

Understanding the Catholic Faith: Sex and Marriage

Father James Chelich – 22 December 2019

For Catholic Faith the distinct physiology of the body of man and woman and the relationship God established between man and woman frame the context in which sex is understood and ordered: sex is for the conception of children in a marriage between a man and a woman. From where does the catholic Faith draw this conviction? It is what God reveals in the Sacred Scriptures (the Bible). In Genesis 1:27 God creates human beings male and female:

*God created mankind in His image; in the image of God He created them;
male and female He created them.*

In Genesis 1:28 God establishes sex and declares its purpose:

“Be fruitful and multiply...”

God has done the same for the various animal species (see Genesis 1:22). But human beings are distinct from animals. Human beings are made in *God’s image* and have the potential to grow into *God’s likeness*. Human beings have been given the ability to reason and the power of choice to govern their behavior. In Genesis 2:24 God specifies exactly how “*be fruitful and multiply*” (sex) is to happen in a right ordered way for human beings:

*“A man shall leave his father and mother and cling to his wife (marriage),
and the two shall become one flesh (children).”*

“*And the two shall become flesh*” is something more than a sentiment about the relationship between a man and woman in marriage. “*The two shall become flesh*” manifests itself tangibly in the conception and birth of children. When questioned, Jesus confirms the Old Testament teaching on sex and marriage (see Matthew 19:3-9) and adds: “*What God has joined let no one divide.*” Jesus, however, further unfolds God’s will for human sex by calling men and women to be chaste. Chastity means not engaging in masturbation, viewing pornography, or having sexual foreplay or intercourse outside of marriage between a man and woman. Jesus connects chastity directly to the marriage of man and woman as the right ordered context for sex:

*“I tell you that whoever looks at a woman lustfully
commits adultery in his heart.”* (Matthew 5:26-28)

“Adultery” specifically refers to marriage. Jesus uses this word deliberately. He is saying that un-chastity on the part of a man or woman, married or unmarried, is a sin against what God has ordained for sex: marriage between a man and woman for the conception and birth of children. That is why Jesus identifies it as “adultery.”

That sex takes place in marriage between a man and a woman for the conception of children is established by God not only for the right ordering of human sexual behavior, but for the right ordering of human life in world and the right unfolding of human life in the future. What does this mean for a single Catholic woman or man, a priest, a consecrated religious man or woman or a same sex attracted man or woman? Each of them is called by Christ to a chaste, celibate cherishing of marriage and children, their protection and well being, and the establishment of a decent world for them to live in. The sexual focus and discipline embraced by each of them contributes to this. In the long history of the Church this has manifested itself in amazing ways. As individuals or gathered together in communities, unmarried men and women living this sexual ethic have preserved knowledge in times of chaos, sheltered the children and protected the families of the poor, established hospitals for their care, schools for their education and orphanages for the rearing of abandoned children. Over the last two thousand years the sexual

focus and discipline of Christians has transformed humanity. This is because it actually does rightly order our sexuality to an authentic human life and a stable world. This is the Catholic way of sexual holiness because it is the way Jesus called for sexual holiness.

Chastity, as Jesus calls for it, is enormously fruitful in the world. The source of this chaste fruitfulness lies in a revolutionary moral principle at the very heart of the Catholic Faith – a principle that Jesus embodied and brought into the world. To put it simply, Jesus completely redefined “love.” The old definition of love is centered on self: “Others exist to give life to me.” This self absorbed “love” brings the world into a chaos of abuse, and men and women into alienation from and hostility toward each other. The definition of love Jesus established and exemplified in his life and death is radically different: “I die to myself to give life to others.” This “love” makes men and women stewards of creation, healers and restorers of the world. It brings them into collaboration with one another in the service of the good. Chastity for unmarried Catholic men and women is not a “white knuckled” repression of the sexual impulse, it is a redirection of that impulse to the giving of life. Jesus gave only one new commandment:

Such as my love has been for you, so must you love one another.” John 13:34-35

To die to yourself to give life to others, only in this can you find the deepest meaning of life, the purpose of your existence and true human fulfillment.

The Catholic Faith never equates sex with love. The Catholic Faith never equates “having sex” with a “relationship.” For Catholics love is equal, but sex is not. Love, as Jesus defines it, brings us into communion with all things. Never is sex considered a form of entertainment – either alone (masturbation and pornography), or with another or several others (fornication and adultery). Embracing sex as entertainment leads to the spread of disease, the abortion of countless children conceived, the instability of the marriage bond, divorce and the rupture of family ties, the sexual trafficking of women, and the sexual abuse of children. Catholicism honors the Heart of Caring that God has instilled in each human being. That Heart of Caring must be expressed in a right ordered love, a love that gives life to the world. For that to happen the human passions, the sexual impulse among them, must be right ordered and disciplined.

On hearing what Jesus said about marriage and sex the Apostles were dumbfounded. They asked, “*Who then can be saved?*” *Matthew 19:25* Jesus looked at them and said, “*For human beings this it is impossible but for God all things are possible.*” *Matthew 19:26* Jesus’ words point to another Truth at the very core of Catholic Faith: Jesus is risen, alive and present to every man and woman. To “believe” is to open your heart and mind to his presence with you. In communion with Jesus the power flowing from him brings a man or woman’s sexuality into right focus and order. (see *Philippians 3:7-11*) All things are possible for those who walk with him and submit their life to him. A deep and personal relationship with Christ enables a man or woman to embrace the sexual focus and discipline Jesus calls for. In turn, this sexual focus and discipline establishes the balance of body, soul and spirit needed to unfold the potential of men and women to create a truly human world and future. In a living relationship with Jesus, power flows from him, takes hold of you, and begins to work in you. Gradually and progressively it brings all things into right order within you and between you and the people and things in the world around you. A Catholic man or woman’s moral striving, although beset by human weakness, inconsistency and failure, always keeps this moral focus and strives forward with Christ, who cleanses us and raises us. Jesus established the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) for the specific purpose of bringing his disciples back on track and their sexual lives into right and life-giving focus. His grace will prevail in all who call upon him. For two thousand years this has been the Catholic way of sexual wholeness (holiness). (*1 Thessalonians 4:1-8*)