

Dancing towards the future with immense hope: love and life that is beautiful, good and true

Introduction

In this study day on being human I was asked to tackle the ethics of sexuality and gender.

Very word gender is going to raise difficult issues never mind sexuality and ethics.

A parallel with some of the problems surrounding the 2015 synod of the family: we could get overlaid with the problems and never get to see the beauty of what we are and what we are doing.

Ethics is about the good and the beautiful and the true not just about rules and pointing out when they are broken.

So my title is: ‘Dancing towards the future with immense hope’: this is a quote from Pope Francis *Amoris Laetitia* and it refers to personal relationships in marriage and family life – ethics of sexuality and gender takes place in a specific context.

- Dancing: we know what are the right steps and the moves that will make us lose marks, moves that mean we are not in fact dancing the dance – like the rich young man who wants eternal life we do know the rules
- To talk about the ethics of sexuality and gender we need to know the rules, but also we need to know what is behind the rules, we need to know how to practice and this means what virtues we need, and we need to know the right attitude – and the context – being human is about the call to holiness, in ourselves and in our relationships
- Called to love and life that is beautiful, good and true – and holy
- We know there are problems: the woman at the well in St John’s gospel reminds us that life is complicated and often messy; but we also know what to aim at; we know it is not just aspiration because people do form good, beautiful and true and lasting relationships and do it well. So as you can see, I want to take this discussion on the ethics of sexuality and gender in the context of hope and of joy and of holiness.
- If you think that this somehow cuts people who are not solid Catholics out of the equation then think perhaps: most people do want to belong, they want to live authentic lives with integrity, they do want to get their relationships right, they struggle with hurt and with hurting others. Above all people need hope and I think that what the Church offers does make sense to all people of good will because it is responding to some of our deepest needs as human beings.

How I am going to approach this:

First building on the first talk: we may want to ask, why does the body and what we do ‘with’ the body matter? In particular why does the Church appear to be obsessed with sexual ethics?

Second we will look at sexual ethics in terms of attitudes to do with the individual person – my own attitudes to me - and attitudes to do with the person in relationship – my attitudes to others.

Third we will look at marriage where the active expression of sex properly belongs.

To ground some of this discussion I want to use two ideas in particular from Pope John Paul’s *Theology of the Body*, the ideas of *solitudo* and *communio*.

First: before the synod on the family Pope Francis made a comment that theologians seemed over-preoccupied with sexual ethics. His point was not that sexual ethics did not matter, rather it always gets the headlines: ‘sex sells’. Because of this the very important subjects that

theologians also talk about – our relationship with the planet, justice in the world, Catholic Social Teaching – are left in the shadows.

- However one significant thing to think about is that for the Church sexuality and sexual behaviour are not just private matters. In current secular thinking sexual acts are entirely private and only become a matter of ethics if someone complains, is exploited, hurt or does not consent. People should not comment on how other people live their lives because that is up to them.
- For the Church sexuality and sexual behaviour always matter because they are about being human, about the dignity and respect we have for ourselves and for others. This is why it is entirely appropriate and indeed necessary for the ethics of sexuality to be a part of a study day on being human.
- Sexual ethics concern not just rules but also attitudes - to myself and to others. Think the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus reminds us that it is not only what we do but also what we carry in the privacy of our hearts.
- Nevertheless one very real problem that the Church has to face is the charge of hypocrisy. Child abuse. There is no getting away from this. The scandals in the Church and the real damage done to people, the blight inflicted on people's lives cannot be swept away.

So, why does the body matter? Why be concerned about sexuality?

THIS SECTION DEPENDS ON WHAT FR SIMON HAS SAID

Consider holiness and the spiritual life: is the body just a prison or a shell and the soul is the spiritual aspect of us that longs for liberation from this thing that weighs us down, that is the source of temptation, that causes all the problems?

- Manichaeism and gnostic thinking, where the material is not to be trusted

Instead: beauty, good and truth of the whole human being - Desert fathers: the body as a field to cultivate; the body bears the greater burden

- Resurrection of the body

The body matters, and so **second** I want to draw attention to Pope John Paul's *Theology of the Body*. A note of caution: it is a mistake to think that the *Theology of the Body* is just about the body – this would be as problematic as thinking that the human person is only spiritual, or only a centre of consciousness where the body does not matter. Certainly Pope John Paul's aim in the *Theology of the Body* is to challenge the mentality that thinks disembodied self-consciousness is 'who' we are, that matter does not matter. However he is also very clear that he is talking about the whole person, the person who has spiritual and material aspects and who is growing into Pope Francis's 'affective maturity' where there is the proper balance of reason, emotion, feelings, will, control. And to achieve this maturity, where the person lives the virtues and follows the call to holiness. The person knows what is involved in the dance and wants to dance well.

Pope John Paul's *Theology of the Body* talks about the human being in terms of **solitudo** and **communio**, the one and the many – each one of us stands alone, and stands alone before God as a unique person; yet we are each called to **communio**, to relationship with each other: analogy with the Trinity and self-giving love (though analogy always point more to what is different than what is similar)

- Sexual ethics concern both the individual, me; and me in my relationships.

Solitudo: and my attitude to myself

From the creation: *AGAIN BUILDS ON WHAT FR SIMON HAS SAID*

- Person as gift: accepting myself as ‘wonderfully made’, as beautiful in God’s eyes, as a sexual being and part of God’s good creation - though this is an ongoing process
- In terms of sexual ethics and ethics to do with the body, the reclaiming of the goodness and dignity of the human person can speak in particular to high rates of self-harm, low self-esteem, idolisation of the ‘perfect’ body, idolisation of youth, seeing the body as raw material to be shaped according to desires and wishes
- Seeing and accepting the person as a gift: includes the person with disabilities
- Building self-respect, proper self-love as a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’

Moreover, sexual difference is part of God’s plan, and part of diversity:¹ human beings are not just souls or spirits or intellects or consciousnesses but also bodies. My body is not a possession, it is not something I own that is somehow outside of me. Rather I am my body and my body also shares in the dignity of ‘image of God’.

- I do not just have an ‘inner sense’ of who I am, I am also my body
- This is why we must be wary of some gender ideologies that say that gender (the roles men and women have) and sex (biological identity) are both constructs of society: who mows the lawn, gender role, may be a construct, but biological sex and the doctor simply decides whether the baby is a boy or girl? And ideologies that deny sexual difference and promote personal identity that has no reference to the body:² crisis of identity – not acts follow being but being follows acts – sex as performance
- Sensitivity to those who feel that they are ‘born in the wrong body’
- Problem of reducing people purely to their sexual orientation
- Sexuality is not simply one part of our existence nor is sexuality only related to the body. Rather sexuality suffuses our whole being and it is in relationships that we come to learn about sexuality and love as truly and fully personal.³
- Love that is fully personal requires the person to be truly integrated where soul, spirit and body, mind, will – and that includes sexuality – are properly integrated in what Pope Francis calls ‘affective maturity’ (*Amoris Laetitia*, 263, 279) so that there is a thirst for the true good.

A particularly helpful image for this ‘affective maturity’ is perhaps Pope John Paul’s image of the person and the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs: being masters/mistresses of our own mystery – the dignity and interior sacredness of the person

- Like the desert fathers, cultivating the garden includes the cultivation of virtues and a proper respect of ourselves and this shapes our ethics towards issues like sexting, the idolisation of body image or indeed the promotion of a hatred of the body, being able to say ‘no’, being patient and being able to wait.

When I think of my attitudes towards others it is perhaps easy to fall into the romantic trap of thinking that one person is not complete without another person. True, people in different ways help each other to become more fully human: this is the experience of a big family. However in the understanding of solitudo each human being is a whole. The complementarity of a man and a woman in marriage is not like a half plus a half makes one.

- This is perhaps clear when Pope John Paul reflects on the charism of celibacy. Celibacy is about integrating sexuality not promoting sexlessness: priesthood, religious life are forms of love and relationship

¹ Gn 1:26-27, 2:18-23.

² Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* n. 56.

³ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio* n. 37.

The difficulty that many people have with the idea of celibacy perhaps reflects a problem: the modern tendency to see every relationship as necessarily sexual and to forget that there can be authentic friendships.

Thinking about authentic relationships and the encounter with the other person: Pope John Paul II says ‘faced with the sacredness of life and of the human person, and before the marvels of the universe, wonder is the only appropriate attitude’.⁴ Pope Francis: when we encounter another person we must ‘remove our sandals’ because we are standing on ‘holy ground’.⁵

- This is not meant to be idolatry, rather it is pointing out that God is already here in this person before me, in this person who is in God’s image.
- So our attitude towards the other from the start is to see the other person as like me: beautiful, wonderfully made, destined for holiness and never ever simply an object for me or for my enjoyment.
- Sexual ethics then is in part directed at seeing the other as a person, not as an object; respect for the other person as another ‘like me’ – and this is why we also have to know how to respect ourselves

In terms of sexual ethics, once we see ourselves and the other person as wonderfully made and not an object for me then our relationships with other people will be based on true friendship: this is wanting the true good of the other person.

- In authentic relationships of friendship sexuality is not repressed nor is it flaunted, but it is under our control through the exercise of the virtues so that we can live as God wants us to live.
- Sexual desire, *eros*, is not an ‘intoxicated and undisciplined’ or animal instinct. Reducing *eros* in this way debases the human person because it makes sexuality no longer a vital expression of our whole being, body, mind and soul. It turns the other person into an object for my own use. Such a reduction does not lead us beyond ourselves to seek the good of the other.
- Christian thinking sees *eros* and the sexual dimension of love as a desire rooted in human nature, a ‘marvellous gift’ from God that needs to be cultivated and directed.⁶

Problem: we are fallen people. The goodness of the body and of sexuality has been damaged: in sexual ethics lust is not sexual desire, lust is exploitation and making the other into an object for me; in sexual ethics pride is not striving for excellence, pride becomes a refusal to accept the wisdom and authority of others, it becomes the drive to dominate.

- If we are left to ourselves we end up making mistakes, distorting what is good, seeking after lesser goods and ignoring the greater goods.
- We need God to help us out of this and of course he gives us many gifts: the wisdom of the law helps us to flourish as human beings, Church teaching gives us direction, the virtues give us strength, the sacraments give us grace.

Questions about relationships are also questions about a person’s life direction and vocation: St Paul on the road to Damascus: ‘What am I to do, Lord?’⁷ Marriage is a particular vocation, a particular way of expressing *communio*.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists, 1999.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Message 50th World Communications Day* 24 January 2016.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* n. 4, 5, 11; Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* n. 150.

⁷ *Acts* 22:10.

Third communio: and my attitude towards the other person.

Communio concerns the call to authentic relationships, friendships, and the sexual expression of love belongs specifically to the communion of persons that is found in married love.

Married love and sexuality in the context of love and life that is beautiful, good and true

Education about sex and relationships begins in the family; we live in a network of relationships but the family, the first cell of society, has the first responsibility of education.

- One area that is often neglected is forming virtues: rather old fashioned sounding, but offer helpful ways of authentic living and are graces Pope John Paul reminds us that we are all called to live lives of virtue and to learn the ‘art of chaste loving’, and this applies to heterosexual as well as homosexual people, and it applies to people living a single life and married life.⁸

Chastity: purity of heart, part of personal integrity and human freedom; integrates sexuality in the person through self-mastery

- stands between the selfish desire of lust that destroys relationships and the negative idea of sex presented by prudery that avoids relationships
- does not attempt to eliminate sexual desires. Rather, it recognises sexual desires as good and orders them to love.
- Thus chastity speaks out against eg lust, pornography; promotes authentic relationships that do not need to be sexual

Modesty:

- stands in between an inordinate pride and exhibitionist mentality, and a total disregard for the feelings of others.
- is ‘a natural means whereby we defend our personal privacy and prevent ourselves from being turned into objects to be used’.⁹ Resists peer pressure

Patience:

- stands between the vices of impatience as lack of self-control and apathy or insensitivity.
- helps us when we encounter frustrations, disappointments and difficulties and gives us the ability to keep control over our sudden impulses.

Magnanimity:

- strength of character and great heart
- ‘walking with Jesus, with a heart attentive to what Jesus tells us’; gives us the courage not to be afraid and to ‘go against the tide’.¹⁰

And falling?

- in the ‘art of walking’ the task is to make sure that we are not ‘staying fallen’, and to succeed in this task we need people who love us to accompany us.¹¹
- The discussion at the synod about ‘seeds’ of goodness in irregular relationships

This formation, education and accompaniment begins in the family relationship which is one of the reasons why the Church sets such great store on the importance of marriage as the place for the total gift of self through a sexual relationship

⁸ Cardinal Basil Hume, *A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality* April 1997, 7.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* n. 282.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *To students in Jesuit schools in Italy and Albania* 7 June 2013.

¹¹ Pope Francis *To students in Jesuit schools in Italy and Albania* 7 June 2013.

Christian marriage and sexuality are part of God's plan to lead people – parents, children and the extended family - on the path to holiness.¹²

- As part of God's plan marriage is not like a human contract or social convention and so marriage cannot be redefined: this is why the debate on same sex marriage was so difficult – it is not a denial of equality, they are simply two very different things
- The married relationship is not simply based on affection and consent and marriage is more than just the commitment of two people. Marriage involves three goods: the union of husband and wife, their lasting faithfulness, and the fruit of their union. The sexual expression of love involves two human subjects, physically different as male and female, who share equally in the capacity to live in truth and love.¹³ The body and sexuality matters, and the mind and soul that directs the body in the ways of virtues matters.

Complimentarity of husband and wife

- Is not just about gender roles, or equality or psychology (good and bad cop)
- Is about recognising that everyone brings their own particular gifts, and it recognises the genius of women
- Avoids narcissism (just looking at one who is the same as me)
- Not looking at each other but looking in the same direction
- Married love is fruitful
- And it needs grace

And full circle

Formation for love, life and relationships that are beautiful, good and true begins in the family

- This is one reason why the Church stresses that married family life is the place to have and bring up children: commitment, recognising the good of the other person, never an object, the place where the individual in community can flourish and grow in holiness
- We know families have difficulties and the community should be there to help them
- Foster a culture of defending and promoting life especially protecting the most vulnerable; witnesses to life eg families with a child with disabilities, looking after elderly family members
- Be a 'domestic Church'

Dancing towards the future with immense hope: love and life that is beautiful, good and true

- Understanding and accepting that sexuality is part of who I am, that it is part of the great gift that is me – and the other person
- that there is the dance of friendship, the dance of marriage, the dance of celibacy
- each express love and life that is beautiful, good and true in a particular way

¹² Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* n. 317; Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles laici* n. 40; *Familiaris consortio* n. 34, 63, 66.

¹³ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families* n. 8.