

From the Pastor

The Language of the Body

This week we will continue to examine the beauty of human sexuality. We will examine the theology of St. John Paul II to understand the exalted goal of our human sexuality. We will also observe the depth of sadness and dissolution into which we may fall when the gift of our sexuality is abused.

As we enter into this discussion, I want to emphasize that our sexuality is a mystery. It is a beautiful gift given to us to unite us to one another and to God. This reflection is a brief moral lesson intended to clarify some misconceptions about our human sexuality. I want to remind everyone that at the heart of sexuality is not sin but rather grace. God is with us in our struggles. God loves us and wants to help us. Living the teachings of the Church regarding human sexuality is difficult—even impossible—without grace. No one can live these teachings apart from Christ. Only in Him can we continue to stand up after a fall and begin again. Only in Christ can we hope to truly integrate the power of our sexuality with the sweet yoke of Christ. This article is not intended to judge or condemn. It is simply a clarification of the Church's teaching about our sexuality, which we are called to live with joy through Christ, His forgiveness, and the grace of the sacramental life of the Church.

St. John Paul II taught in his *Theology of the Body* that our bodies speak a language deeper and more real than the spoken words of our mouths. Through our bodies, we communicate genuine messages to the people around us. We all understand that our actions speak louder than our words. We have all experienced the power of nonverbal communication. If someone scowls or slams a cabinet in anger, he communicates volumes without saying a word. Our bodies speak even when our lips are silent.

According to St. John Paul II, the most intimate and personal form of this “language of the body” is the language spoken in sexual union. In the moment of sexual union, a person speaks to his or her beloved not with words, but with his or her very body and self. The message, when it is true, is beautiful and clear.

During the sexual act, a husband says to his wife—with his body— “I love you. I give myself completely to you. I belong wholly to you, just as I am. And I accept you fully, just as you are.” In turn, the wife's body responds, “I receive your gift of self, and I give to you the gift of myself. All that I am is yours, and I accept the whole of who you are.” This is the language communicated by the body during the act of sex. This communication, of course, is not just physical; rather, the physical language of the body echoes the sentiments of the soul when the act of sex is used according to God's plan for intimate human love.

This is the true language of sexual love: mutual and total self-giving.

Because this language expresses a complete and total handing over of oneself to another, it can only be spoken truthfully in a relationship in which that total gift is real. In other words, the language of the body must match the truth of the relationship. This means that a couple has the right to speak this intimate language only when the two truly belong to each other through a sacred bond in the covenant of marriage. If someone tries to use this body language but is not wholly committed to the person in a lifelong relationship of love, the message becomes a lie, and the act of sex is rendered sinful rather than sanctified.

The only proper context for this total gift of self to another is within a lifelong, exclusive, and faithful bond sealed by the sacred vows of matrimony. Every other use of this language outside of marriage distorts its meaning and becomes a serious offense against the dignity of the human person and the beauty of God's design for love and sex.

It is for this reason that all couples must seek to reconcile their marriages within the Church. All Catholics are bound by the discipline of the marriage laws of the Church. If a Catholic person is not married in the Catholic Church but is instead married only civilly, he or she should seek to reconcile the marriage as soon as possible according to the discipline of our faith. Furthermore, couples who are married only civilly and are sexually active should not present themselves for Communion. They have not yet entered into a sacramental union, which also allows them full access to the sacraments. If a couple who are only civilly married present themselves for Communion while not married by the Church, they cause themselves spiritual harm through their reception of Holy Communion because they eat and drink unworthily, as St. Paul tells us.

Let us consider what happens when this “language of the body” is spoken falsely.

First, let us examine the case in which sexual intimacy is forced upon someone through violence. The language of love is twisted into a horrific lie. What was given to us by God so that we can express our love—sexual intimacy—becomes an act of domination and violence. This is why the Church teaches clearly that sexual violence is a grave sin against both God and the dignity of the person: it turns what should be an expression of self-giving love into the language of a lie and violence. This example is very easy for us to grasp, but it leads us to understand more subtle sins against the “language of the body.”

This understanding of sexual body language also sheds light on the gravity of premarital sex. When a couple engages in sexual intimacy outside of marriage, they are saying with their bodies, “I am yours completely and forever.” But in reality, they are

not bound by a public, solemn, or lifelong promise; therefore, they do not truly belong to one another “completely and forever.” Their encounter is not permanent and can end at any moment. There is no lasting bond. Without the covenant of fidelity, the language of their bodies does not speak the full truth. How can a person claim with his or her body to belong wholly to another when he or she has not yet made that total and binding gift of self in marriage? How can I tell a person that I belong totally to him or her, and he or she to me, if I am not even married to that person? If I am afraid to make a commitment to the person for the rest of my life, then I am incapable of speaking the body language of total gift. This lie turns the act of sex into grave matter.

The message that I give with my body in premarital sex or an adulterous sexual exchange is a lie that betrays human integrity. Because the language of the body is so intimate and the exchange so personal, to lie in that moment is grave matter. A lie told in such an intimate and sacred act makes the act gravely sinful, not because God wants to take joy away from us, but because He desires that our love be real, faithful, and life-giving.

The Language of the Body and Artificial Contraception

The truth about sexual body language helps us understand why the Church teaches that artificial contraception is morally wrong. Many Catholic couples struggle with this teaching, yet the logic of the Theology of the Body helps us see why it matters. In the sexual embrace, the body says, “I give myself to you completely, and I receive you completely.” But when artificial contraception is introduced as part of the sexual act, true self-giving is withheld. Instead of saying, “I give all that I am,” the message becomes, “I give you everything except my fertility.” The couple’s physical union then becomes a partial gift rather than a total gift. The person says, “I love you, but not all of you.” Because the internal intent of the person and the physical body are speaking contradictory messages, the couple is engaged in a lie at the deepest level of human expression.

In this way, artificial contraception turns the truth of the act into a kind of falsehood. It withholds something essential to love’s full expression—the openness to new life. The act that should be a self-giving exchange of love becomes self-protective and closed. It becomes less about love and more about control or pleasure. The act of sexual love, when overlaid with artificial contraception, is, in moral terms, reduced to mutual physical gratification, which is gravely sinful. It is for this reason that all forms of artificial contraception must be condemned as grave matter: sterilization, tubal ligation, the pill, IUDs, spermicides, the withdrawal method, or any other artificial means that may prevent the conception of new life.

This same principle of the Theology of the Body applies to other sins against chastity. Fantasies, masturbation, pornography, and sexually explicit media of any kind distort the meaning of sexuality. They take the gift of the body, meant to be a total self-gift to another, and turn it inward into an act of self-gratification. The language of love becomes the language of self-abuse.

Sadly, even many Catholics reject the teachings of the Church in the area of sexuality. It is good to remember that just because a teaching of the Church is difficult does not mean that it is wrong. Many people equate difficulty with impossibility. Some prefer to reject the Church’s teachings in order to live a life of ease. Unfortunately, when we live a moral life apart from the Church, there are sad internal consequences that wound the heart. “The wages of sin are death” (Rom 6:23).

We, as Catholics, believe in the infallibility of the Church. We believe that when the Church teaches on morals and faith, her voice is the echo of the Holy Spirit. It is possible that a person might say, “I don’t like this teaching of the Church,” or even, “This teaching is difficult.” We may even decide not to follow a particular teaching of the Church, but we should never say that the teachings of the Church are wrong. It is much better to admit that we are sinning than to judge the Church, who is the Bride of Christ. Although we may choose not to follow the Church’s teaching, if we admit that the Church is right and we are weak, we do not put ourselves in a position in which we judge the Church and close our hearts to the grace of conversion. After all, accepting our weakness is often the first step toward accepting God’s grace.

The Church’s teaching on sexuality may be difficult to live, but it is not meant to condemn—it is meant to call us to something higher, more beautiful, and more true. God’s design for human love is not meant to limit our joy, but to deepen it. When the language of our bodies speaks truthfully—within faithful, sacramental love—it becomes a radiant reflection of divine love itself.

In Christ,

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