

The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality

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Questions for Chapter 3

Sexual Intercourse: The Natural Word of Love

1. Referring to sexual intercourse, the author claims that “even people without revelation can come to know the meanings that God built into these physical acts through internal likeness and parallelism of structure.” What does intercourse most obviously symbolize?

Most obviously, sexual actions symbolize love—but a very particular kind of love. Because our bodies are not mere collections of functions, but express visibly part of the natural and intrinsic *meaning* of our selves.

The Meaning of the Body

2. Describe the characteristics of the male body and how its structure parallels the male psyche and male action in the world. What do these physical realities symbolize?

A man’s genitals are external, hanging loosely, on arousal they point away from him, at climax, expel his seed from him. He is quick to respond, especially to visual stimuli. He can also quickly cease to respond if other stimulus intervenes. He has great freedom in this regard. After-effects are non-existent. He can initiate intercourse quickly—even against a woman’s wishes. This symbolizes that on a psychic level man is outwardly directed, he focuses attention spontaneously on things outside himself. He tends to quick action rather than contemplation. He is interested in display and in manifestation of his sexuality, either directly or in contest with other men. His whole life manifests his inner need to take initiative. Thus, a man’s family remains psychologically external to him. His family extends him in time and space and in range of influence and power. He will establish strong relationships with the world beyond himself and his family. He senses a duty to act in the world, to make full use of his powers. He is one who builds the world.

A man’s interiority comes from the mind, through which he grasps the external world, his own feelings, and even his own sexuality. Through this interiority of the mind he is able to make the world a suitable place for himself and his family.

A man is also expendable. His body is made for dangerous action and quick reaction in response to danger. He can fertilize many women. Society does not need an individual man in the same way that it needs an individual woman. He can be expended, sent into battle, to protect the women and children at home.

3. Describe the characteristics of the female body and how its structure parallels the female psyche and female action in the world. What do these realities symbolize?

A woman’s genitals are interior, hidden. Her response is largely tactile and much slower than the man’s—in both arousal and in subsiding. This prolongation in her body signifies and even greater prolongation in her mind and emotions. If she conceives, she will be heavy with child for long months, beginning a relationship with her child that the father can never have.

To accommodate the child, there is an empty space within her that only another person can fill. This inner space is open for the mystery of a new persons. A woman’s interiority is not primarily of the mind, but is rooted in her womb and its openness to the seed of her husband and for a child. A woman has a special power of nonverbal communication that allows her to better respond to

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her child who cannot speak. The woman lacks the bodily strength of the male. She needs someone who can protect both her and her children.

The woman has a corresponding psychic need for security. Just as she nourishes her infant with her own body, so is the woman called to nourish them spiritually. Her bodily unsuitability for combat symbolizes her basic drive for commitment, a desire and need for love and guidance by the man she loves and trusts.

4. Explain what the author means when he says that St. Paul's commands (Eph 5:24-25, 28, 33; Col 3:18-19) are "fully in accord with our nature." What occurs when a husband or wife falls short of these commands?

The man who truly loves his wife satisfies her greatest need as a woman, her need for the security of a steadfast love and faithful protection. The wife who obeys her husband confirms the need he has for authority so that he can accept his full responsibility towards his family. She thus helps him to hold fast to a commitment he might otherwise be tempted to reject; whereas a wife who disregards her husband's authority robs him of his function and undermines his ability to give her what she most needs and desires—his abiding love. So too, the husband who is not concerned to make manifest in body, mind and heart his love for his wife, makes it far harder for her to submit to his authority, no longer seen as being exercised for her good but arbitrarily or merely for others. He thus weakens her ability to give him that support, in his wrestling with the world, that he needs from her.

5. Describe the meaning of nakedness both before and after the fall.

The man and the woman were both naked and were not ashamed. Nakedness before another is more than mere nudity. It symbolizes that each is meant to be uncovered to the other spiritually. It means that each stands in the present moment without psychological covering or concealing any of one's interior self. And each accepts the other, see thus naked, whatever defects are thus exposed.

In our fallen state, nakedness before another calls, especially for the woman, for no small trust and humility. Will he accept her for herself, as she is in herself, regardless of imperfection, fault or law, whether spiritual or physical?

In turn the husband must be able to give himself to her as he is in his masculinity, without pretending to be less or more than he is. Only through he can he discover what it is to be a man, to be truly male.

Each of them stands as a personal gift from God before the other but. Hence each is not only to revere and appreciate the other but to worship God through the other.

### The Meaning of Intercourse

6. What does the pleasure of sexual union symbolize?

The physical delight, though so strongly and intensely felt in the flesh, symbolizes something beyond itself. For the pleasure one receives, as also the pleasure that one gives, is a pleasure that comes from, through, and by another person. The fact that intercourse is with another person gives rise to the greatest pleasures in marriage. One's pleasure is not an isolated pleasure centered on one's own body, validating nothing and generating shame. It is a pleasure of mind and heart in which the pleasure of another becomes one's own.

7. What limitations does the interpersonal aspect impose upon intercourse? Include physical and psychic aspects. How do these limitations serve to remind us of God?

The other person is not simply an object that one is dealing with. The beloved is another person, of equal rights and stature, of equal dignity before God. Hence, one is not free to use him or her for one's pleasure, nor even as one upon whom pleasure may be imposed. Any attempt to force the other person sexually contradicts the signification of this "built-in" limitation on intercourse that is constituted by the other person.

Another limitation: Neither spouse is capable of giving all of himself or herself to the other. Each belongs to God. They love each other, they are bound to each other, but only God truly possess either or can claim the total love of either. Total union with one who is not God is impossible.

Were it possible, it would be idolatry, giving the creature the status of the divine. Only God can own and take possession of any person without destroying or degrading that person.

This reality is symbolized by the fact that their two bodies do not melt into one another as they imagine at times they desire to do. This physical-separateness-in-union acts as a symbol of what occurs at the psychic level. Two creatures can never be so united that they are only one. No creature can take the place of God. This aloneness, then is itself a symbol of an openness to God. Through the other person, one is invited to love God more deeply and more perfectly.

8. Describe the natural symbolic meaning apparent (though much muted today) when intercourse "has its total consequences," for the couple together and for the man and woman separately. When intercourse has its total consequences, a new human person comes into being. This mystery of parenthood offers new strength and maturity to the personality of each and without which neither can realize all his natural potential. Symbolically, a wife desires to give her husband the fulness of manhood, the gravity, the dignity, the sense of responsibility and sobriety which characterize a father. The husband in turn desires to give his wife that particular richness, warmth and fierce tenderness which are characteristic of a mother.

### Natural Marriage

9. Describe what is needed for a young person entering marriage to make the full meaning of marriage his own. Define marriage as an institution. A young person must first learn what that meaning is, and then *desire to gain the ability* to speak well this word of love. Marriage is the institution by which those who do not yet know how to say totally by their act of sexual intercourse all that it means, bind themselves to live in such a way as to achieve that knowledge and understanding and to grow through practice into expressing in each marital act what are, at that moment, the most appropriate aspects, if not the totality, of that meaning.
10. On what grounds is even natural marriage (with some qualifications) indissoluble? On the grounds that humans are imperfect, even natural marriage cannot be broken or dissolved because there is no defect of love whatever that can invalidate a solemn contract to overcome all of one's defects of love and to assist in all ways possible one's spouse to do the same. The ground for entering into this union is precisely the knowledge that both are defective in love's perfection, and that neither person is as yet able to intend fully what his body is already saying by the act of intercourse.
11. In what ways does the natural symbolism of sexual intercourse point toward monogamy? How is this different for the male and the female? Why is polygamy a highly defective form of marriage?

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No matter how many men a woman might open herself to, it is the sperm cell from but one partner that is joined to her ovum to initiate new human life. Psychologically also, a woman, even if promiscuous, tends to dream of one man to whom she might eventually give herself. On the other hand, a man can have fertile intercourse with many women, but he cannot give himself totally to one without depriving another. Therefore, polygamy is a highly defective form of marriage.

12. Describe the ways that intercourse within is a symbol of marriage, not only in its static sense, but of marriage as progress and as growth.

Much of what we do comes not from love but from selfishness. Marriage is a commitment to grow in selflessness. We can only utter the full meaning of what intercourse symbolizes when we have learned through asceticism and through penance, the self-control that is needed to get beyond our selfishness. Only then can we truly mean and fully intend in mind and heart what our act of intercourse actually says in and through a symbolism that has been charged by God with even greater meaning through His revelation.