

Finding the meaning of your life in Christ

Third in a series
By SHAWN McMAHON

Introduction

A young man approaches his pastor and says, "Father, I'm quitting my job and I'm moving out to Washington, D.C."

With deep curiosity, the priest replies, "Oh yeah? Why?"

In consternation, the young man flexes his eyebrows and says, "I want to move out of here and go out to D.C. because I really want to find myself!"

In utter amazement at the young man's response, the priest replies, "Well, when did you lose yourself and how do you know that you will be out in D.C.?"

The young man's desire to "find himself" reveals two deep questions that exist in the heart of every human person: "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of life?" These two questions are profoundly linked to our understanding of the truth and the meaning of our sexuality.

Questions about our sexuality always deal with this fundamental question: "What does it mean to be a man? a woman?" In other words, "Oh God! Who am I and why did you make me this way?"

Sexuality is not something purely biological. In fact, it concerns the nature of the person as male or female.

This understanding of "who we are" is addressed at the beginning of the document, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family in 1995 to help parents form their children according to God's plan for human sexuality. We as parents need to understand "who we are as male and female" so that we might be "living witnesses" to our children. With this understanding we can further teach the faith we are living.

Jesus Christ reveals man to himself

According to Pope John Paul II, we need go no further than Jesus Christ if we want to "find ourselves."

"Jesus Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear," the pope says. Although psychology has its place, we won't necessarily "find ourselves" on the "clinical couch" in a therapist's office anymore than that young man will "find himself" in Washington, D.C.

Instead, we should stop at the feet of Jesus Christ. To understand one's own existence, one must begin by looking to Jesus Christ, for He is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Looking around our world, we see many disconcerting things in relationships between men and women – fighting, divorce, abuse, neglect, hate, revenge, etc. The words of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew tell us, "... in the beginning, it was not so" (Matthew 19:8).

Before original sin, the relationship of man and woman was characterized by union and harmony. If we are to understand the truth and meaning of our sexuality, we must look to the experience of Adam and Eve before original sin to see how it is that God created us. Original sin has "blurred" our understanding of each other, but in the beginning, it was not so.

The state of original innocence

In his "Theology of the Body," Pope John Paul II provides deep insights into "who we are" as male and female through his reflections on Scripture. The Pope begins with the Book of Genesis.

When Adam saw Eve for the first time (Scripture says they were both "naked without shame"), he exclaimed, "At last, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"

What was Adam seeing? He saw that his sexuality (his maleness) and Eve's sexuality (her femaleness) were meant for each other. Adam saw that his heart, his mind and his body – in fact, his whole being – were meant to be united with his bride Eve. Our first parents realized that they were called to become one flesh – they were called to communion. Each one saw the glory of God revealed through the other's body. It was truly a match made in Heaven!

The Pope calls this the "nuptial" or marital meaning of the body. Male and female are meant for communion in the permanent, faithful, fruitful covenant of marriage.

Before the Fall, Adam desired to make a total gift of himself to Eve and she desired to receive him fully, and in so doing to make a gift of herself back to Adam in perfect communion, perfect self-giving love. They had discovered the meaning of life! There was no tension, no nagging, no suspicion, no "headaches" or other excuses. Their intentions were selfless and driven by the desire to be a gift to each other.

Consequences of disobedience

So what happened? Why don't we experience our sexuality this way?

The words of Christ point us

to Genesis: When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons... 'I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself'" (Genesis 3:7-10).

What is the first thing that happens to Adam and Eve after they sin? Realizing they are naked, they put on clothing because they are afraid. Why? Because lust has now entered the world. Now that they have disobeyed God, His love has "died" in their hearts. As a result, Adam and Eve's sexual desire is now self-oriented and self-focused instead of self-giving.

Adam and Eve put on clothing because they are now afraid of being used by one another and want to protect themselves. In short, each is afraid the other will want sex for his own personal gratification. According to Pope John Paul II, this is lust – sexual desire void of God's self-giving love.

To put modern dress on the situation – Adam will be easily tempted by pornography. The desires of his heart are flipped upside-down. In his battle against fallen desire, Adam's desire is now to use women for his own gratification. In other words, Adam's desire to give himself selflessly is no longer a given. As for Eve, now she will try to find emotional fulfillment in soap operas and romance novels and she will be tempted to emotionally manipulate Adam. She will have to battle that fallen tendency as well.

This is our fallen condition as human beings. There is a constant battle between the way we are and the way God made us "in the beginning." We have inherited this from Adam and Eve. Our understanding of our sexuality, maleness and femaleness, made in the image and likeness of God, is now twisted. The hearts of all people are now geared toward self-gratification instead of self-giving. That is why we have wars, addictions, family fights, rapes, grudges, etc. We are fallen. So, how do we get out of this mess?

New life in Jesus Christ

Fortunately, we are not only fallen, but also redeemed in Jesus Christ. Christ came to earth, suffered, died and rose again so that we might have new life. Christ has come not only to give us eternal life, but also to restore the "original order" of our sexuality (like Adam and Eve before the Fall). Jesus has come to "restore" the love of God in our ex-



CNS/Reuters

A new bride looks away after she and her husband were blessed by Pope John Paul II during a general audience in January, 2002 at the Vatican. Pope John Paul II's teachings on marriage and sexuality have contributed to a greater sense of this sacrament as a model for the love between God and His Church.

perience of sexuality through a change of our hearts. Our hearts must be penetrated with the life of the Holy Spirit.

What does this look like in real life? Have you ever wondered why the pornography-trade is a multi-billion dollar industry? Porn is largely directed at men because our hearts, due to original sin, are "deflated" – God's love has been weakened in our hearts. But, Christ has come to "re-inflate" our hearts with the love of God.

A man who receives the love of God into his life can have his heart reoriented to love instead of selfish desire and can overcome lust. He must accept Christ's redemption into his heart and that's no easy thing. But it's worth the effort. If the heart is changed, right action will follow. Each of us, male and female, must pray that our hearts will be changed, not just our actions. Through prayer and meeting Christ in the sacraments, especially reconciliation and the Eucharist, we can begin to experience this change of heart here on earth.

Conclusion: Marriage is a foretaste of union with God

As humans, our final destiny is not earthly. If we accept the invitation to redemption, our sexuality, as part of our nature, will be fulfilled and completed in part here on earth and completely in Heaven. In short, the Holy Father says that in the resurrection

we discover, in an eternal dimension, the same "marital" meaning of our bodies – that we are meant for communion. But since there is no human marriage in Heaven, we find the fulfillment of our sexuality (our natural desire for intimate union) in meeting the mystery of the living God face to face.

Marriage is a foretaste of eternal union with God. It points us to the divine union we all seek. That is why the celibate lives of priests and consecrated men and women show us that human marriage will "give way" to union with God. In other words, there is no sex in Heaven. As saints, we will all be celibate. Celibates embody that reality here on earth. Indeed, their celibacy is not a lack of something, but rather a fullness of their ultimate marital vocation to embrace God as their Beloved.

Pope John Paul II's teachings on the meaning of human sexuality, which I have here attempted to summarize briefly, provide the basis for understanding ourselves and finding true happiness. But we must have eyes to see that such understanding and happiness begin and end with Christ.

Editor's note: Shawn McMahon is the Director of the Office of Family Life in the Diocese of La Crosse. *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* may be purchased by mailing a check for \$2.60, payable to the Diocese of La Crosse, the Office of Catechesis and Evangelization, PO Box 4004, La Crosse, WI 54602-4004, or call (608) 791-2658 or e-mail alankford@dioceseoflacrosse.com.