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Jesus Caritas
Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted

'Thou shalt not commit adultery'

Part One

In our previous three articles, we considered God's demand of His people, in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, not to covet their neighbor's wife (or husband) nor their neighbor's goods. Now, let us consider the need to practice chastity in the single state, in married life and in vowed virginity.

To understand the Sixth Commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," we need to understand the goodness and beauty that sins against this commandment distort, how these sins damage God's plan for human love. It is sad to say that many of these sins are rampant in society today, especially those that threaten the very institution of marriage. Before considering these sins, let us look at what the Sixth Commandment protects and sustains.

Equal in dignity — different in identity

In the beginning of time, God created man and woman in His own divine image (Genesis 1:27ff). While all that God creates is good, human persons reflect this goodness in a special way because we are made in the very image and likeness of God. He gives equal personal dignity to both man and woman but also a sexual identity that differs in fundamental ways. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says

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(#2333), *"Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity. Physical, moral and spiritual difference and complementarity are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life. The harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out."*

When the Sixth Commandment is obeyed, and when the fullness of its implications are understood and embraced, then men and women can make a total gift of self that builds communion in love and that brings forth new life. Obedience to this command of God enables us to forge the virtue of chastity and to love one another in truth.

Obedience to the Sixth Commandment also lays the groundwork for complementary relations between men and women. Mutual support and authentic love arise not from a glossing over of gender differences but from a grateful recognition of different gifts and a respectful response to different needs.

Body and soul together

God created human persons for the sake of love, an embodied love. Our masculinity or femininity, in other words, enters into every dimension of our efforts to love. Unlike angels who have no bodies, we humans cannot love in a disembodied way. When we love, we make a free gift of our whole person, body and soul, according to our state in life. For most men and women, this occurs in the vocation of marriage. But it also occurs when God calls persons to virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. The whole person, body and soul, is called to make a total gift of self to God and to whomever God gives one to love.

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI explains this necessary unity of body and soul (#5), *"Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united... Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness... it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united,*

does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love — eros — able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur."

The teaching of the Church does not divide the soul from the body of the human being, never places them at odds with one another. But the recently translated "Gospel of Judas" makes this fatal error. In this Gnostic document, Judas is considered heroic, but why? Because his act of betrayal, supposedly requested by our Lord Himself, released Jesus' (good) spirit from His (evil) body! This was a common theological error among the Gnostic sects of the second century A.D. It represents a body-soul dualism that is antithetical to the Catholic faith, as the Fathers of the Church demonstrated at the time it was first proposed. This old heresy has emerged again in our time, but it is nothing new, just an old error built on contempt for the human body. It will not stand the test of time.

Theology of the Body

In the first several years of his papacy, Pope John Paul II presented a series of talks on the topic of human sexuality. He called it the "Theology of the Body." Drawing upon the biblical and patristic roots of the Church's teaching, the late Holy Father invited us to reflect on "the nuptial meaning of the body," meaning the ability each person has, as male or female, to become a gift for others.

The Theology of the Body is built upon the fact that the human body is good, even if bodily passions and sensual appetites make the practice of authentic love difficult. Lifelong efforts and the help of God's grace are needed to achieve self-mastery and generosity of heart. What is achieved through this struggle is the virtue of chastity.

The body is created by God in the divine image. Moreover, in Christ's incarnation, the Son of God became man, i.e. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, a man with a true human nature. In doing this, His human body forever participates in His divine nature. Through His resurrection He has redeemed humanity and given all men and women, body and soul, newfound dignity.

God calls human persons to love as He loves. God loves as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A communion of Persons, the Trinity freely loves, faithfully loves and fruitfully loves. Since we are created in the image

and likeness of God, we are to love as the One who created us.

Adultery distorts love

When God commands, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," He is not saying this because the body is bad, nor that all sexual activity is evil. Quite the opposite. God is telling us that the goodness of the body and of the sexual embrace is of such value that it must be handled with great care and only in a context of marriage, i.e. within a lifelong commitment according to the divine plan. The sexual embrace is only appropriate when the man and woman are able to make and do make a total gift of themselves, body and soul, in the context of a lifelong covenant, marriage.

Adultery and all other sexual sins fall short of this total gift; in doing so, they distort God's plan and harm the persons who commit them or are touched by them. On the other hand, chastity, which is a successful integration of one's sexuality and a grace-filled mastery of self, leads to integrity of life and authentic love.

In the next part of this series, we shall look more closely at the Sixth Commandment and at various offenses against marriage. Our purpose is not just to curse the darkness but rather to understand the dark nature of sexual sins so as to appreciate the nuptial meaning of the body in all its richness, the beauty of our being a man or woman.

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