

An Intrinsic Ethic Of Meaning



Elements of the
Catholic
Moral Vision
Concerning
Human Sexuality

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The Catholic Church has a beautiful and cherished vision of human sexuality. This vision underlies our stance on many public policies concerning sexual behavior, genetic manipulation, procreation and societal mores.

A Person-Centered Ethic

According to *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, the norm of Christian morality is the “human person and his/her acts rightly understood.” The sanctity of human life and the divine dignity of each human person are the bulwarks for the Catholic community in its appraisal of the gift of human sexuality. The ethic is a resounding “yes!” to the goodness of sexuality, to the goodness of life, and to the dignity of the human person.

Human beings should never be viewed “instrumentally,” that is, as means or “instruments” towards achieving another purpose or goal. More over, the intrinsic meaning and value of human life requires that the components of human life, including sexuality, be respected in an integral manner. For example, the teaching in the Vatican *Instruction on Human Life* (March 1987) opposes reproductive techniques, which seek to achieve the good of procreation apart from the act of sexual union. The very meaning of human sexual gesture must be considered in its fullness, and not from the standpoint of utility, which views human goods such as sexuality as “means” towards the achievement of other purposes.

A Communal Ethic

A cardinal principle of Catholic social teaching is the notion of the “human person in community” (*Economic Justice for All*, the 1987 U. S. bishops’ pastoral letter). A concern for the “common good,” that is, the sum total of spiritual and material goods, which contribute to human flourishing, leads to a notion of justice in human relationships. Justice means rendering to each what is due, but it also means arranging social networks so that the human good can be fully realized. The institution of marriage becomes the primary lens through which the integrity of human sexuality is viewed and judged. Christian marriage seen as a vocation for furthering the Kingdom of God requires a just and proper understanding of the goodness of human sexuality. Thus, the experience of the faith community in its journey through time becomes a central source of moral wisdom and guidance for the ordering of human sexual behavior. A privatistic or individualistic vision of human sexuality is inadequate as a moral approach, for example, citing a subjective appeal to personal liberty as a justification for extramarital intercourse.

A Covenant Ethic

A key biblical theme is the intimate bonding, which weds God to the story of the human family. This paradigm of divine respect for the human is reflected in the pages of Scripture. As the *Genesis* creation accounts make clear, the unique relationship between man and woman is one of equality, mutuality, and friendship, which specifies a sexual relationship of fidelity, commitment, and generosity. From the “one-flesh” unity of husband and wife flows the openness to the creation of new life. Accordingly, there is inscribed in this biblical vision a distinct moral anthropology which is expressed in the moral principle that sexual relations are to be governed by the intrinsic connection between the “unitive” and “procreative” meanings of human sexual gesture.

An Integral Ethic

Human sexuality is a “body language” which must be spoken well. Body and spirit form an organic unity, complementary energies which call forth each other. There is a “wholeness” to authentic human sexual living which requires that the human person not be “reduced” to a bodiless spirit, nor to a “spiritless” body. Reductionistic accounts of human sexuality, for example, accounts, which emphasize the value of pleasure to the exclusion of an integration with values of responsibility and personal dignity, can readily be seen to fall short of this test of “integrity.” Or, to cite another example, views of sexuality, which reduce human sexuality exclusively to its procreative meaning (e.g., in new forms of reproductive technology), also fail the test of integrity. The notion of integrity means that the sexual union of husband and wife is integrally connected to the gift of children. Reducing the meaning of sexuality exclusively to genital expression is a failure to be truthful to the authentic, holistic understanding of human sexual gesture.

An Ordered Ethic

All human goods, including the gift of sexuality, are ordered towards the ultimate end of our existence, namely God. The wisdom of the intellect and the affections of the heart (rightly formed) are required in order to appreciate the dynamic mystery of our moral lives. Guidance comes from the teaching authority of the Church, which is a privileged font and source of moral insight for the well-being of the community of faith. This sense of moral order provides guidance for a variety of concerns, for example, new reproductive technologies, surrogate parenting, and the vast array of human sexual behaviors. The virtue of chastity is a force for moral integrity, a skill or power which orders one’s sexual feelings, thoughts and desires, and which is differentiated according to the various states of life, married or single.

Summary

A community of faith which counts among its sacred writings *The Song of Songs*, *Genesis*, *The Book of Proverbs* and *Matthew 19, 3-15* is a community which respects the many and complex dimensions of the gift of human sexuality, its sensual and its tender components. The Catholic moral vision grows and is deepened by its encounter with the human and social sciences, and its continued theological reflection. The elements thus cited are crucial to a careful and thoughtful appraisal of the distinct contributions of our Catholic way of life to our sexually troubled modern age.



Implications of Catholic Teachings about Marriage, Family Life and Human Sexuality for Legislation and Public Policy Decisions

The following summary of Catholic teaching is taken from the authoritative reference guide titled, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, English translation for the United States of America, approved by the United States Catholic Conference, c. 1994. Citations refer to the official paragraph numbers of the text.

For example:

§2319: Every human life, from the moment of conception until death, is sacred because the human person has been willed for its own sake in the image and likeness of the living and holy God.

The citations in this summary are not exhaustive, but represent a selection from a broad range of pertinent moral and social teaching of the Church that may be useful for those in public office with a responsibility for the common good of all citizens.

§ 2202: A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family. This institution is prior to any recognition by public authority, which has an obligation to recognize it. It should be considered the normal reference point by which the different forms of family relationship are to be evaluated.

§2207: The family is the original cell of social life. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life...

§2209: The family must be helped and defended by appropriate social measures. Where families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, other social bodies have the duty of helping them and of supporting the institution of the family. Following the principle of subsidiarity, larger communities should take care not to usurp the family's prerogatives or interfere in its life.

§2211: The political community has a duty to honor the family, to assist it, and to ensure especially;

- the freedom to establish a family, have children, and bring them up in keeping with the family's own moral and religious convictions;
- the protection of the stability of the marriage bond and the institution of the family;
- the freedom to profess one's faith, to hand it on, and raise one's children in it, with the necessary means and institutions;
- the right to private property, to free enterprise, to obtain work and housing, and the right to emigrate;
- in keeping with the country's institutions, the right to medical care, assistance for the aged, and family benefits;
- the protection of security and health, especially with respect to dangers like drugs, pornography, alcoholism, etc.;
- the freedom to form associations with other families and so to have representation before civil authority.

§2273: The inalienable right to life of every innocent human individual is a constitutive element of a civil society and its legislation...

The article treats in great depth the basis of human rights in the inalienable dignity of the human person, and the obligation of civil authority to have a special concern for the most vulnerable among us.

§2274: Since it must be treated from conception as a person, the embryo must be defended in its integrity, cared for, and healed, as far as possible, like any other human being.

At this juncture, the *Catechism* cites the 1987 *Instruction on Human Life, Donum Vitae (The Gift of Life)*:

Prenatal diagnosis is morally licit, if it respects the life and integrity of the embryo and the human fetus and is directed toward its safeguarding or healing as an individual...It is gravely opposed to the moral law when this is done with the thought of possibly inducing an abortion, depending upon the results: a diagnosis must not be the equivalent of a death sentence.

§2275: One must hold as licit procedures carried out on the human embryo which respect the life and integrity of the embryo and do not involve disproportionate risks for it, but are directed toward its healing, the improvement of its condition of health, or its individual survival.

It is immoral to produce human embryos intended for exploitation as disposable biological material.

Certain attempts to influence chromosomic or genetic inheritance are not therapeutic but are aimed at producing human beings selected according to sex or other predetermined qualities. Such manipulations are contrary to the personal dignity of the human being and his integrity and identity which are unique and unrepeatable.

§2360: Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion...

§2363: The spouses' union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life. These two meanings or values of marriage cannot be separated without altering the couple's spiritual life and compromising the goods of marriage and the future of the family. The conjugal love of man and woman thus stands under the twofold obligation of fidelity and fecundity.

§2399: The regulation of births represents one of the aspects of responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Legitimate intentions on the part of the spouses do not justify recourse to morally unacceptable means (for example, direct sterilization or contraception).

Editor's note: *"direct sterilization" refers to a medical procedure performed solely for contraceptive purposes, and is, therefore, immoral according to church teaching. A sterilization performed for sound medical reasons, e.g., to remove a diseased organ, is a therapeutic intervention and is morally permissible.*

§2378: A child is not something owed to one, but is a gift. The "supreme gift of marriage" is a human person. A child may not be considered a piece of property, an idea to

which an alleged “right to a child” would lead. In this area, only the child possesses genuine rights: the right “to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents,” and “the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception.”

§2375: Research aimed at reducing human sterility is to be encouraged, on condition that it is placed “at the service of the human person, of his inalienable rights, and his true and integral good according to the design and will of God.”

§2376: Techniques that entail the dissociation of husband and wife, by the intrusion of a person other than the couple (donation of sperm or ovum, surrogate uterus), are gravely immoral. These techniques (heterologous artificial insemination and fertilization) infringe on the child’s right to be born of a father and mother known to him and bound to each other by marriage...

§2377: Techniques involving only the married couple (homologous artificial insemination and fertilization) are perhaps less reprehensible, yet remain morally unacceptable. They dissociate the sexual act from the procreative act. The act which brings the child into existence is no longer an act by which two persons give themselves to one another, but one that “entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person...”
(Reference taken from the earlier cited document, *Donum Vitae*)

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If there are questions after reading, or elements that need further clarification, staff at the Catholic Conference will be happy to try to respond or to put you in contact with an individual whose expertise will be more helpful.



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