is integrated fully into "personal integrity"]. By contrast, in choosing to masturbate, one does not choose to act for a goal which fulfills oneself as a unified bodily person. The only immediate goal is satisfaction for the conscious self; and so the body, not being part of the whole for whose sake the act is done, serves only as an extrinsic instrument. Thus, in choosing to masturbate one chooses to alienate one's body from one's conscious subjectivity.<sup>38</sup>

Such self-alienation amounts to an existential dualism between the consciously experiencing subject and his/her body, i.e., a division between body and conscious self. Masturbation damages the unity of the acting person as conscious subject and sexually

functioning body. But “this specific aspect of self-integration is...precisely the aspect necessary so that the bodily union of sexual intercourse will be a communion of persons, as marital intercourse is. Therefore, masturbation damages the body’s capacity for the marital act [its “nuptial meaning”] as an act of self-giving which constitutes a communion of bodily persons.”<sup>39</sup> Because it does this, masturbation violates the good of marital communion insofar as such communion can only be realized by the bodily gift of self. Masturbation is therefore intrinsically evil.

**Sodomy.** Sodomitical acts, e.g., anal sex, oral sex, can be either heterosexual (done by persons of the opposite sex) or homosexual (done by persons of the same sex). Such acts are in many ways similar to acts of masturbation insofar as sodomites choose to use their own and each other’s bodies as a mere means of providing consciously experienced satisfactions. They thus choose in a way that violates the good of personal integrity as bodily persons insofar as they treat their own and each other’s bodies as mere instruments of the consciously experiencing subject. They thus violate the nuptial meaning of the body and thus the body’s capacity for the marital act, and in this way they violate the good of marriage itself.<sup>40</sup>

Today many claim that individuals who find that their homosexual disposition cannot satisfy their sexual urges and natural inclination toward intimate communion save by establishing a more or less permanent and exclusive relationship, including genital intimacy, with a person of the same sex, are morally justified insofar as their relationship can be regarded as marital. Indeed, some today claim that homosexually inclined persons have a right to marry and that their sexual unions ought to be legally recognized as marital.

This apologia for homosexual sodomy is specious. We can grant that homosexual partners can share a committed relationship with sincere mutual affection, with a desire to express their

friendship in appropriate ways. But their bodily coupling does not in truth unite them so that they form, as do husbands and wives, one complete reproductive couple. Their acts of sodomy do not contribute to their common good as friends or to the goods specific of marriage. The intimacy they experience is private and incommunicable and is no more a common good than the experience of sexual arousal and orgasm. It can only provide the illusion of a communion of persons in one-flesh. As Finnis has pointed out:

[T]heir activation of one or even each of their procreative organs cannot be an actualizing and experiencing of the marital good – as marital intercourse (intercourse between spouses in a marital way) can be, even between spouses who happen to be sterile – it can do no more than provide each partner with an individual gratification. For want of a common good that could be actualized and experienced by and in this bodily union, that conduct involves the partners in treating their bodies as instruments to be used in the service of their consciously experiencing selves; their choice to engage in such conduct thus disintegrates each of them precisely as acting persons.... Sexual acts cannot in reality be self-giving unless they are acts by which a man and a woman actualize and experience sexually the real giving of themselves to each other – in biological, affective, and volitional union in mutual commitment, both open ended and exclusive – which...we call marriage.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Here I want to show how our dignity as God's very own children, members of the divine family, brothers and sisters of Christ and members of his body, requires us to honor the goods of

human sexuality and human persons. Through baptism we have become one body with Christ. Saint Paul spells out the meaning of this for sexual ethics when he writes:

Do you not see that your bodies are members of Christ? Would you have me take Christ's members and make them members of a prostitute? God forbid! Can you not see that the man who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? Scripture says: 'The two shall become one flesh.' But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun lewd conduct. Every other sin a man commits is outside his body, but the fornicator sins against his own body. You must know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within—the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own. You have been purchased, and at a price. So glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:15-20).<sup>42</sup>

Marriage is good – it is a gift from God (cf. Genesis 1-2) – and marital union is good. Moreover, the marriages of baptized persons, of those who are already indissolubly united to Jesus Christ, are sacraments of his life-giving, love-giving, grace-giving bridal union with his spouse the Church, not only pointing to this great reality but efficaciously making it present in the world here and now so long as the spouses put no obstacles in the way. But any kind of nonmarital sex is for the Christian a sacrilege. In the text from 1 Corinthians Saint Paul specifies the sacrilegious character of sex with a prostitute – *porneia* in that sense. But in that letter and elsewhere he and other New Testament writers used the Greek term *porneia*, translated above as “lewd conduct,” broadly, to include not only prostitution and fornication but also other non-marital genital acts.<sup>43</sup>

Those who have become one body with Christ realize that they can give glory to God in their bodies, as Saint Paul admonishes

them, only by respecting the good of marriage, the nuptial meaning of the body, their own personal integrity, and the great gift of human life which God himself wills to come into being through the love-giving union of husband and wife in the marital act. They realize, too, that they cannot be faithful to Christ, who said to his disciples, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them” (Matthew 19:14) if they deliberately set out to impede the beginning of these children’s lives by contracepting. They know, too, that one dishonors the goods at stake in sexual choices not only by outwardly observable acts, but also by inwardly hankering for them in their desires and aspirations. Their prayer is that God may create in them a pure and loving heart.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), p. 41. This is Wojtyła's famous "personalistic norm."
- <sup>2</sup> A baby, pre-born or born, does not, of course, have the *developed* capacity for deliberating and choosing freely, but he has the *natural* or *radical* capacity to do so because he is human and personal in nature.
- <sup>3</sup> Vatican Council II, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, n. 16; emphasis added.
- <sup>6</sup> Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. A. Potocki (Dordrecht/Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 198-199.
- <sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 7.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 71.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* n. 65. See n. 71, where the Pope cites a remarkable passage from St. Gregory of Nyssa's *De Vita Moysis* where he says "we *are* in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we will, by our decisions."
- <sup>10</sup> Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 1, *Christian Moral Principles* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), p. 59.
- <sup>11</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1-2, q. 94, a. 2; see also Germain Grisez, "The First Principle of Practical Reason: A Commentary on the *Summa Theologiae*, 1-2, Question 94, Article 2," *Natural Law Forum* 10 (1965) 168-201; see also Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 178-182.
- <sup>12</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1-2, q. 94, a. 2. See a. 3 of the same question for the good of practical reasonableness.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1-2, q. 100, 3 and ad 1.

<sup>14</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 13; the internal citation is from Vatican Council II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., n. 13.

<sup>16</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 3.122.

<sup>17</sup> Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, p. 184.

<sup>18</sup> For a fuller discussion of these moral truths see Grisez, *Christian Moral Principles*, pp. 205-225; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), chapter 3; Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1984), pp. 74-78; William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology* (rev. ed.: Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1994), pp. 77-80.

<sup>19</sup> Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., nn. 48, 50. In his Encyclical *Veritatis splendor* Pope John Paul II explicitly includes “the communion of persons in marriage,” violated by adultery, among the *goods* of human persons (n. 13; see also nn. 48, 50, 67, 78, 79). On marriage as a fundamental good of human persons, intrinsically good, see Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), pp. 555-584.

<sup>21</sup> John Finnis, “Personal Integrity, Sexual Morality, and Responsible Parenthood,” *Anthropos: Rivista di studi sulla persona e la famiglia* 1 (1985) 46, emphasis added. *Anthropos* is now called *Anthropotes*.

<sup>22</sup> The “nuptial meaning of the body” is developed by Pope John Paul II in many of his addresses on the “theology of the body” given at his Wednesday audiences, in particular those given between September 5, 1979 and May 6, 1981. These addresses are found in Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*:

*Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997). See in particular, “The Nuptial Meaning of the Body” (General Audience of January 9, 1980), pp. 60-63; “The Human Person Becomes a Gift in the Freedom of Love” (General Audience of January 16, 1980), pp. 63-66; and “The Mystery of Man’s Original Innocence” (General Audience of January 30, 1980), pp. 66-69.

<sup>23</sup> Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1627-1628; *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1057.

<sup>24</sup> Here the words of the late German Protestant theologian Helmut Thielicke are most significant. He wrote: “Not uniqueness establishes the marriage, but the marriage establishes the uniqueness.” *The Ethics of Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 108.

<sup>25</sup> On the distinctive characteristics of conjugal love see Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, n. 48; Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae vitae*, n. 9.

<sup>26</sup> On this see Pope John Paul II, “Analysis of Knowledge and Procreation” (General Audience of March 5, 1980), *The Theology of the Body*, pp. 77-80. In the marital act husbands and wives, the Pope says, “reveal themselves to each other, with that specific depth of their own human ‘self,’ which, precisely, is revealed also by means of their sex, their masculinity and femininity....[T]he reality of the conjugal union...contains a new and, in a way, a definitive discovery of the meaning of the human body in its masculinity and femininity.”

<sup>27</sup> The ideas briefly set forth here are developed by me at more length in *Marriage: The Rock on Which the Family Is Built* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), chap. 2, “Marriage and the Complementarity of Male and Female.” See also Robert Joyce, *Human Sexual Ecology: A Philosophy of Man and Woman* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 35-50.

<sup>28</sup> On this see Robert George and Gerard V. Bradley, “Marriage and the Liberal Imagination,” *The Georgetown Law Review* 84 (1995) 301-320.

<sup>29</sup> See St. Augustine, *De genesi ad literam*, 9, 7 (PL 34.397).

<sup>30</sup> Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Humanae vitae*, n. 14.

<sup>31</sup> On this see Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, n. 78. See also the excellent essay of Martin Rhonheimer clarifying this passage, “Intrinsically Evil Acts and the Moral Viewpoint: Clarifying a Central Teaching of *Veritatis splendor*,” in *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, eds. J. A. DiNoia, O.P., and Romanus Cessario, O.P. (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999), pp. 161-194.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, the following: (1) St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 24 on the Epistle to the Romans*, PG 60.626-627; (2) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 3.122; (3) the “*Si aliquis*” canon into the canon law of the Church in the *Decretum Greg. IX*, lib. V, tit. 1, cap. V and part of the Church’s canon law from the mid-thirteenth century until 1917; text in *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. A. L. Richter and A. Friefburg (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1881), 2.794; (4) the *Roman Catechism*, Part II, chap. 7, no. 13. See also John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, ch. 38:9,10; this text, in which Calvin likens contraception to homicide (as do sources 1-4), is cited by Charles D. Provan, *The Bible and Birth Control* (Monongahela, PA: Zimmer Printing, 1989), p. 15. Provan notes that this passage is omitted by the editor of the “unabridged” series of Calvin’s Commentaries, published by Baker Book House.

<sup>33</sup> The argument that contraception is anti-life is developed at length by Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle, John Finnis, and William E. May, “Every Marital Act Ought To Be Open to New Life’: Toward a Clearer Understanding,” *The Thomist* 52 (1988) 365-426.

<sup>34</sup> On this, see Chapter Four, “Contraception and Respect for Human Life,” in my book *Catholic Bioethics and the Gift of Human Life* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2000).

<sup>35</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on The Role of the Family in the Modern World *Familiaris consortio*, n. 32.

<sup>36</sup> See Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, pp. 73-84.

<sup>37</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World Familiaris consortio*, n. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Grisez, *Living a Christian Life*, p. 650.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 653-654.

<sup>41</sup> John Finnis, "Law, Morality, and 'Sexual Orientation,'" *Notre Dame Law Review* 69 (1994) 1066-1067. See also Robert P. George and Gerard V. Bradley, "Marriage and the Liberal Imagination," *Georgetown Law Journal* 84 (1995) 301-320; Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, "What Sex Can Be: Self-alienation, Illusion, or One-Flesh Union," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 42 (1997) 135-157.

<sup>42</sup> The Council of Trent appealed to this text of St. Paul, when, in opposing Luther, it solemnly defined that nonbelief is not the only mortal sin (see DS 1577/837). Trent showed this by pointing out that, according to Paul, divine law also excludes from the kingdom "those with faith who are fornicators, adulterers, effeminate (*molles*), sodomites, thieves, covetous, drunkards, evil-tongued, greedy (see 1 Cor 6:9-10) and all others who commit mortal sins" (DS 1544/808).

<sup>43</sup> On this see the excellent studies by Silverio Zedda, S.J., *Relativo e assoluto nella morale di San Paolo* (Brescia: Paideia, 1984), chap. 5, pp. 63-85 and O. Larry Yarborough, *Not Like the Gentiles: Marriage Rules in the Letters of St. Paul* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985).

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