

Sex and Marriage – just a series of prohibitions?

Kathleen Baster – 15th November 2009

As we all know, many of us have and do struggle with the Church's stance on areas of sexuality. It really is a controversial topic. There is an understandable backlash against "celibate men in frocks" dictating to ordinary people what they should or shouldn't do – many people would like the Church to just 'keep out of the bedroom'.

However, I don't believe that it is properly understood or discussed why the Church teaches what it does. I know I personally grew up knowing what the Church said I shouldn't do, but not why.

Even if practising Catholics are willing to accept Church teaching, it does seem like a long list of don't do this and don't do that. Church's teaching seems very restrictive and controlling. There doesn't seem much joy in the treatment of sexuality – just a lot of negativity.

As human beings though, we know that sexual union can be so very positive. It is something wholesome and wonderful to be enjoyed in a married couple. So how can God's Will and Church teaching be so at odds with what we know deep down? Our sexuality can be such a powerful part of ourselves – it cannot be right to stifle and box it. God must have wanted human beings to enjoy and feel fulfilled by that expression or He wouldn't have made sexuality such a big part of how He created us.

There came a point for me, in my life that I wanted to learn about the 'why' of the Church's teaching. I wanted to know how the Church could reconcile the paradox between what it said and what most humans felt. It took a long time for me to develop a heart open enough to listen to what the Church said rather than presupposing what I thought it was saying. But what an eye-opening joy it has been for me to explore this teaching. My husband will tell you that it has had a profound impact on me and my life – on my attitude to who I am and what God wants me to be. That's why I want to talk about it with you today. I would dearly love to be able to plant some seed in everyone here tonight - to suggest to you that the Church does have beautiful motivation for what it teaches and to urge you to try to explore it for yourselves.

The biggest problem with Church teaching on sexuality, and I think, the reason it is so badly understood, is that everyone's questions are different. There is no short paragraph that will convince someone about why the Church is against sex outside of marriage or against contraception if they don't fundamentally agree already. It is a completely different way of looking at the world. We cannot just read one section of a book and expect it to all make sense. We need to first of all be open, put all our preconceptions to one side for a little while and then give God a chance to touch us.

I have written this talk, not as a full explanation of Church teaching, but as a series of concepts that struck me. I don't expect you all to be convinced or converted by what I say tonight. I cannot answer direct questions on the Church's teaching because my questions are different to yours and my heart has only been touched by what God wanted me to learn. He most probably wants you each to learn something different in bringing you here tonight.

What I do hope, is that I can give you enough of a taster of the Church's perspective to encourage you to look into it more – and maybe the parish could facilitate that. I would love there to be a study group in the parish where a few people could get together and explore and learn about this teaching. There is so much to discover that 20 minutes could never do it justice. I may not have the answers to your questions, but I believe that the answers are there if only we will look. Our sexuality is a deeply personal thing – we must each make every effort to understand it in and with God.

Most of what I have studied about this comes from what Pope John Paul II wrote in his extensive work on the Theology of the Body. Everything that we know about Karol Wojtyla as priest, bishop and later as pope, says that he allied himself very closely with young people and understood well the challenges that they faced in the world. For a celibate man in a frock, he seems to have had a very clear understanding of the secular world and the difficulties that arise within marriage. He seems to have made it his mission in life to explore and explain God's desires for us – to make Church teaching clear and relevant in the 21st century and, in doing so, to overturn the culture of death to allow for a culture of life to blossom.

OK, let me begin to talk about the insights that stuck me most when going through this teaching...

First; Has anyone here ever seen a beautiful sunrise and been inspired to think of God? Has anyone watched a thunder and lightning storm and marvelled at the enormous power of God? Have you ever noticed a blossoming flower and understood a little more of the great beauty of our Creator? Has anyone ever watched lambs playing in a field and recognised God's hand and believed in Him a little more? Of course, we can learn so much about God from all of these things. They are created by Him and have His mark on them. But what is the jewel in the crown of God's creation? What did He make that was most like Him? In His image and likeness? Us! We people and our bodies, minds and spirits, were made to teach us more about God than any stunning sunset or star-filled night. If only we had the eyes to see it, our bodies can tell us so much about God and His love for us. If only we have the eyes to see, each of us, looking in the mirror can teach us more about God than any text or sermon. His stamp is on us. We must allow our bodies to impress us and inspire us to know and love God all the more!

Sometimes we have the impression that the Church teaches that our spirits are good and holy while our bodies are bad and only lead us to sin. This is a heresy – known as Manichaeism. We were created by God as whole people – body and soul. It is wrong to reject one part in favour of the other. Without our bodies, we would not be able to see the great beauty of God's world, to hear His word, to feel the elements, to smell the world around us, to taste the food that we have to eat. God reveals Himself to us, in and through our bodies and in and through our senses. Catholicism in particular has always been a very sensual religion with all the smells and bells - ornate architecture and images, revelational music and choirs, beads and prayer books to feel and hold and the Blessed Eucharist to taste. We could not experience any of this without our bodies. The Church cannot be anti-flesh – Jesus, who is the Word, became flesh!

Therefore, we need to consider why sexuality has such a powerful hold on us. Why so much of sin and pain in the world is actually related to sexuality, when it is really only one part of us. To answer this, let us first think of what we consider good and wholesome sex to be and to represent. I believe that sexuality bugs us because we each have an in-built desire to offer ourselves to another. We want to share ourselves with another – to make ourselves known to another. We want to be

accepted and freely loved in return – and we want to be connected with that other for the rest of our lives. We also, whether we admit it or not, have a desire to nurture others – to help build up the faith in love and life. That is what most couples wanted on their wedding day, I think.

Now, let's think about God the Father in the Old Testament. Firstly, He gave us life and the ability to choose and to love. Then time after time after time, God showed Himself to His people. He exposed Himself and made Himself vulnerable so that we might know Him and freely choose to love Him and that we might follow Him and be committed to Him for the rest of our lives. In a theological sense, God wants to marry each of us. He wants to live with us in an eternal exchange of love that is revealed to us on the earth through the love of a man and a woman. He offers Himself to each of us so that we might know Him and love Him and that we might participate in His life-giving love.

Now, it is not only people with a vocation to marriage that have this yearning to offer themselves. We are all called to be unitive and procreative including those not married and priests and celibates. Priests and religious are called to offer themselves as their life's work to the Church and to her people. These and anyone who lives a life of celibacy for the kingdom of God, give themselves and their time to mentor or nourish the faith of those with whom they come into contact. A priest has a whole community to love and to nurture and to see grow in faith. That's why we call a priest 'father'. He has a real parental role in our lives. Mother Teresa touched so many people in her life – so many would gladly call themselves her children! Without ever conceiving or giving birth to a single child, her offspring could fill a giant stadium!

And this doesn't just go for priests and religious; if someone has a great gift of music, for example, and travels about the world offering their talents for God and chooses to remain celibate to enable them to do this, then they are fulfilling their call to be unitive and procreative. They are offering themselves to those who will hear so that their work may be listened to, and that they might ultimately inspire and nurture another to fulfil their own talents or to grow closer to God.

It is this offering of ourselves that John Paul II really clarified when he spoke of us each being called to give ourselves as a gift. We *all* have a vocation to offer ourselves to others, for their good and for our own. We give ourselves as a gift, hoping for that gift to be accepted, appreciated and that we will be offered the gift of another in return. In the case of the marital vocation, this is what the marriage vows specifically talk about – I give myself to you and I take you to be mine. In the case of celibate vocations, the gift is to Christ and His Church and Christ will always return our genuine offerings a thousand-fold.

If we could think for a moment about what Christian wedding vows say – maybe we don't think often enough about what the commitment to marriage actually is. "Do you consent to be my husband/wife" – which means do you offer all of yourself as a gift to me? "I take you as my husband/wife and I give myself to you as your wife/husband" – which means I accept your gift of your whole self and I give my whole self as a gift to you. "To love each other truly for better or worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health till death do us part" – which means that we accept and treasure each other's gift for everything that it is and in all circumstances forever! These are such beautiful words that are so very real and that a couple getting married mean with all their hearts on their wedding day.

When you give yourself to another and that other accepts you and gives him or herself back to you, you feel affirmed, you feel more like yourself than you ever felt before. That is the experience of communion. It is not sexuality that creates the need for man and woman to give him or herself to another – it is the need to give oneself that finds its outlet in physical and sexual union in matrimony. Sexual union is how we express in this world this deeper desire for union – or at least that is what it is meant to be.

How healthy do you think is the relationship of a couple who repeatedly break their wedding vows to each other? And how healthy do you think is the relationship of a couple who regularly and spontaneously renew their wedding vows to each other? If marital sex is seen as the offering and acceptance of each to the other, then it is simply, and beautifully, the act of renewing wedding vows. That is the fundamental point of why the Church preaches against artificial contraception – because the use of contraception breaks our wedding vows. Use of contraception says “I offer all of me except my fertility and I accept all of you except your fertility”. Wedding vows were never meant to have exceptions and criteria attached. And the Church, in its wisdom through generations and through the Holy Spirit, recognises that if we break our wedding vows, even in small ways, then marriages are undermined and in some cases fail and ultimately cause more pain to the individuals involved. God doesn’t want to cause suffering in His commandments. He offers us rules to live by so as to protect us from the pain that as fallen humans, we inflict on each other and on ourselves. Jesus didn’t say “I came that you may have life and be miserable”, he said “I came that you may have life and LIVE IT TO THE FULL”.

Now, John Paul II spoke of the rule of gradualness. We are each in our own place in relation to God. If we are open to His call, if we are like little children before Him, God takes each one of us and gradually moves us step by step nearer to Himself. But this law of gradualness must not be confused with the gradualness of the law – we need the law because we are weak. Our being weak is not a reason to weaken the law – it is only a call to ask God to help us make ourselves stronger so that we can live the full truth of our humanity.

Some people want to separate God from the erotic union of a couple. But we must remember that all that is good comes from God. Erotic love is an intrinsic good in a marriage so it must come from God. And God is love. If God is not part of the act, then the act cannot be one of true love.

Remember where we’ve learned what we understand about sexuality. Possibly some from our parents. Probably lots from the school playground or TV or films. And then a large part from what we think and understand in our own minds. Would we consider all of these to be good sources if we were trying to learn about, say, science or languages? Even if what we learned was correct, we surely would miss out on some fundamental concepts. If we think of our attitude to sexuality as a language of the body, we must be prepared to seek out good sources to inform and develop us so that we can understand this language and use it to talk to God.

Now, one of the things that has struck me most forcefully about the Theology of the Body is that it is not just about sex and marriage – and still less about what we should and should not do. Because it’s based on the very nature of God, and the way He created each of us, it can illuminate so many other aspects of Catholic teaching. I see now more than ever how Catholic teaching all fits together as if each part is one piece of a jigsaw, and the Theology of the Body demonstrates this. Take, for example, the male-only priesthood.

John Paul II's Theology of the Body explores the essential qualities of our maleness and femaleness. We are each born either male or female and this is a reality of our existence that we take entirely for granted and right throughout our lives. In this sense, sexuality is not something that we have, it is something that we are. Without setting limits or restrictions, there are many aspects of maleness and femaleness that put the two sexes apart, but one thing that really hit me relates to way we offer ourselves as gifts to the other. Traditionally, and in the case of marital union, practically speaking, it is the man who initiates the gift. It is the man who offers himself to his bride and it is she who accepts his gift and offers herself in return. If we think of the relationship between God and the Church, we know that it is God, and in particular, Christ, who initiates the gift of Himself and we, the Church, are called to accept His gift and to offer ourselves to Him in return. In this way, I finally understood why the Church is always referred to as 'she' and why Jesus had to be a man coming into this world. And this explains for me why priests, being 'in persona Christi' must always be male. At the altar at Mass, the priest is really in the place of Christ, the Christ who is offering Himself up as a gift for the Church – initiating the gift because we, in our humanity could never initiate so beautiful an offering! This was something that I'd really struggled with especially through my teens and had questioned so many people but had never found an answer. It was so exciting to me to finally get an explanation that made sense to me!

Another thing that I'd struggled with was the writings of St Paul. To be honest, I'd always thought his instructions on the roles of men and women in marriage to be quite misogynistic. The reading of 'wives submit to your husbands. Husbands love your wives' always sounded to me to belittle women and give men authority over their wives, which doesn't sound particularly Christian to me.

But then both parts were broken down for me in the Theology of the Body – both with eyes directed towards God. Firstly – wives submit to your husband; if we think of submit as a form of submission then what is submission but under mission. Wives put yourselves under the mission of your husband. But what is the mission of the husband? We are all called to God. Union with God is our mission. The husband's mission is to lead his family to God. The wife's role is to be part of that mission and together the family is directed towards God and heaven.

The second part of St Paul's text always got my back up, to be honest; husbands love your wives – full stop. To love your wife doesn't seem a particularly arduous task – surely that isn't too much to ask of a husband. And for such little commitment, St Paul gives him authority over his wife – to treat her as he wishes? But John Paul II's Theology of the Body made me realise that instead of being the authority role, St Paul was calling husbands to the servant's role. 'Husbands love your wives'. Love, in St Paul's view was not the wishy-washy sometimes fickle approach to love that we humans have, but the all-encompassing self-humbling love that God has for us. We are called to love as God loves. In this text, St Paul calls husbands to love their wives as Jesus loves His Church. Far from a husband commanding his wife to serve him his every wish, St Paul calls husbands to reach to help their wives. A husband is called to reach to his wife in the evening to ask her how her day was, to offer to massage her shoulders, to offer to massage her feet, to offer to wash her feet ...

As I said at the beginning, there is so much in the Theology of the Body, we have only glimpsed at the surface tonight. There is so much more that I've completely missed out. Theologians have said that this Theology touches on almost every aspect of Catholic teaching, and I can see how. It is not that anything is new – the Church has had this Truth right from the beginning – but I do believe that

John Paul II has drawn so much together shedding new light on the rich tapestry that is Church teaching.