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Sexuality, God's gift, a personal treasure, language of communion¹

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Contents

- A. The many dimensions of human sexuality
 - 1. “A body you have prepared for me”
 - 2. A world of affections
 - 3. Sexuality in the brain
 - 4. A language for communication
 - 5. For love and for fun
 - 6. The golden rule
 - 7. The Spirit in the body
- B. Seekers of life
 - 1. The fragility of human love
 - 2. The ecology of sexuality
 - 3. A “pure diamond”

A. The many dimensions of human sexuality

1. “A body you have prepared for me” (Hebrews 10: 5)

G:

Milan Kundera wrote that the idea of linking love to sexuality was one of our Creator’s most bizarre ideas.² We do in fact wonder why God interconnected divine love, *agape* love, with the body and its erotic drives, *eros*. We know that we cannot love another person if we do not have a “heart of flesh”, and neither is it possible – unless one is deprived – to love a body without being also unconsciously attracted to its spirit. We do

¹ The speakers have dealt with this theme (in Italian) in the following publications published by Effatà (Cantalupa, Torino): *Amici a vita. Il segreto dell'amore coniugale* (2000); *L'amico discreto* (1998), *Lei & Lui. Comunicazione e reciprocità* (2001); *Le ragioni del matrimonio* (2006). See also: *Verginità e matrimonio* (San Paolo, Milano 2000) and *Con o senza Dio* (Città Nuova, Roma 2006).

² Cf. M. KUNDERA, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, New York 1999.

not love dead bodies, not even if the features and measurements are perfect. Attraction, whether desired or unwanted, is fruit of a mystery that makes a body beautiful even beyond its packaging. It does so by means of the breath of the Spirit that hides and reveals at the same time. The body conveys a meaning, and it evokes, like Mona Lisa's smile, a mystery that goes beyond it.

A:

The deciding factor in what brings about satisfactory sexuality is the quality of the interpersonal relationship. In some cases there can be physiological problems that should be discussed with a sexologist, but there is always a need to learn to manage one's own body, as small children learn to control their sphincters and regulate thirst and hunger. We learn to love someone, not by seeking pleasure, but by desiring the good of that person, and the consequence of that is spontaneous joy. On the contrary, when pleasure is sought for its own sake, it stands in the way of true intimate union. Nobody wants to be simply an instrument in satisfying another's passion. The more sexuality is concentrated on the self, the more there is intrinsic tension in the love relationship. Christians, then, model their love on the "law" of Christ who became flesh and willingly gave up his body, and who asked us to do the same: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (*Jn* 13: 34).

2. A world of affections.

G:

If we are able to love and respect others, then we deserve love and respect: "I am loved, therefore I love". Children who do not have an early experience and the security of being loved, find it difficult to grow in humanity. God remains an empty word, or has the face of a severe judge.³

A:

John Paul II said: "In rearing children, mothers have a singularly important role. [...] she gives the child that sense of security and trust without which the child would find it difficult to develop properly its own personal identity and, subsequently, to establish positive and fruitful relationships with others".⁴ This maternal resource is in turn connected to the father-mother relationship, because a husband's love assures his wife of close affection and fidelity, both of which are essential to her as a mother. In this way a circuit is established that joins the human family triad to each other.

G:

Not everyone is born into a situation of balanced affection. There are adverse conditions

³ Cf. E. H. ERIKSON, *Childhood and Society*, New York 1950. S. Acquaviva emphasises this in his comparative essay on *eros*, death and faith experience (S. ACQUAVIVA, *Eros, morte ed esperienza religiosa*, Bari 1990, II, 14-1).

⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Message for Peace 1995, no. 6.

that deeply affect people's capacity to love (discord between their parents, rejection of the child, distorted sexual education...). Indeed, the body and mind have their rules that shun the control of reason, and if they are not respected, they can cause unforeseen harm. We can speak of love while subjugating the other and destroying their mental equilibrium, and we must not think that we can repair the breakdown in sexuality by means of sexuality itself.

A:

When individuals display mental blocks that prevent them from trusting and that cause them to be afraid of being undesirable and of the refusal of sex, they are in need of rehabilitation. This is not impossible, but it needs extra effort, as anyone who has worked with children's trauma will know. It needs dedication that is often heroic and is not always able to achieve the desired effects.

Love is always therapeutic. This can be substantiated by a great number of experiments in family psychotherapy and by couples whose intimate relations depend on the quality of love experienced during the day. Vice versa, incidents of rudeness, lack of attention or offensive judgements can block the body's ability to express love in sexual language.

G:

Human sexuality is a fact of nature and it is an adventure, and through marriage it fulfils a covenant of love and lays the basis for a new society. All peoples, even though in different ways, are aware of its charms. Benedict XVI said clearly: "Marriage and the family are not in fact a chance sociological construct [...]. On the contrary, the question of the right relationship between the man and the woman finds its roots in the essential core of the human being. [...] The human being is created in the image of God, and God himself is love. It is therefore the vocation to love that makes the human person an authentic image of God: man and woman come to resemble God to the extent that they become loving people".⁵

3. Sexuality in the brain

A:

Sexuality and intelligence are generally seen to be opposed to each other, but in fact it is not possible to feel an attraction for someone without having first had some perceptions of that person that stimulate the brain. It is the brain that processes perceptions, expectations, pleasure, fantasy, values, etc.

The flourishing publicity industry is based on these properties as it encourages clients to consume the object of desire. It also uses virtual sex to stimulate the brain so that the body will follow, by making use of the processes of symbolisation. They even put forward psychological and genetic theories to suggest that infidelity improves the quality of relationships.

⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Address to the participants in the Ecclesial Diocesan Convention of Rome, 6 June 2005.

G:

Pornography encourages “mental adultery”⁶ by offering gratification, dreams and sexual experiences that are extremely difficult to accomplish in reality. The dependence that follows calls for larger doses that give greater stimulation to new and more condensed emotions. The arousal does not come from a “you” who is present, but from what it represents in fantasy. The “you” goes into second place and love is emptied of a human sense. If the game takes charge, it is difficult to escape unharmed. (“Whoever loves danger will perish in it” (*Eccles 1: 26*)).

A:

The brain also plays a part in prostitution. Both the prostitute and client do everything possible so that the mind can be led into the illusion that it loves and is loved, even when it is a case of trafficking. That is why, in the world of prostitution, people hide their identity behind catchy nicknames, distinctive clothing and persuasive language that tries to make the imagination fly above the wretchedness of the actions and the surroundings. If the mind were not involved it would be difficult for an honourable person to have sexual relations.

G:

On the other hand, the brain knows how to direct love even when there is no genital sexuality (it has been said that the brain is the sexual organ *par excellence*⁷). As U. Galiberti pointed out, this is why a married couple can remain happily in love with each other even after routine and the slow degradation of their bodies has removed the veil of perfection. They can still feel what has become known as the “orgasm of the heart”, a deep emotional sharing, intense placid joy that hoodwinks the fragility of their bodies.

A:

John Paul II was referring to the role of the brain when he spoke of “adultery of the heart”⁸. He reminded us of Jesus’ words: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a

⁶ When individuals feel respected and loved, it brings out the best in them, and then they can respond positively to another person’s fidelity. That is why it is important to look appreciatively at another person rather than reductively or possessively: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness” (*Mt 6: 22-23*).

⁷ L. ROGERS, *Sesso e cervello*, Torino 2000, p. 42, 166.

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, General Audience, 8 October 1980, nos. 2 & 3: “Adultery committed in the heart is not circumscribed in the limits of the interpersonal relationship which make it possible to determine adultery committed in the body. It is not these limits that decide exclusively and essentially about adultery committed in the heart, but the very nature of lust. It is expressed in this case by a look, that is, by the fact that that man—of whom Christ speaks, for the sake of example—looks lustfully. Adultery in the heart is committed not only because man looks in this way at a woman who is not his wife, but precisely because he looks at a woman in this way. Even if he looked in this way at the woman who is his wife, he could likewise commit adultery in his heart. [...] The lust which, as an interior act, springs from this basis (as we tried to indicate in the preceding analyses) changes the very intentionality of the woman’s existence ‘for’ man. It reduces the riches of the perennial call to the communion of persons, the riches of the deep attractiveness of masculinity and femininity, to mere satisfaction of the sexual need of the body (the concept of ‘instinct’ seems to be linked more closely with this). As a result of this reduction, the person (in this case, the woman) becomes for the other person (the man) mainly the object of the potential satisfaction of his own sexual need. In this way, that mutual ‘for’ is distorted, losing its character of communion of persons in favor of the utilitarian function. A man who looks in this way, as

woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (*Mt* 5: 28). This refers to those who may not be actually cheating on their spouse, but in their mind’s eye they are in sexual intimacy with somebody else. The brain plays a major role in infidelity in the way it deflects a spouse’s attention towards taking new positions. This is affirmed by couples that are having difficulties because he or she has established a mutual understanding with a colleague that is gradually becoming romantic and sexual. An agreement of minds precedes the attraction of lovers. That is why it is good for communication between couples to continue at all levels and beyond that of body and affection, and to bring minds, plans and souls into harmony.

G:

On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that stimuli received from the environment can bring about structural changes in various areas of the brain, and hence on the objectives and values that are followed throughout a person’s life. It is therefore possible to nourish altruistic love, and this is good for love. On the other hand, we know the consequences of the ideas about humankind that circulated in pre-Nazi days: “The human body contains enough fat to produce seven bars of soap, enough iron to produce a medium-sized nail, enough phosphorus for two thousand matches, and enough sulphur to get rid of your fleas”.

A:

As the brain can be trained if effort is applied (and academic studies testify to this), so too can sexuality be educated, guided and controlled, but this requires care and appropriate handling. We should not withhold ourselves from delighting and suffering with the person we love, but we have the ability to set a direction for our thoughts and our lives. We can continue the journey without absolute guarantees, yet we know that it is possible, as it was possible in the Ulysses myth, to resist the enticing sirens.

4. A language for communication

G:

In studies on intimacy, they emphasise the need for a more refined quality of communication.⁹ The body has various forms of language: holding hands expresses alliance, mutual understanding and promise; a kiss or a caress expresses the self-giving of a person; a glance, smile, embrace, posture with respect to others and dancing express a specific outlook on life. Older couples will find that the loss of some physical abilities can be well compensated by affectionate behaviour. This is asserted by those who refuse

Matthew 5:27-28 indicates, uses the woman, her femininity, to satisfy his own instinct. Although he does not do so with an exterior act, he has already assumed this attitude deep down, inwardly deciding in this way with regard to a given woman. This is what adultery committed in the heart consists of. Man can commit this adultery in the heart also with regard to his own wife, if he treats her only as an object to satisfy instinct” [English translation from: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2tb42.htm>].

⁹ See L. WYNNE & A. WYNNE, “The Quest for Intimacy”, in *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 12 [1986], 383-394.

to regard themselves or be regarded by others as “old” with a body that is decrepit and dependent on medication. They claim their affective vitality to an advanced age.¹⁰

A:

By communicating in different ways as we go through life, we regenerate ourselves and others over time. Careful attention is needed in order to adjust different languages to different situations. They are all valid because they bear a code that only the couple can decipher: a wink, caress, note, email, SMS text message, a simple glance... The couple grow in learning to anticipate, to ask, to wait and to give at the opportune moment. Two people who are in love do not imitate. They create with four hands a unique work of art, and they carve out reciprocal love as artists dedicate themselves to their work.

G:

Although they usually speak to each other with normal everyday language, those who love each other also know how to communicate with their souls, because they are connected over distance. This is how it has been for countless couples whose bonds have triumphed over war, migration, imprisonment and forced separation. This often happens in life when a person makes contact with the thoughts of another, even when there has been no explicit communication.

A:

Blessed Maria Corsini wrote to her husband Luigi Beltrame Quattrocchi: “My love, do you not feel my soul wafting gently around you, caressing your face, your forehead, your eyes and your mouth, speaking softly into your ear?... And today, precisely today, you assure me that you always feel my spirit wafting around you, affectionate and endearing. Do you see, my love, what a beautiful coincidence this is?”¹¹

Distance and the absence of physical contact can extinguish fragile bonds, but it reinforces those that are strong and makes them indestructible. Dante and Beatrice are the most spectacular literary examples of union beyond death, even though they had no intimate relationship.

5. For love and for fun

G:

Communicating by means of the body is an experience that continues our childhood games throughout our existence, while perfecting our sensory and emotional perceptions. Contemporary culture questions the primacy of reason and has legitimised the recreational dimension of sexuality. This has come to be seen as happy and theatrical, an entertainment that involves the interaction of both parties, involvement, hide and seek,

¹⁰ “Physical contact through embracing and caressing is more important than the sexual act, and in older couples the quality becomes more important than the quantity” (W. PASINI, *La vita a due. La coppia a venti, quaranta e sessant'anni*, Milano 2007, 248).

¹¹ Cf. A. DANESE & G. P. DI NICOLA, *Un'aureola per due*, Torino 2003.

peaceful games and fighting (*Eros* and *Thanatos*). Adults continue to play in this way, temporarily abandoning their self-control and the categorical imperative, liberating their fantasy and emptying their minds.

A:

Sexuality is one of the pleasures of the senses, like food, music and perfume, but it possesses a special power to place two people in contact with each other, gently “constrained” to be in harmony, to take each other into account and to wait for agreement. They need to have learned to play as children, but they also have to know how to call the shots in the game. If not, it can get out of hand and become a drama or a tragedy. Nobody wants to be reduced to a plaything, a “doll” to be cuddled and then thrown aside and left forgotten in some corner of the house. The game implies acceptance and gift if it is to be a source of joy, because no person must be used as a means of entertainment.

G:

It would be wrong to forget the relational and responsible significance of sexuality,¹² but without the capacity to abandon oneself, to lose control like children, to be nude before the other, to forget the barriers that separate two beings, to leave each other and re-embrace each other thousands of times, it cannot exercise its beneficial effect. Adults need to reawaken the child within them from time to time, to free themselves from the deadwood of bad thoughts and from worries, and to let the world of anxieties disappear for a moment. In this, well directed sexuality has the magical power to regenerate people: “Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure”.¹³

6. The golden rule (*The ethical-anthropological dimension*).

A:

Widespread ignorance about the art of loving can be seen in interviews with adolescents: “For me, love is possessing the other person and making them totally mine”; “To love is to become the same and to do everything together”; “To love is to be in agreement, to be happy, to feel filled with the love of the other person”; “I did not know that there was a connection between sex and love”.¹⁴ Ingmar Bergman had a character in one of his films say: “The truth is that they didn’t teach us how to love at university”. To love is an art, and if it is not learned within the family, beginning from the mother’s womb, it is difficult to recuperate it. It needs specialists who know how to awaken love and the therapeutic effects it has on the deepest wounds.

¹² On the topic of responsibility, see the section on the importance of the human sense of sexuality coming before preventive action: R. BURGGRAEVE, “From responsible to meaningful sexuality”, in J. F. KEENAN (ed.), *Catholics Ethicists on HIV/AIDS Prevention*, New York-London 2000, pp. 303-316.

¹³ “Hence the acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honourable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude” [SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, 49]; “Sexuality is a source of joy and pleasure” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2362)

¹⁴ Interviews reported in: M. & R. SCOTTO, *Sessualità tenerezza*, Roma 2009, p. 9.

G:

If, at the level of human maturity, there is no adjustment in the dimensions of sexuality (eroticism), of love (sentiments), of covenant (moral correctness) and of fertility, it is difficult to live happily as a couple. We understand this if we read a well-known declaration by a Greek orator in the 4th century: “ Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households”.¹⁵ The “you” here is dismembered, and therefore so is love.

A:

As a general rule, a distinction is made between sexual relations as a source of pleasure, and gift as an ethical moment. The positive dimension of sexuality is crushed between a pansexual culture and a traditional culture which ties it to morality.¹⁶ Sexuality also comes within the economy of gift. We love if our aim is the welfare of the other and we become a source of shared joy for him/her. Moreover, the value of body language is not in the gestures themselves, but in their ability to reach the heart of the other person. Appreciation of a gift is not simply based on the intention of the giver and even less on the gift itself, but on how the other receives it and reciprocates it. It is reciprocation that seals the human-divine character of sexuality.

7. The Spirit in the body

G:

It is always possible to discover a spark of humanity in lovemaking and an implicit invitation to a “spiritual” thrust (or, as Lévinas would say, “enter into the dynamics of gift”¹⁷). That which pertains to sexual attraction is not a preamble to marital relations, as if they lay elsewhere, but is a constitutive element of interpersonal communication. The actions that take place in a union, precisely because they aim at the greatest intimacy and try to remove the barriers that stand in the way of coming together, are not to be seen only as techniques aimed at achieving the erotic objective. They are full of potential relational meaning, and convey an implicit invitation to let go of selfishness and to find harmony.

G:

Current studies on sexuality emphasise the different possible intentions in a relationship with another, a training ground of progressive learning.¹⁸ (Xavier Lacroix distinguishes

¹⁵ PSEUDO-DEMOSTHENES, *Against Neaira*, 122.

¹⁶ For the positive dimension of sexuality see: M. POCHE, *Sessualità in positivo*, Roma 1991. We can sometimes go to the other extreme and idolise eroticism which in itself lies in the aesthetic and not in the ethical sphere. E. Fuchs speaks of the spiritual value of eroticism (cf E. FUCHS, *Le desir et la tendresse*, Genève 1982, 189).

¹⁷ E. LÉVINAS, *Textes messianiques, Difficile liberté*, Paris, 1976, 87.

¹⁸ H. Van Lier distinguishes at least 5 different interacting intentions that have come down to us with more or less conscious traces of primitive man and woman: the instrumental intention, or sexuality intended for reproduction (a dominant but not exclusive position in Christian thought, at least until Pius XI); sexuality intended for the well-being of the body in sexual union; hedonistic love (of which Wilhelm Reich is the

four purposes. These are qualitatively different, but in reality, in the phenomenology of lovemaking processes, there are crossroads and intrinsic permanence in their interaction.¹⁹). Relationships are the testing ground of the human and spiritual essence of two people, of their ability to make trust between them possible and to attract positive backing from society and from God whose blessing is felt to be present when the couple are united in the sacrament of matrimony.²⁰ Spiritual values would have no hold if they did not involve the emotional sphere and the body. The body experiences the force of being transcended and losing itself in the other and finding itself again, thus learning about the dynamics of faith.

G:

For example, a caress is not an attempt to take possession and to put one's hands on another (The title of a film by Rosi, "Hands on the City", suggests the double function of a protective and groping hand). It is a sign of reverence for the body and a reciprocal transmission of warmth. It is an attempt to reach the other while being fully aware that the person of the other cannot be possessed.

A:

"It is a search that does not know what it is looking for; there is no specific object, no project or plan; it is to stroll freely on the body-landscape, but this landscape extends to a face; it is inhabited by someone I cannot see, who is too close to be seen, that I try to reach through his/her hidden face, through his/her flesh, all remaining so close and so dark".²¹

maximum expression); the cosmic intention, as participation in the universal forces of life, of male and female energy; the sacred intention which has interpreted sexuality since ancient times, as a mystery, *fascinans et tremendum*, in contact with the divine, a power that goes beyond the person who possesses it, that extols its capabilities and allows for participation in a better life; the orgiastic intention which tries to overcome individualistic limitations and recover union-fusion, according to the tradition of the ancient bacchanals and saturnalias or the mediaeval sabbats. As Bataille observed, in eroticism of this kind, there is a form of licentiousness towards all that is fixed, regular and definite (cf. H. VAN LIER, *L'intention sexuelle*, Tournai 1968).¹⁹ Xavier Lacroix speaks of "operative" love ("lovemaking"), which is essentially functional, especially in the sexuality of youth. If it is mainly erotic, sexuality concentrates on games of desire and pleasure. It is not a question of pure selfishness because it has the relational component of learning about the experience of unity, between distance and its denial, modesty and shamelessness, violence and respect, beauty and obscenity. Play, as an experience of free giving, expresses the need to free oneself from the seriousness of reality (animals are always serious) and to detach oneself from needs (play has no "use") and become children again. The third level deals with emotions and tends to legitimise any kind of relationship. At this level there is an experience of tenderness, when the other seems to protect, not only a body, but the one who has awakened the concern of the heart. In itself taken to be an absolute value, even tenderness has its ambivalence. It can be devoid of ethicality, an escape from loneliness, a dream of merging, a delighting and basking in one's childhood. It is possible to experience tenderness and not take on a commitment. In a marriage agreement, love becomes a covenant. In all 4 levels, according to Lacroix, a person can experience interpersonal relations. It is always a case of two people reaching out to each other, not two organisms (cf. X. LACROIX, "Amour, sexualité, alliance", in *Theophilyon*, 2 (1997), pp., 35-40; see also IDEM, *Les mirages de l'amour*, Paris 1997).

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Who are the two or three who gather in the name of Christ with the Lord in their midst? By three does he not mean husband, wife, and child? A wife is united with her husband by God" (CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromateis* III, 10, 68, 1)

²¹ X. LACROIX, *op. cit.*, 43.

G:

Likewise, an embrace encloses the other person with arms open to welcome and closed to narrow the distance. When there is consensual abandon, an embrace expresses mutual affection. Each is wrapped in the other, recalling gestures and desires from childhood. A kiss desires to reach the intimate essence of the other. It is there that the words it reveals are expressed, and where the soul surfaces to the opening of the body. “Rather than consuming, here it is a case of drinking, as from a chalice. After the word, there is a return to the source of the word. It is not destruction but veneration. In the various cultures, a kiss signifies respect, as in kissing the altar in the liturgy. It can also mean communion, the kiss of peace, for example... To abandon oneself to a kiss is to decline to be closed up, to refuse to be a prisoner in your own skin, to cross over to the other, to know his/her taste, to draw close to his/her substance”.²²

A:

The consensual conjugal act is also reciprocal hospitality, wanting to inhabit the other and to welcome him/her to oneself (in Italian and French the word for guest and host is the same). One possesses the other in the attractive game of being welcomed and of welcoming, of enwrapping and of being enwrapped. It is the same for all expressions of physical love, but the reaction of the other person is always decisive. A caress would be an irreverent abrasion if the other person did not enjoy it. The other person is the litmus test of the quality of love. One can help and be a bother, communicate and encroach, give and take possession, embrace affectionately and hem in, use violence and request hospitality.

G:

The spiritual dimension of sexuality is seen in the joy of being able to give happiness and in the gratitude that arises spontaneously for each act of love given and received. In the eyes of faith this gratitude is lifted up to the source of this freely given gift, an infinitely wide expanse that raises up the potential of men and women and guarantees their unity (*Gratia non destruit naturam sed perficit*). The self and the “you” do not drown each other out. They show that each one recognises that love comes from above, that it is not self-referential, and that it transcends the limitations of created beings. The Bible is explicit about this (“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” *Gen 1: 27*). God created, in his image, two separate people and he united them because he wanted to see himself reflected in their love, because God too is love among three equal and distinct Persons.

A:

Jesus Christ was made flesh in the mystery of the Incarnation. Flesh is something that can be eaten. Metaphorically speaking, we could say that Christian spouses give themselves to each other, and in their intimate relations, they allow themselves to be “eaten”. D. M. Turoldo wrote with regard to the Eucharist: “Every Eucharist in every nation is when people feed from divinity in order to escape from loneliness, dispersion and death... it is

²² *Ibid.*

part of *eros*, the mysterious power of love of all humanity. The lover says to the beloved: 'I love you so much I want to eat you'. That which is not possible for human love is possible for God's love".²³

B. Seekers of life

1. The fragility of human love

G:

Experience teaches us that a significant number of love relationships fail because they have too many expectations that are often fed by romantic films where the lover is prince charming and the beloved is a warm-hearted angel. When they place all their hopes for happiness in sex, they are asking human love to give something that it cannot provide, and so there is a boomerang effect. Benedict XVI wrote that: "counterfeit divinisation of *eros* actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it. Indeed, the prostitutes in the temple, who had to bestow this divine intoxication, were not treated as human beings and persons, but simply used as a means [...] *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns".²⁴

A:

Sexuality is not automatically and always something good. It lies at the intersection between strength and sensation, drive and desire, ancient and sublime, paradise and hell. It is characterised by dramatic risk which idealistic notions tend to obscure. "Because of its kinship with the dark side, it cannot but offer its weak side to that which in theological terms is called sin: idolatry, consent to slavery, the denial of otherness".²⁵ ("If sexuality does not become an occasion for continuous growth in love, it will end up losing its significance and newness, and descend into boredom and routine"²⁶). The intrinsic limit to sexuality is simply an invitation not to absolutise it, to refrain from thinking that sex or living beings can be the point of arrival of the search, that it could satisfy a thirst for the infinite. The engine that moves love lies elsewhere.

Self-esteem

G:

²³ D. M. TUROLDO, *Neanche Dio può stare solo*, Torino 1992, 22.

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 4.

²⁵ X. LACROIX, *op. cit.*, 47; "To give is the first action of the spiritual life" (E. LÉVINAS, in *Textes messianiques, Difficile liberté*, Paris 1976, 87).

²⁶ M. & R. SCOTTO, *Sessualità tenerezza*, *op. cit.*, p. 16. The authors pointed out 5 important conditions for well-being for each person and each couple: dream, enjoy and suffer together (in agreement and as partners); psycho-physical health (worries and depression damage love); adequate space (without intrusive prying, interfering parents, ever-present children...); without hurry (anxiety is harmful); smile (enhance free time together with activities like storytelling, watching a film, playing a game, going for a walk, listening to music...).

We never finish learning the language of love, sometimes through mistakes and failings. Those who teach have the special task of strengthening people's self-esteem as this is the best defence against the temptation to "sell yourself" (surrendering your dignity in your quest for success, adapting to fashions, displaying your body on your mobile phone or on *You Tube*). Self-esteem is a basic condition for a dignified relationship that will prevent others from controlling one's life and reducing one to slavery.

Faith is a decisive element in self-esteem. It gives us the assurance that we are freely loved, always and no matter what, whether we are beautiful or otherwise, healthy or ill, poor or wealthy, virtuous or in sin. On this basis, we distance ourselves from the temptations to sell ourselves, to see relationships in terms of advantages (where reciprocation means to "invest" and insure oneself against risk and to "disinvest" if the accounts give no return), to forsake our values and to fall into the traps that spoil loving relationships.

Concern for the other

True love is able to understand and anticipate the needs of the other person, and to bow to the mystery that a body evokes and to admire its beauty. Allure reinforces the *golden rule* that is the foundation of human relational ethics: "do to others as you would have them do to you" (cf. *Mt 7: 12*). As everyone wants to be loved, this universal aspiration is the point of departure for the reciprocation of gift.

However, the other person is not God and cannot be allowed to control your life and to suffocate your soul and vocation. More generally, human love is aware of mutual limitations. "It is very important to manage to admit that we shall never completely satisfy our partner and that no man or woman will ever be enough for us".²⁷ We often become aware of this when disappointments, ingratitude and betrayals take over and we are obliged to take the ambivalence of human feelings into account. These hurtful episodes can be points of departure for a more mature and generous love because they teach us not to lean on the other to the extent of delegating to him/her our very soul.

G:

Above all, the other person should not have to suppress the vocation that each one receives at birth as a child of God and that comes directly from the Creator and from the Church through Baptism. In order to build up a successful relationship, including from the sexual point of view, it is good to learn about and respect the talents of the other person and to appreciate them, and to be nourished by the sources of love by strengthening our interior, cultural and spiritual life in order to have something to give the other (*Nemo dat quod non habet*). For the most part, it is at home among brothers and sisters and between spouses that we learn to be "subject to one another out of reverence

²⁷ W. PASINI, *La vita a due. La coppia a venti, quaranta e sessant'anni*, op. cit., p. 96.

for Christ”, as Saint Paul says in Ephesians 5: 21.²⁸ It is love, rather than equal rights, that asks us to place ourselves at the service of the other person’s happiness, with all the shades of affection that this implies.

2. The ecology of sexuality

A:

Sexuality requires vigilant care in preserving the limpidity of love so that words and gestures may preserve their meaning and flavour and not descend into tedium. Is it perhaps true today that there is a rejection of the consumer vision, even by sex therapists? Is there not a conviction that abstinence is necessary in order to recharge the body, mind and soul (we think here of footballers’ retreats)? It is an awareness that does not only arise for moral reasons, but from the fact that the consumer use of love causes harm to love.

G: The same thing applies to all of our drives. It is not possible to eat everything and always, or to be fired up by everyone we meet... Far too often, an engaged couple omit to spend time together in conversation and in getting to know each other. Then, when the thousands of daily chores prevent this from happening, they grieve for the opportunities that were missed, the conversations and plans never realised, and the sunsets never observed in contemplation. The fortunate engaged couples are those who avoid being distracted and who make an effort to get to know each other. They are making sure that they are making the right choice, searching for the most expressive language, and listening to God’s plan for each of them.

A.

It is usual for engaged couples to wonder if their love will stand up to the wear and tear of time. They do not always recognise feelings not of their making because these are connected to the objective structure of bodies. They have to learn to read these feelings and recognise the direction in which they are pointing. Feelings and consent are both necessary. Plato in his time identified love with consent. Yet, consent alone is not enough. Most children who were abused comply because of emotional dependence. Everyone knows that paedophilia is based on coerced compliance. It is also necessary to nourish ecological respect for the rules nature has given us.

G:

Self-control and sacrifice do not automatically imply repression. It is a characteristic of human beings to be able to defer pleasure. Animals collect fruit and eat, while human beings learn to plant, work the land and wait. Similarly, in music the pauses and silences

²⁸ John Paul II commented on this: “In relation to the ‘old’ this is evidently something ‘new’: it is an innovation of the Gospel. [...] However, the awareness that in marriage there is mutual ‘subjection of the spouses out of reverence for Christ’, and not just that of the wife to the husband, must gradually establish itself in hearts, consciences, behaviour and customs. This is a call which from that time onwards, does not cease to challenge succeeding generations; it is a call which people have to accept ever anew” (JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 24).

are indispensable for the phrasing and melody. To abstain temporarily from sexual activity is something like this too. Periods of waiting, of postponement and sacrifice are good for sexual life just like abstinence is salutary for a healthy diet. They respond to the natural rhythms of life (menstruation, pregnancy, frigidity, impotence, unsuitable period of time, absence of desire, respect for tiredness and rest...) and they safeguard love from temptations to take possession.

A:

The demand for an *ecology of sexuality* arises from revulsion towards what Sorokin called “pansexuality”.²⁹ Connected to this is the rethinking about chastity which is beautiful love, capable of sacrifice in order to tune one’s rhythm with that of the other, in proximity and from a distance, and to optimise one’s energies with quality. This also goes for those who choose some primary objectives like sport, music, study, religion, etc. In other words, those who love can decide to sacrifice stable love and the exercise of sexual activity in order to dedicate their energies to other objectives regarded as primary, and where, in devoting themselves to these, the other person could not be truly and constantly loved. This is how it was for Michelangelo. When asked why he did not marry, he responded: “Because I have this art which is more than a wife for me”.³⁰

G:

Chastity, if it is not selfish attachment to one’s own plans, is not a relic from the past. It reflects a clear truth: we are born and die alone. Two people, even when they love each other, are always two people. The intimate union of bodies cannot be indistinguishable merging. A relationship reaches maturity if both are capable of accepting this essential difference. The deferring of pleasure reaffirms this distance that emphasises the primacy of God. The Lebanese philosopher René Habachi wrote: “To love means to marry a person’s vocational assets”. Simone Weil specified further: “In perfect friendship [...] both friends fully agree to be two distinct creatures. It is only with God that a person has the right to desire to be directly united”.³¹

A:

The purifying function of sacrifice cannot be taught by books or at school. It can be perceived in the pure gaze of a child, of a consecrated person, of a chaste married couple. The scent of its perfume has to reach you. However, it can happen that young people who abstain from pre-marital sexual relations are made fun of, and they begin to think that they are affected by a taboo. When we live in a culture that recommends that we should not rein in our drives, that we should liberate the self in order to avoid frustrations and discomfort, we can understand the words of Benedict XVI: “Love is not self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it

²⁹ Cf. P. A. SOROKIN, *The Ways and Power of Love*, Boston 1954.

³⁰ He declared that he had renounced marriage in order to devote himself to art which was his idol and monarch. To anyone who scolded him for this, he replied wittily, “I have too much of a wife in this art which causes me no end of suffering. My children will be the works that I leave behind me”.

³¹ S. WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, introduction et notes de J.-M. Perrin, o.p., Paris 1949, préface de J.-M. Perrin, Fayard 1966, 203.

becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice”.³²

To delay gratification for the sake of love is not a “no” but a “yes” to a life of relationship. Benedict XVI wrote that: “*eros* tends to rise ‘in ecstasy’ towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing”.³³

3. A “pure diamond”

G:

There are plenty of young men and women capable of loving and of devoting their time, talents and lives to others. This is a very beautiful thing. “Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light” (*Lk* 11: 34). Whatever path they choose to take, they know that they will succeed if they are able to give their lives to it (“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it”, *Lk* 9: 24). They are attracted by the transparency of love, like by a pure diamond or by a clear morning sky seen from a mountaintop. It is of little importance whether they choose the path of marriage, religious life or priesthood: “When love beckons to you, follow it, though its ways are hard and steep”.³⁴ Every choice in life requires total self-giving. Can we love without body language? No. Can we live without sexual intimacy? Yes. This has been demonstrated by the great women and men in history who formed real families through love for Christ: Mother Teresa, Ignatius of Loyola, Chiara Lubich: “The love that seemed to command them was transformed into mystical love that left aside sexual drives. It was always for love, neither deeper nor weaker, but simply different”.³⁵

A:

Can you love your spouse intimately and preserve your chastity? The path of love may wind along tortuous ways, but it always aims for the heights that are connected to God. There is a link between love and chastity that makes beauty sacred, that does not allow it to be violated but that protects it, like a precious object that we do not want to see damaged by dust, consumed by intrusive prying or desecrated by possessive hands. Simone Weil wrote: “The purity of demonstrations of affection depends entirely on the respect shown to the person who is loved [...] Beauty is the friend of modesty [...] sexuality and aesthetics. Sexual desire reaches the beautiful at the moment in which modesty intervenes (for example, a painting by Leonardo da Vinci: a desirable and sacred object)”.³⁶

Even when love is directed towards one individual, true love touches the universal.

³² BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 6.

³³ *Ibid.* no. 5.

³⁴ K. GIBRAN, *The Prophet*, Hertfordshire UK, p. 5.

³⁵ G. ABRAHAM, *Un amore tutto nuovo. Innamorati dopo i quarant'anni*, Milano 1995, pp. 7-8.

³⁶ Cf. S. WEIL, *Sur Freud*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1988, I, 279; see also G.P. DI NICOLA & A. DANESE, *Simone Weil, Abitare la contraddizione*, Roma 1991, 133-142.

Simone Weil understood this well, even though she did not have a religious upbringing. “Friendship consists in loving a human being as if one wanted to be able to love individually each of those who make up the human race. As a geometer studies a particular illustration in order to deduce the universal properties of the triangle, in the same way, the one who knows how to love directs a universal love towards a particular human being”.³⁷

A:

Michel Pochet said: “I think that there are two dimensions of love that strongly attract people, and they are “absolute” love and “universal” love. God is capable of absolute love, which is to love each person as if they were unique. However, at the same time, He does this with everyone [...] God’s love is a love that is simultaneously absolute and universal in the fullest sense. I have the impression that the love that human beings desire is in the image of these two dimensions. On the one hand it is absolute love, the possibility of loving with all of one’s heart, mind and strength forever, faithfully, a man or woman in marriage [...] However, the human heart also has the desire to be all things, to take everything in, to love everyone [...] otherwise it would not be a truly universal love [...] It is not possible to do both simultaneously [...] Human beings feel called in a special way to one or the other path [...] It is a loss for all of us, because we would like to love everyone absolutely, but this is not possible. We all have to understand which call we have with regard to these two possibilities”.³⁸

³⁷ S. WEIL, *Attente de Dieu*, op. cit., 205.

³⁸ E. CAMBON, “Verginità e bellezza, intervista a Michel Pochet”, in *Gen's*, 4/5 (1996), pp. 117-118.