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Sexuality in Marriage

James H. Van der Veldt, O.F.M.

Marriage is an existential relationship. The more such a relationship touches the very existence of a person, the more fundamental it is. The most basic relationship is between God and man. In the natural sphere, marriage is the principal bond between human beings because it is the most intimately shared experience possible.

The concepts of the meaning and other aspects of marriage have varied greatly in different periods of history and are still different in different cultures and religions. What is correct among the Moslems may be held as incorrect among other people. Marriage between brother and sister which is forbidden in most cultures and

times, was not only allowed but prescribed in some of the dynasties of old Egypt; Cleopatra was married to her brother, Ptolemy.

The traditional view as to why people marry has been, for a long time, that the principal motive for people to marry is the desire to have legitimate offspring and to found a family. Other motives have also been recognized, such as the satisfaction of sexual needs, the wish to strengthen the bonds between families or countries, as happened previously in royal families, the wish to safeguard the financial interests of families. Another motive is that woman is the helpmate of man, not only in the education of children,

but also in a material sense, such as doing the cooking and other housework; in some primitive societies women do most of the manual work also outside the house.

The idea of marriage being primarily an institution for the procreation of children was for centuries the accepted view. But the question has been raised if this idea is also uppermost in the minds of the couple who marry. Since the beginning of the present century, an increasing number of authors inside and outside of the Catholic Church have challenged the idea that marriage is primarily an institution destined to serve the procreation of offspring, however important this function may be. These authors have adopted a more psychological approach, which is called the personalist view.¹

For centuries the approach to marriage in the Church was moralistic and legalistic, because marriage problems were chiefly handled by moral theologians and canonists. The experts in these areas were, and are, mainly concerned with the prerequisites of the marriage contract, the conditions of free marital consent, the impediments of matrimony, the qualities of marriage, such as its indissolubility, the duties and rights of the married couple, and so on. The moral-legalistic approach to marriage is undoubtedly necessary, but personalists and phenomenologists believe that it sometimes lacks insight in the psychology of conjugal love.

The personalists claim to restore marital love to its proper place. They maintain that marriage and the marital act have a meaning as well as a value in themselves, apart from other considerations, like the procreation of children. The sexual act of marriage is not only a biological function, but is in the first

place the realization of a life — communion between husband and wife. These two marry, because they wish to share one another's life in the most intimate communication, namely, as a two-in-one unity. This interpersonal relationship is a value in itself, and is intended as such by the Creator.

What does the existential communion of husband and wife entail? Ideally, it entails genuine affection, friendship, and sympathy. It encompasses empathy, that is to say, the attitude whereby either of the spouses instinctively apprehends how the other feels and thinks; this capacity grows stronger, the longer a marriage lasts. The two-in-one unity implicates faithfulness for life. The communion of mutual love implies surrender to one another, which finds its culmination as well as consummation in sexual intercourse. To obtain perfect consummation, psychologists say that the partners should be suitably fit for one another; this means not only physical but also psychological adjustment. Psychologists insist that the marital act is an act of wholesome humanized eros which implies a certain abandon that sets aside momentarily ulterior considerations. The marriage partners are aware that the objective purpose of the marital act is the procreation of offspring, but this awareness is not reflexive during the act. Marital love is more than the means for obtaining that end.

With regard to the problem of the ends of marriage, H. Doms maintained, against the traditional view, that the primary purpose of marriage is the personal and mutual completion of husband and wife and that the procreation of children is the secondary purpose. Trying to get around the controversial issue of the ends of mar-

riage, E. Boissard,² instead of using the terms primary and secondary ends, has suggested the use of the words immediate and mediate ends, the former being the conjugal love and mutual support of the spouses, the latter being the procreation and education of the children. Those who adhere to the personalist view of marriage readily admit that the bond between the marital act and procreation is so intimate that persons who decide to marry implicitly accept also potential parenthood, and that marriage is incomplete if they decline it.

The description of marriage in its ideal form, as outlined above, makes it clear that marriage imposes a real task upon the partners, even apart from the upbringing of offspring. At the marriage ceremony the newlyweds accept the task of realizing in their lives the two-in-one communion of love, support, and help. The secret of a happy and lasting marriage consists in the acceptance and realization of this task. It implies that marriage is a vocation, a state of life. In the fulfillment of the marital task to achieve ever more the two-in-one unity of the spouses consists for them the way to perfection.³ Thus Pope Pius XI said, "Marriage is a way of mutual spiritual perfection."⁴ Hence not only the religious life but marriage, too, is a way of perfection. The very fact that marriage has been raised to the dignity of a sacrament indicated a radical change in the meaning of marriage.

The question has been asked which vocation is of greater value, the religious or the marital vocation. And the answer was often in favor of the former. However, such a question is not unlike the famous medieval problem that stirred up so much controversy and sometimes acrimony, namely, which human faculty is more

important, the intellect or the will. The answer to the present question depends greatly on the circumstances. A housewife who takes good care of difficult husband and a large family seems at least as admirable as a nun who spends her days in prayer, in the seclusion and protection of her convent. One might also mention the fact that marriage is a sacrament and the religious life, apart from the priesthood, is not.

The concept of marriage as a mutually lived experience of love was never entirely lost sight of in the history of the Church. It is expressed in the second chapter of Genesis and in the New Testament. Our Lord said, "A man shall leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." (Mt. 19:5). St. Paul expressed the same idea (Eph. Ch. 5).

While in the course of history the personalist view of marriage lost ground, in modern society the personal, psychological and sexual aspects of the marital relationship have gained more prominence. It could be expected that the recent emphasis on the meaning of marriage as being in the first place an interpersonal life-union of the spouses would meet with opposition. A number of Catholic authors hold that the traditional view of the procreation of children being the primary purpose of marriage remains the teaching of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council, in its Constitution on the Church in the modern world, devoted an entire chapter to "Fostering the nobility of Marriage and Family." The Council deals extensively with conjugal love. Here are a few excerpts:

"A man and a woman, who by their compact of conjugal love are no longer two, but one flesh (Mt. 19:6), render mutual help and service to each other through an intimate union of their persons and of their actions. Through this union they experience the meaning of their oneness and attain to it with growing perfection day by day."

"This love is uniquely expressed and perfected in the special area of marriage. The actions within marriage by which the couples are united intimately and chastely are noble and worthy ones."

"Marriage to be sure is not instituted solely for procreation. . . . Therefore, marriage persists as a whole manner and communion of life, and maintains its value and indissolubility even when, despite the often intense desire of the couple, offspring are lacking."

The council adds: "Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and education of children."

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