



Thinking about Sex and Marital Surrender

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Do Americans think enough about sex? Some would argue that it seems to be the only thing on people's minds in troubled times like these where so much attention is lavished on celebrity couplings, Viagra and breast augmentation. Yet there is an important difference between sex on the brain and sex as an object of thought, and we face a rather urgent cultural need to reflect more deeply on the inner order and significance of human sexual activity. The failure to think carefully about the deeper meaning of sex, I believe, stands at the root of several modern-day bioethical problems like *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and contraception.

Sex has a delicate structure of its own. At the heart of the marital act, we can identify a kind of *surrender*. The inner language of sexuality involves a surrender of our self and our self-will. Prior to the marital act, one already sees how this self-surrender begins to come into play: does my spouse feel up to it tonight? If we become pregnant, will I support her in the morning sickness that may ensue? Am I willing to surrender my desire for intimacy now, if we agree that we ought to wait? Am I ready to surrender myself to the various demands that will come with raising children well and responsibly? Am I open to my spouse's concerns tonight, even more than my own? Even within the marital act itself, we discover this same aspect of self-surrender. St. Augustine referred to the intensity of sexual intimacy, noting that "when it reaches its climax, there is an almost

total extinction of mental alertness; the intellectual senses, as it were, are overwhelmed." The point of climax, then, also involves a language of *letting go* of oneself, so that we enter a new and ecstatic space where we are no longer in command, where our own self-will no longer prevails.

This aspect of surrendering ourselves, looking to the other, and relinquishing control is a basic dynamism at the heart of human sexuality. Whenever a new human life is conceived at the center of this surrender, it suddenly appears as a "third", and a co-equal with its parents. The child seems to appear out of nothing, precisely when the parents find they can lay claim to nothing of their own, when their surrender has become complete. In their mutual surrender, the child can come as an equal, entering the world not as a product or a project, but as a gift awaiting discovery and unpacking. In the depths of their one-flesh union, in their "union of self-annihilation," they discover this transcendent and mysterious possibility of engendering/receiving a "third." That "third" comes as an equal to the parents in part because the parents cannot selfishly lay claim to the new life as if it were an entitlement, possession or right. With the ultimate origin of that new life out of their control, they cannot subordinate it as "unequal" or "lesser" than themselves, because of the inherent equality of origins between themselves as human beings

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and their children as human beings. The engendering of new life, in an important sense, always stands just outside their full control. The inner structure of human sexuality thus includes this central and discernible meaning: that the root origin of new human life is meant to ultimately lie beyond our own direct determination, being instead the fruit of a collaborative surrender and union with our spouse and with God.

Once we begin to see this beautiful inner order of human sexuality, we can also begin to appreciate how IVF and contraception manage to upset the apple cart of sexual relations in married life. At the heart of IVF, for example, we encounter not only manipulation but also a new form of *domination*. Instead of the child appearing as an equal in the midst of true self-abandonment following sexual intimacy, the child is now highly unequal to the parent, a pawn to be played with in the endgame of satisfying parental wants. The child is radically unequal to his parents because he is manufactured in laboratory glassware, treated as a product, manhandled, prodded, possibly even frozen or discarded so as to assure that a desired result is forthcoming for those who dominate over him and his origins. Instead of surrender, the origin of human life is turned into a laboratory effort that is subject to our own direct determination and manipulation. The arrival of a “third” is not a gift that appears in the midst of our one-flesh surrender, but a

scheme to be realized by making use of all our wiles and resources. Our own willfulness, rather than our mutual surrender, is the central dynamic in IVF, much as it is in contraception, which closes off the marital act to true openness and mutual surrender.

When a married couple uses contraception, they say with their bodies that they do not, in fact, surrender to each other. They hold back a deep and critical aspect of themselves, namely, their own fruitfulness and fertility. They decline to share that part of themselves with each other and with God. Because sex is about *total* surrender, contraception strikes at the heart of human sexuality by turning it into a partial and warped exchange, where one spouse may use the other to gain certain desired satisfactions. This can amount more to manipulation and domination, perhaps even a form of mutual masturbation, rather than loving surrender. The entire dimension of loss-of-self in mutual surrender, opening up a self-less space for the arrival of a “third,” is stripped away by contraception. Any child who might happen to be conceived (in spite of any contraceptive efforts) arrives not as a welcome “third” equal to the parents, but as an unequal, less-than-desired encumbrance. The “third” is perceived as a threat to my desires and plans. I must remain in command, in charge, rather than living in the fruitful mystery of total surrender in marriage. The appearance of this “third” who is outside

my game plan may lead to the next step — abortion — reflecting a radical closure of the marriage to any kind of surrender or acceptance, and a firm rejection of any kind of equality between parent and child. So while there should be real surrender in this setting, with contraception there is instead a real form of domination over the origins of another.

Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical letter described “That love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings...” This mysterious love is particularly reflected in the marital embrace of husband and wife, calling forth their mutual self-abandonment and total surrender, and throwing open a receptive space in their marriage to new life and new love.

Rev. Tadeusz Pacholczyk, Ph.D. earned his doctorate in neuroscience from Yale and did post-doctoral work at Harvard. He is a priest of the diocese of Fall River, MA, and serves as the Director of Education at The National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia. Father Tad writes a monthly column on timely life issues. From stem cell research to organ donation, abortion to euthanasia, he offers a clear and compelling analysis of modern bioethical questions, addressing issues we may confront at one time or another in our daily living. His column, entitled “Making Sense of Bioethics” is nationally syndicated in the U.S. to numerous diocesan newspapers, and has been reprinted by newspapers in England, Canada, Poland and Australia.

