

Celibacy, Marriage, and Heaven

John Paul concludes his chapter on heaven by talking about celibacy for the kingdom. One might ask, “Isn’t celibacy a rejection of sexuality and our call to union?” Quite the opposite! Those who sacrifice marriage “for the sake of the kingdom” (Matthew 19:12) do so in order to devote all of their energies and desires to the ultimate marriage—the marriage of Christ and the Church. In a way, they are “skipping” the sacrament (the earthly sign) in anticipation of the ultimate reality. By doing so, celibate men and women declare to the world that the kingdom of God is here (see Matthew 12:28).

The celibate witness does not say, “Sex and marriage are bad, and if you really wanted to be holy you should give them up as I have.” No! Rather, the celibate man or woman proclaims that there is something even better than the union of husband and wife—and it is worth sacrificing everything for. Those who choose celibacy as a way of life proclaim that heaven is real. In fact, they bet their very lives on it.

Of course, marriage also points to heaven, but in a different way. As mentioned earlier, the joys of marital intimacy are meant to be a kind of foretaste of the eternal joys of union with God. However, in order for marriage to bring the happiness it is meant to bring, spouses must live it as God intended “from the beginning.” This means they must contend diligently with the effects of sin.

Marriage does not justify lust. As a sacrament, marriage is meant to symbolize the union of Christ and the Church. The body has a “language” that is meant to express God’s *free, total,*

faithful, and fruitful love. This is exactly what spouses commit to at the altar. The priest asks the couple, “Have you come here freely and without reservation? Will you love each other as husband and wife all the days of your life? Will you receive children lovingly from God?” Bride and groom both answer, “Yes.”

Spouses are meant to express this same “yes” *with their bodies* whenever they become one flesh. Sexual intercourse is meant to be a renewal of wedding vows – where spouses again give themselves to each other *freely, totally, faithfully, and fruitfully*. In this way, the words of marital consent are made flesh.



Understanding Sexual Morality

The Church’s sexual ethic begins to make sense when viewed through this lens. It is not a prudish list of prohibitions. It is a call to embrace our own “greatness,” our own God-like dignity. It is a call to live the love we are created for.

Since a prophet is one who proclaims God’s love, John Paul II described the body and sexual union as “prophetic.” But, he added, we must be careful to distinguish true prophets from false ones. If we can speak the truth with our bodies, we can also speak lies.

Ultimately, all questions of sexual morality come down to one simple question: Does this truly image God’s *free, total, faithful, fruitful* love or does it not? In practical terms, how healthy would a marriage be if spouses were regularly unfaithful to their vows? On the other hand, how healthy would a marriage be if spouses regularly renewed their vows, expressing an ever-increasing commitment to them? This is what is at stake in the Church’s teaching on sexual morality.

Masturbation, fornication, adultery, intentionally sterilized sex, homosexual acts—none of these image God’s *free, total, faithful, and fruitful* love. None of these behaviors express and renew wedding vows. They aren’t *marital*.

Does this mean people who behave in such ways are “inherently evil?” No. More than likely, they are just confused about how to satisfy their genuine desires for love.

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If I offered you a counterfeit million-dollar bill and a real million-dollar bill, which one would you prefer? Silly question, right? But what if you have been raised in a culture that incessantly bombards you with propaganda convincing you that counterfeit is the real thing and the real thing is a counterfeit? Wouldn’t you be a little confused?