

DISCOVERING THE UNITY OF LIFE AND LOVE

A REFLECTION ON THE FOUNDATIONS FOR
A THEOLOGY OF HUMAN LOVE



CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
EPISCOPAL COMMISSION FOR DOCTRINE

*What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them? Psalm 8:4*

1. In our modern Canadian society, we are daily bombarded with images and conflicting messages about the meaning of life and of love, about what it means to be human. Stable realities that we once took for granted, such as marriage, family and a sense of home and belonging – these simple realities that sheltered us and welcomed us especially when we were most vulnerable – appear to be very fragile. The mystery of death at the end of life is now something we have the right to control, with the recent amendments to the Criminal Code that allow us to ask a physician to end our lives if we think we will suffer too much.

These new ideas destabilize us and generate confusion about the fundamental truths about life and love, truths that we hold dear. Pope Benedict XVI reflected that these ideas cast “shadows that hide God’s plan” for humanity.¹ We can no longer easily discern the truth about ourselves and why we exist. It is as if reality itself no longer existed. In his homily at the 2016 March for Life, Cardinal Thomas Collins spoke of a forgetfulness of reality. One of the dominant lies in our culture, he said, is “the false idea that reality is mainly found between my ears. No, there is an objective world of reality, not created or shaped by our subjective desires. Wisdom involves discovering it and seeing how we are called to adapt to it.”² When confronted with these challenges to our faith in the Church’s vision of human life, marriage and the family, we are not always ready to give reasons for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). Looking at reality with the eyes of faith, can we discover something stable upon which to build our lives in love and freedom in these unstable times?

2. Following the lead of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, as well as in his profound appeal to the mercy of God during the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops desires to look together at our primary human experiences that we discover in reality. We desire to recall to ourselves and others the beauty and profundity of how God created us and our primary relations to others, to the world and to God. We desire to take a moment of rest within our busy, overconnected lives, lives that carry heavy burdens and pain, to look at our humanity with God’s tender gaze of mercy. While we may be pulled in many directions and swept up in the modern ideas mentioned above, God’s gaze on us is not a look of condemnation. With God’s eyes full of tenderness and hope, we desire to “look with humility at man’s place in the cosmos” and the call to love that has been inscribed by God into our very hearts and bodies.³
3. This reflection is also timely given the recent conclusion in 2015 of the Synod on the Family that captured the world’s attention and received much media coverage. The popularity of the Synod tells us, among other things, that the Church’s vision of marriage and family life touches each

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Cor Unum*, January 19, 2013.

² Cardinal Thomas Collins, Homily for the March for Life, Ottawa, May 12, 2016. <https://www.archtoronto.org/Blog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=58>

³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 160.

of us very deeply. While we are united in our hope for the future of marriage and the family, with humility, we also recognize that the Synod evoked strong reactions against the established teaching of the Church. It is evident that many Catholics and people of goodwill feel confused as to why the Church seems to hold such a countercultural view of sexuality and marriage. For many, it seems that the Church is simply articulating an archaic ideal of sexuality and family life that no longer has a place in today's world. Still others believe that the Church is presenting an ideal of life that is impossible to attain.

4. As pastors of the Church in Canada, it is our desire to recall the deep, human reasons for the Church's vision of human love and life. We wish to rediscover the family as a place where the essential truths about human life and love can be discovered and embraced; the family as a place where our humanity can flourish and serve the common good; the family as a community where human wounds and vulnerability can be embraced with mercy.

As Pope Francis writes, "what we need is a more responsible and generous effort to present the reasons and motivations for choosing marriage and the family, and in this way to help men and women better to respond to the grace that God offers them."⁴

5. To this end, in this reflection we wish to offer some reasons for the Church's vision of human life and love in the hopes of showing its profound reasonableness and correspondence to the heart of each and every one of us. We will begin by asking a fundamental question that will guide the rest of our reflection: Who are we? The answer to this question hinges on another: Is the meaning of our lives something we construct for ourselves, or something we receive? We will then consider various pieces of "original evidence" about our humanity, that is, universal experiences we all have that reveal something about who we are. We will begin with our relatedness to others, the context in which we discover our human freedom. We will then examine how our identity is revealed through our body, and consider some of the implications of modern gender theory. Then, after considering the role of sexual difference and its connection with human fruitfulness, we will conclude by taking up the challenge of love, including the proper role of sexual desire, and see how Christ's presence mediated through grace allows us to live this beautiful challenge with freedom, as a path to authentic human fulfillment.

It is in the spirit of Saint Paul before the early Christian communities in Corinth and Philippi that we offer this reflection, because we see ourselves as "co-workers for your joy" (2 Corinthians 1:24), desiring that "your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight" (Philippians 1:9).

⁴ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 35.

A FUNDAMENTAL DECISION: WHO ARE WE? DO WE CREATE OUR OWN MEANING OR RECEIVE IT AS A GIFT?

6. One of the greatest crises we face in our culture today is that of our fundamental self-awareness: Who are we? Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? The answers we give to these basic questions shape how we understand the meaning of life, love, work, suffering and getting old. While we may not always be mindful of these questions, our answers to them shape the way we live. Alluring advertisements promise happiness if we buy the latest gadget or product. Developments in biotechnology promise to overcome every limit imposed by our bodies and by nature. Persuasive ideas abound that convince us that if we just try hard enough, we can create the lives we've always dreamed of. Throughout our lives, however, most of us have discovered the emptiness of these promises. The most precious things in life, such as happiness, joy and love, cannot simply be constructed or produced by our own will.

Why is it important to begin our exploration of the Church's vision of human life and love at this fundamental level, that of the awareness of our relationship to reality? The path is valuable because much of what the Church has to say on the meaning of marriage and the family presupposes that reality itself – that is to say, the way God made things – is rich in meaning. It presupposes that through their reason and their freedom, men and women are able to discover this meaning, which is a logic of love, within their own hearts and bodies.

7. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are clearly faced with two fundamental options regarding our self-understanding. We have the basic choice of recognizing that our lives have been given to us as a gift from Another, or of affirming an original meaninglessness to our lives. In other words, it is a foundational decision between the position that not only our own lives but all of reality is positive and full of meaning – and therefore the privileged place for encountering God – and the position that all our lives and all of reality are devoid of meaning. According to this latter option, we impose our own meaning of reality rather than discover it. Naturally, we operate every day within one or the other of these positions, even if we are not aware of it. It is important to become aware of how such a foundational awareness shapes the way we live and consider the meaning of love. The origin of what Pope Francis calls “practical relativism” finds its place in this second option, where we live life as if it were up to us to create our own meaning and value.⁵

In the first option, we discover that our life is a mystery. We did not ask to be born, but find ourselves alive. We have been given a particular family and unique aptitudes, gifts and limits. Our lives are not random. We discover that our being comes from another. We are in relation to others from the very beginning of our existence. In the second option, which is increasingly prevalent today, we consider ourselves to be our own creator. Life is a project of construction of the self. We can even construct our own gender identity and decide if we are a man or a woman, following our own feelings and ideas. We are originally alone and truly autonomous. The

⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 122; *Evangelii Gaudium* 80.

growing presence of technology gives us a sense of power not only over nature, but even over each other and our own bodies. In a subtle manner, for example, our children are being educated in this false promise of “self-making” in the new curricula of sex education promoted in many provinces. Here they are told, among other things, that their gender identity is something that they decide for themselves according to their desires.

OUR LIFE, AND ALL OF REALITY, IS A GIFT

8. What light does the mystery of our Catholic faith shed on this fundamental decision? The Church has always held that the world came to be because of God’s love: “The universe did not emerge as the result of arbitrary omnipotence, a show of force or a desire for self-assertion. Creation is of the order of love. God’s love is the fundamental reason for all created things”.⁶ So, too, has each person been created out of love and for a purpose. “Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with his affection”.⁷ There is no such thing as a random life. No one’s existence has emerged from a void.

For us as followers of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance. Nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by love which calls us together into universal communion.⁸

In light of our faith, we discover that reality is not “formless and completely open to manipulation,” but is a fundamental good.⁹ “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

9. Taking note of these two fundamental positions is very important when we try to understand the reasons for the Church’s vision of the person and human love. When the Church looks at men and women and the desire to love that has been inscribed in their hearts and bodies, she does so within a gaze that sees each of them and their desire to love as something fundamentally good. The Church has a gaze that sees the world, the body and the desire for love as a reflection of God’s great design in creation.¹⁰ In her pastoral work and moral teachings, the Church desires to help men and women enter into this fullness of meaning that is found not only in the cosmos, but also in the heart of every human person.

⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 77.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 77.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 76.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 106.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 9.

AS A GIFT, OUR LIFE REVEALS A “PRIMARY DEPENDENCE” ON GOD AND OTHERS

10. If it is true that we do not make our own lives and give ourselves existence, then a second dimension of reality that we discover in our experience is the fact of being dependent on God and on others. Dependence, in this primary sense, is not a choice or a sign of human weakness, but an integral part of who we are. If we look at our human experience, we can all attest to the fact that we did not give ourselves life, but received it from a mother and a father and ultimately from God. We can also attest that we are not making our own lives, even now. Someone or something is keeping us in existence, willing us “to be” now. Who is giving us life? As we saw above, we are held in being by the tenderness of God’s love. We call this fact of our human experience “primary dependence” or “original solitude”.¹¹

We know that this original position of dependence has all the characteristics of a personal love because we are created by a God who is Love.¹² God is not a threatening menace or an impersonal force, although we often think this way in our day-to-day lives. He created each of us freely, not wishing us to be slaves, but to live fully human lives and freely love him in return. The core of our human awareness of reality is therefore gratitude and thanksgiving for the gift of existence.

11. All around us we are surrounded by a logic that says life has no meaning, that nature itself is mere stuff to be manipulated according to our will, and that the people around us are there by chance or because we did something to earn their love. Following Pope Francis, “let us refuse to resign ourselves to this, and continue to wonder about the purpose and meaning of everything. Otherwise we would simply legitimate the present situation and need new forms of escapism to help us endure the emptiness”.¹³ Recalling this position of original dependence and the attitudes of gift and gratuitousness, we can rediscover today the awareness that our lives are given to us by our Creator. They possess a meaning of love that we are invited to discover. Within this gaze of mercy, we can look with fresh eyes on our spouses, children and parents, and the friends God has given us.

HUMAN FREEDOM WITHIN THIS PRIMARY DEPENDENCE

12. In our age that prizes independence and autonomy, it may be hard to recognize how human freedom squares with primary dependence. Yet if we look at our experience of childhood, we can glimpse some indications of how this might be the case. Coming into existence as a child, we can see that our freedom and autonomy have always been mediated by the presence of others who loved us: our mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. We increasingly discovered the gift of our autonomy within a loving community where we depended on others for everything. As we matured, our dependence did not cease completely, but took on a different form within

¹¹ This is the language used by Pope Saint John Paul II in his Wednesday audiences on human love in the divine plan to describe man and woman’s relationship with the Creator-God. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006): 146–156.

¹² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 81.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 113.

these relations. This example of the child within the family reveals that freedom and dependence are not at odds with each other. Autonomy rightly understood is also a gift we receive from God. Freedom and autonomy have been given to us in order that we may freely participate in a unique way in God's design of love for the world. As the French poet Charles Péguy has beautifully written, God loves nothing more than human freedom. He would not be satisfied with being loved by slaves, but only by men and women who turn to him in freedom.¹⁴

In our own time, human freedom seems to struggle most before the call to a lifelong commitment in marriage and family life.¹⁵ The call to marriage and family life seems to both exalt our freedom and challenge it to the core. On the one hand, men and women are the only creatures who have the capacity to offer their lives to another, to make a vow of one's whole life in marriage. What an exaltation of human freedom! On the other hand, such a commitment to marriage and family life seems to pose an immense restriction on our freedom. One need only ask any parent about the daily sacrifices that such a commitment to a spouse and to children invites and often requires.

HUMAN FREEDOM FULFILLS ITSELF IN THE GIFT OF SELF WITHIN THE FAMILY

13. This paradox of freedom and dependence cuts to the heart of the crisis we see in the family. If we praise the "autonomous" individual who only enters into relationships when he or she feels like it, what is the future of marriage and family life? While we sometimes desire to be totally autonomous, is the desire to belong and to share our life with others an even stronger desire? How can we live this apparent tension within our human experience? The answer can be found in the paradox that man and woman find themselves and discover their true freedom only by making a free gift of themselves, by binding themselves in a total and permanent way. Men and women discover a deeper level of freedom when they offer their freedom for a greater good. Pope Benedict XVI mused on this paradox in one of his last addresses to the Roman curia:

Can one bind oneself for a lifetime? Does this correspond to man's nature? Does it not contradict his freedom and the scope of his self-realization? Does man become himself by living for himself alone and only entering into relationships with others when he can break them off again at any time? Is lifelong commitment also worth suffering for? Man's refusal to make any commitment – which is becoming increasingly widespread as a result of a false understanding of freedom and self-realization as well as his desire to escape suffering – means that man remains closed in on himself and keeps his "I" ultimately to himself, without really rising above it. Yet only in self-giving does man find himself, and only by opening himself to

¹⁴ "Because I myself am free, says God, and I have created man in my own image and likeness. Such is the mystery, such the secret, such the price of all freedom. That freedom of that creature is the most beautiful reflection in this world of the Creator's freedom... When you once have known what it is to be loved freely, submission no longer has any taste. All the prostrations of the world are not worth the beautiful upright attitude of a free man as he kneels." From the poem "Freedom," in *Basic Verities: Prose and Poetry*, trans. Ann and Julian Green (New York: Pantheon Books, 1943).

¹⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 33–34.

the other, to others, to children, to the family, only by letting himself be changed through suffering, does he discover the breadth of his humanity.¹⁶

WE ARE FUNDAMENTALLY RELATIONAL BEINGS

14. In today's cultural context, which idolizes independence, we easily forget that deep down we are relational beings. The above example of the child within the family shows that *relation* and *dependence* are not things we *choose*, but more fundamentally realities which describe who we *are*. Pope Francis reminds us of this primary dimension of our human experience in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*:

Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enriched by our encounter with others. Even our knowledge and self-awareness are relational; they are linked to others who have gone before us; in the first place our parents, who gave us our life and our name. Language itself, the words by which we make sense of our lives and the world around us, comes to us from others, preserved in the memory of others.¹⁷

THE UNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON IS FOUND IN THE HEART

15. So far, we have affirmed that each person is a gift from God and lives a primary dependence on his or her Creator. We said that his or her life has been created by love and for love. We also saw that we are fundamentally relational creatures whose freedom is fulfilled paradoxically when we make a permanent gift of our freedom to another. What more can be said about the original experience of being human? What can be said about our interiority, which cannot be glimpsed by the human eye?

If all of our life is a gift from God, then our whole selves must be seen in the light of this gift, including our bodies, desires and affections. Historically, there has been a tendency to give more attention to how God created the “spiritual” or “intellectual” part of men and women, and to pay less attention to the bodily and affective dimensions, as if these were less important. It has not been easy to overcome this dualism between the spirit and the flesh! However, we can find such an integrated view of the person in the Hebrew tradition. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of the unity of the human person – body, spirit and soul – in terms of the “heart.” A person's heart is the unity of all of his or her reason and affection, the unity of what is physical and spiritual. Pope Saint John Paul II, in what is known as his theology of the body, repropounded this unified vision in many of his writings.

16. What does it mean to say that the unity of the person is found in the heart? Every person who has ever walked this earth has been created by God and therefore shares the same inner constitution, which we call the “heart”. The heart is the seat of God's image and likeness in us.

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*, December 21, 2012.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* 38.

The human heart is also understood as the seat of our relationship with God. According to Christian revelation, each and every human being has a capacity for a personal relationship with his or her Creator.¹⁸ Some have called this original consciousness or questioning after the divine that is part of the structure of the human heart our religious sense.¹⁹

The heart indicates the unity of a person's intellectual, spiritual and emotional life. Since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, we have understood that the core of each person is characterized by the capacity for reason and for freedom, and that each person has a fundamental openness to what is true, good and beautiful.²⁰ These insights have been integrated into our Catholic tradition.

The human heart also expresses the bundle of fundamental needs that has been bestowed on each person in being created by God. The simplest characteristic of the human heart is its desire to love and to be loved. This common desire to love and to be loved unites us to everyone. We also share an unquenchable desire for justice, beauty and truth, even if at times our human sensitivity to these goods becomes dulled through sin and distraction.

THE BODY REVEALS THE PERSON AS MALE OR FEMALE

17. In addition to these interior qualities of the human heart, the visible human body further reveals to us something of what it means to be a human person. Affirming this intuition, Pope Saint John Paul II spoke about a “language of the body.” What does the language of the human body tell us about ourselves and reality? What is most evident when we look at the human body? The first thing we notice is that we have been created as male or female. There is a complementarity of the sexes. What is more, this complementarity gives rise to the creation of new human life. What does this original evidence of sexual difference and its fruitfulness reveal to us about our lives and the way God has created us? What does being created male and female reveal about “the beauty of God’s creative design”?²¹

At a basic level, the duality of the sexes points to the invitation to be open to the other who is different from us. Many of us have experienced the joy and beauty of opening up to the other in the experience of love. The mystery of sexual difference and the joy of love have been the focal point of poetry and music throughout the ages.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei* 81.

¹⁹ Cf. Luigi Giussani. *The Religious Sense*. Trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997). See also Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI’s understanding of *anamnesis* in his lecture to the American Bishops in Dallas, Texas, in February 1991. Published in *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

²⁰ Cf. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 205.

²¹ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, April 15, 2015.

THE NEW THEORY OF “GENDER”: SHOULD WE ERADICATE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN?

18. In our own time, however, our society has become more sensitive to difficulties in this encounter of men and women. We have, over the years, come to recognize systematic violence against women and a lack of respect for their inherent dignity. While this new sensitivity has led to a deeper appreciation of the dignity of women and the equality of the sexes, it has also sometimes led to frustration and resignation in the encounter with the opposite sex. And so a new theory of sexuality and gender has been developing. Gender theory proposes that our identity as a man or a woman is socially constructed rather than given in nature and willed by God. According to Pope Francis, this theory “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family.”²²

This ideological view of gender that is promoted in many educational and political spheres promotes “a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time.”²³ It is important to consider this theory, as it forms the basis of the new sex education curricula in many of our Canadian provinces.

We can ask if the wilful denial of sexual difference will fulfill the desires that motivate the theory: will gender theory answer the problems in the relationship between men and women? Or, is there a more human and realistic path, one that is in keeping with “the beauty of God’s creative design” that we see within our very bodies?

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND THE CALL TO COMMUNION

19. Another way of looking at the difference between men and women is as a call to a communion of lives. In the discovery of our bodies as male or female is an original call to open ourselves up to the other. “The difference between man and woman is not meant to stand in opposition, or to subordinate, but is for the sake of communion and generation, always in the image and likeness of God.”²⁴ As we said above, the desire to love and to be loved lies at the core of the human person. This desire is also written in our bodies “in the reciprocity between male and female.”

Pope Francis urges us to look more deeply at the social motivations of gender theory and to work for more harmonious and respectful relationships between women and men:

Modern contemporary culture has opened new spaces, new forms of freedom and new depths in order to enrich the understanding of this difference. But it has also introduced many doubts and much skepticism. For example, I ask myself, if the

²² Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 56.

²³ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 56.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, April 15, 2015.

so-called gender theory is not, at the same time, an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it. Yes, we risk taking a step backwards. The removal of difference in fact created a problem, not a solution. In order to resolve the problems in their relationships, men and women need to speak to one another more, listen to each other more, get to know one another better, love one another more. They must treat each other with respect and cooperate in friendship. On this human basis, sustained by the grace of God, it is possible to plan a lifelong marital and familial union.²⁵

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND FRUITFULNESS

20. When we look at the reality of being created male and female, another primary piece of evidence appears. The sexual union of these differentiated bodies leads to the possibility of the generation of new life. In the “beauty of nature willed by the Creator,” new human beings come to be through this loving union of a man and a woman.²⁶ From the primary fact of the child coming from the sexual union of man and woman, we can discern a mystery that can also be glimpsed in all of nature: new life emerges, comes forth, from the union of two beings who are at once similar and dissimilar. Fruitfulness comes forth only on the basis of *identity* and *difference*. This relationship between identity, difference and fruitfulness is what the Church often calls the “nuptial mystery.” An analogy of this mystery can be seen in all levels of nature, from the biological to the personal. Ultimately, God revealed himself as the origin and archetype of this mystery as one being and three persons, as a Father and a Son and as Holy Spirit who is the fruit of their communion. In God who is Love, we see that all love is called to be fruitful.

We have perhaps become immune to this mystery of human fruitfulness in an age dominated by contraception and reproductive technologies. Today it seems that fruitfulness has almost nothing to do with sexual difference and the unity of the male and female bodies. Through technological innovation, a child can now be created through a mechanism totally removed from the sexual union of a man and woman. But what is the significance of the denial of what we have called the nuptial mystery? Does it matter to the couple, or to the child who is the fruit of their love?

21. If the logic of love is at the same time the logic of the fulfillment of the person, then we cannot imagine that interfering with the nuptial mystery will be of no consequence. Let us look back at what we said above about the language of the body and the desire of the human heart to love and be loved. Because the unity of our person is at once physical, spiritual and emotional, in the sexual act the body “speaks”; it reveals the person. Because we desire to give ourselves to the beloved in the sexual act, the language of the body should “speak” of the totality of this gift. We are made for and desire the total communication of our person to the other. When men or women wilfully tamper with their capacity for fruitfulness, they are tampering at the same time

²⁵ Pope Francis, *General Audience*, April 15, 2015.

²⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to Cor Unum*, January 19, 2013.

with the mystery of love that defines them and their union, even if they are not immediately aware of this. Due to our fallen nature, there is a temptation to let our sexual desire and affection for the other turn inwards and become focused on ourselves, making it difficult to remain open to the presence of the other as a good in and of themselves. By intentionally excluding the possibility of the generation of another human life, we also risk reducing the presence of our partner to someone to fulfill our own gratification. We can easily forget that our love comes from and participates in God's greater, fruitful love for ourselves and for the world. Our love grows towards fulfillment when it remembers its belonging to this greater story.²⁷

22. Another way of seeing the value of the nuptial mystery in the life of the couple is from the perspective of a child. A child is the fruit of a union between a man and a woman. Ideally, this union is the expression of love. The child needs this love, and the affection of her mother and father, to grow in a mature and balanced way. The child needs to be welcomed as a free gift to know her deep identity as a beloved child of God. However, what happens to our understanding of the child when we deny the nuptial mystery? Today, more than ever, a child is understood in terms of a "right." There is no longer the need of a mother and a father in order to welcome a child. Our culture has thought of many possible ways to facilitate one's so-called right to a child: in-vitro fertilization and women acting as gestational mothers are two such examples. What impact does this have on the child's self-awareness? Does it hinder his or her awareness of the gift character of life and love?

THE ROLE OF SEXUAL DESIRE

23. Having looked at the reality of sexual difference and its link with fruitfulness, let us now turn our attention to the experience of human love. How does human love grow? Part of our human experience of being male and female is sexual desire. This desire awakens in puberty and is part of the nature of the human person. Sexual desire reveals something fundamental about the human person and the Creator's plan for our happiness. Our Creator has given this to us, too.

On a very basic level, our attraction to the other is a sign that our happiness does not lie within ourselves alone.²⁸ We are called outward to the other; the attraction to the other allows us to break out of our self-sufficiency and illusions of complete autonomy. Through this desire, we discover that life begins with a call of love. Our sexuality promises us happiness and fulfillment. Sexual attraction is a taste of the plenitude of human life; it seems to answer the heart's desire to love and to be loved. Because it touches the deepest desires of the human heart, sexual attraction is one of the strongest forces in our lives. Although it is fundamentally good, sexual desire is corrupted when we make of it an absolute in itself instead of allowing it to be a pathway to communion with the other person.

²⁷ There are methods of family planning that are approved by the Church and that respect this language of the body, as well as the couple's freedom to plan their family in prayer and dialogue with each other and God. Various resources on natural family planning can be found on the website of the Catholic Organization for Life and Family at www.colf.ca.

²⁸ The progression of ideas from sensuality to affectivity and the affirmation of the person comes from Fr. Jose Granados' catechesis "Theology of the Body: A Catechesis into the Fullness of Love," written for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Catechetical Sunday, September 19, 2012.

AFFECTIVITY AND THE PATH TO FREEDOM

24. In order for sexual desire to become a pathway towards a true encounter with the other person, this desire needs to be integrated with human affection and emotions. In our own experience, we see that sexual desire is not the only ingredient of human love; affectivity, or the feelings that unite us to the other person, is also necessary for sexual desire to develop into a fully human love.

When we fall in love, we begin to enter the world of the one we love. Our life is no longer simply our own, but in a profound way, our life becomes shared with the other. Human emotions are integral to this experience. Joy, care, concern and respect for the other are examples of the emotions that unite us in the experience of human love. This affection helps us to integrate the sexual attraction within the love relationship between a man and a woman.

Without this integration of human affectivity, a relationship risks becoming stuck at the initial level of sexual attraction. This initial sexual attraction, then, cannot grow to integrate the totality of each of the partners' lives. The deep human need to love and to be loved cannot be achieved when the relationship focuses on sexual pleasure only.

At the same time, we realize that emotions, too, are not a sufficient basis for human love. Our emotions can fluctuate; sometimes they are strong and at other times they seem absent altogether. If we made feelings the benchmark of human love, we would risk making an idol of our sentiments and feelings, as if "feeling good" were sufficient for a relationship to endure. Also, love would seem to disappear when our feelings changed.

We live in a time and culture that, for the past two centuries, has exalted human emotion and sentimentality as the height of human love. This leads to a profound fragility in our experience of love. Certainly, it is not wrong to want to "feel good," to possess the feelings of love and of being loved! But when these feelings become the goal of our lives, rather than the good of the other person, then they have become an idol. We must therefore remember another essential element of human love that rises above and integrates desire and emotions: the affirmation of the *person*.

AFFIRMATION OF THE PERSON

25. Sexual desire and human emotions become stable dimensions of love when they are given time to mature within a personal love. What is a personal love? It is a love that recognizes the mystery of the other as a gift and that affirms the other as a unique good in and of herself. The goal of personal love is the recognition of the other as a gift to ourselves and to the world. The one we love is more than our feelings towards him or her. When we affirm the other as a person, we begin to love the other and respect the other for who they are, for how God made them to be, even when it does not correspond to our ideas or feelings of how they should act or be.

26. At the level of personal love, sexual desire and emotions do not disappear or become “sublimated”; no, within a personal love, sexual desire and human emotions become truer and more profound. They achieve their purpose of guiding us towards the possibility of a truly free and mature human love.

At this personal level, the couple is also able to look beyond their own love and to consider its fruitfulness for others and the world. They can recognize that their love is a gift not only for themselves, but also for others. They desire to share this love with others, so that they, too, can discover a love that is free, a love that welcomes, and a love that is fruitful.

27. We do not arrive at personal love overnight. It is not an immediate quality of human love! The fact that love needs time to grow and mature is something we do not often consider in our day. Jean Vanier often speaks of this reality in his many public lectures and books. He suggests that it might be more honest to speak of “growing in love” rather than of “falling in love,” as the path of true love requires effort, sacrifice and time. Love remains fragile if it is not educated towards a love that sees and values the other as a good in his or her own right. Pope Francis offers a beautiful reflection on the educational path of human love centred upon the dignity of the human person in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.²⁹

SIN AND THE INABILITY TO WELCOME THE OTHER AS A GIFT

28. As we saw in our introduction, there are many currents in our culture that seem to prevent us from living this awareness of gift: the gift of our own life, the gift of the one we love and the gift of all of creation. We live distracted lives. We all have the experience of desiring to love well, yet falling short. We tend to reduce the other to our own measure and to use them, in small and bigger ways, for the accomplishments of our own needs and goals. We all know the shame of hurting those we love, and also the hurt of being used and not respected.

This discrepancy between our desire to love and our capacity to love is something we can all affirm in our experience. We cannot love well by means of our own efforts. This reality of sin or human frailty is another primary piece of evidence we discover in our human experience. We need help to welcome ourselves as a gift from God and to welcome the one we love within this gaze. We need the help of God’s grace.

In his redemptive sacrifice, Jesus Christ made his saving grace available to us. This grace is not “abstract” or merely “spiritual” help. It is the gift of God’s life made present to us so that we can learn to love more truly, to love others as he has loved us (John 13:34). In the Church, through the liturgy, the sacraments and her moral teachings, we are continuously taught the meaning of gift and offered the grace to be conformed to the image of the Son, the Father’s gift of Love (Romans 8:29). In the sacramental life of the Church, we are offered a true pedagogy of love.

²⁹ See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 128, 147–153, 259–290.

CHRISTIAN MORALITY IS A RESPONSE OF LOVE

29. We can see now that Christian morality, before being a set of rules or limits imposed upon our desires, is rooted above all in a relationship with the person of Christ in the communion of the Church. “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”³⁰ In this sense, “the moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man.”³¹

In the Year of Mercy, we were reminded that the moral life unfolds and matures within this encounter with the love of God. If we are not aware of God’s love for us and his presence throughout our day, let us pray to have a simple heart ready to welcome him. The Church’s moral guidelines, even if we cannot always understand them, are in the service of a true encounter between ourselves and God, between human and Divine Love.

HUMAN LOVE IN THE IMAGE OF DIVINE LOVE

30. Human love has always held a privileged place in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Just as we believe that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, so too the Church believes that the reality of human love is held within the greater reality of Divine Love.

Christian revelation of the origin and destiny of human love within Divine Love sheds light on the nature of reality and the primary human experiences we have been referring to. In the light of the revelation of a Creator God who is Love, we can glimpse the significance of these elements of our human experience that we might not have otherwise perceived, such as the mystery of sexual difference, the gift character of life, and the deeper meaning of our being created as male and female. These primary truths form the basis of the Church’s moral teachings on sexuality and marriage and family life. They are the basis for her unified vision of the person and the mystery of human love.

CONCLUSION

31. This unified vision of being at home in reality is increasingly at odds with how the world invites us to think of ourselves, our bodies and the meaning of human love. What the Church proposes as unified, the world invites us to consider as fragmented: for example, the unity of love and marriage, sex and fecundity, and gender and the body. All around us, we are told we can love without the stability of marriage and sexual difference, that we can have sex without the fruitfulness of children, and that our sexual identity can be asserted based on our own convictions, despite the given gender of the body.

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 1.

³¹ Pope Saint John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* 10.

How can we discover a path of love and fulfillment when everything seems fragmented? Pope Francis warns in *Laudato Si'* of the dangers of this kind of alienation of men and women from themselves:

When human beings fail to find their true place in the world, they misunderstand themselves and end up acting against themselves: “Not only has God given the earth to man and woman, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given, but, man and woman too are God’s gift to themselves. They must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which they have been endowed.”³²

32. We believe that true and lasting joy and a meaningful existence can only be had by entering more deeply into the logic of love that we can discover in our bodies and our hearts. Looking together at our primary human experiences “with the eyes of Christ,” we desire to show the reasonableness and beauty of the Church’s vision of human love.³³ “Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, above all else, the great worth of a human being.”³⁴

Through the course of these reflections, we see that the theology of the body broadly speaking is more than just another way of explaining the Church’s moral opposition to contraception and divorce. It offers a new way of understanding our human experience of love and the desire to be loved. It offers a new way of looking at our human experience and, in fact, of all life, within the merciful gaze of the Father who created us gratuitously, for no other reason than his abounding love. In an age that threatens the very foundations of human life and makes us blind to ourselves, this teaching helps us to grasp the reasons why we exist and offers a path for human happiness as followers of Jesus Christ.

33. We hope that this reflection on our primary human experiences can shed light on the reasonableness of the vision of human love that is proposed in the teachings mentioned above. In our culture that glorifies fragmentation, alienating us from ourselves and each other, we, the Bishops of Canada, as “co-workers for your joy,” desire to repose a unified vision of life and love. We pray that you can discover this path to freedom and a fullness of life and love in the communion of believers in the Church.

³² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* 115. Pope Francis is quoting Pope Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* 38.

³³ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 78.

³⁴ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 128.

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Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Feast of Saint Matthew, September 21, 2017.

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Code: 185-114

ISBN: 978-0-88997-820-1

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