

KAROL WOJTYLA'S LOVE AND RESPONSIBILITY: A PRECIS

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This document is a very brief summary of Karol Wojtyla's *Love And Responsibility*.

For further information, visit: <http://www.ox.compsoc.net/~leyshon/LR>

0. Background Information

The following is not part of Wojtyla's text, but is essential background information situating it in the Catholic moral tradition:

- 0.1: The human person, the "I", is a unity of body and spirit.
- 0.2: The human inner life includes faculties for remembering (memory), understanding (cognition), choosing (will) and experiencing emotion (affective response).
- 0.3: The only morally permissible acts are those actions which are good in themselves and are performed for good intentions. Bad consequences may be justified by the rule of double effect. Sometimes the best Christian witness is a heroic act beyond a morally permissible compromise.
- 0.4: "Love" in Christian literature should normally be understood as a deliberate choice to promote the well-being of the person loved.
- 0.5: It is meaningful to assert that all human beings are either men or women despite the existence of a few ill-defined examples, and to regard heterosexual relationships as the "normal" human experience.

1.1 Analysis of the Verb, "to use"

A Christian way of life must be based on the Great Commandments of love for God and neighbour. Every person (human and of the Trinity) must be loved, which means that we must always choose the true good of each person. But what is the true good of a human person? Human nature, uniquely among creatures, is to exercise rational self-determination, so the highest good towards human beings is to affirm and preserve their capacity for self-determination – that we must do so is the **personalistic norm**. One consequence of this is that we must never use another person merely as a means to an end.

1.2 Interpretation of the Sexual Urge

The sexual urge is part of human beings' nature, necessary for the preservation of the species [in accord with good evolutionary biology!], an aspect which drives them towards procreation [using the motivation of pleasure]. Since its purpose is to beget new human persons, rational humans must govern it according to the ethics appropriate to the creation of new human persons. The pleasure associated with sex is not evil, rather it is a good to be enjoyed in the proper context. But there is a clear hierarchy in which the moral significance of the sexual act is *first*, that it is oriented to producing a new human person, *secondly* to the mutual enjoyment of two existing human persons, and only *thirdly* to the particular satisfaction of sexual desire.

2.1 What is love? (things we call “love”)

(i) Worthy Christian decisions of the will

Loving attraction: I understand the good in N, and I choose to draw close to this good.

Loving desire (personalistic): I want N, because N (body and spirit) is good for me.

Goodwill: I want to do good for N.

Comradeship: N and I want to work together for the same goal.

Betrothed love: I want to surrender myself totally to N.

(ii) Unworthy decisions of the will

Desire (utilitarian): I want N's body to pleasure me.

(iii) Amoral Affective Responses

Emotional attraction: I feel good when I see N.

Sympathy: I feel close to N when I become aware of N's needs and emotions.

2.2 How do we love?

Sensuality is a mental and physiological response to the corporeal body which is objectively present, especially in men, which fails to respect the inner nature of the person beheld.

Sentiment is an emotional response to the whole person which seems to be (is subjectively) present, especially in women, which is biased by an idealised rather than a true knowledge of the person beheld.

In the light of this, lovers must be careful to make a true appraisal of the whole person of their beloveds. First, lovers must discover the truth about those they love. Only then can they properly exercise their free-will to make the free gift of a loving commitment to another person.

2.3 How should we love?

Love is a virtue. We need to be educated about how to practice it well, and believe that God wants to give us grace to love worthily!

Choosing a spouse is a decision to live out the married vocation. One must choose a spouse with whom one hopes to succeed in a journey of mutual self-giving. Sexual attraction may be a starting point but is not a sufficient basis for marriage. Only if both spouses are willing to choose the good of one another when their emotional responses fade, and love independently of the spouse's virtues and despite the spouse's faults, can there be a true relationship of betrothed love.

It is only safe and good to have sex with someone who has made a life-long and total commitment to place your well-being above their own, and when you have made a similar selfless life-long surrender in favour of your sexual partner's well-being. Anything less means that one of you is using the other for pleasure, and that is beneath the dignity of human beings. One must be aware of the enormous value of oneself and one's spouse as persons in order to give and receive the gift of self worthily.

3.1: Why the virtue of chastity is needed

Human persons experience “sensual concupiscence”, a spontaneous reaction in which a person develops an appetite for sensual experiences. This in turn may lead to carnal desire: a conscious hunger for encountering a sexual body. These tempt the will to choose an experience of a sexual body to derive enjoyment. Physical arousal and the unsought stirring up of desires to enjoy another’s body are not sinful; and even an act of will cannot suppress these immediately. The threshold of sin is crossed when the will acquiesces to the desires presented by concupiscence: abandonment of resistance is sinful as well as active encouragement. Responsible loving requires use of the will to shape emotional responses in a direction which respects the value of the human person as a whole. Chastity is best understood as part of the virtue of love, which seeks to respect the high value of the whole person, rather than as part of the virtue of moderation which regulates sexual experiences.

3.2 What is shame?

Human persons must never be used as means to an end, especially as a means to enjoyment. When one becomes aware that one’s own body may be a means to another’s pleasure, or that one is taking pleasure in another’s body, this awareness results in **shame**: physical shame at one’s own body, emotional shame at one’s reactions. Efforts to minimise cause for shame constitute **modesty**. Since men are more susceptible to sensual arousal, they experience more emotional shame, and women especially experience physical shame because of men’s possible reaction to them. The practice of modesty is a signal that one wishes to relate on the basis of valuing the whole person. **Prudery**, by contrast, is a puritanical attitude that all manifestations of sexuality are wrongful.

Men and women must both recognise that it is easier to behave in a way which appears shameless to the opposite sex, than they may be conscious of. Modest dress is so dependent on culture that it hard to define, though any form of dress designed to accentuate one’s sexual body to the extent that it would obscure a vision of yourself as a whole person is necessarily immodest. Nudity is acceptable in art as long as the artist seeks to convey the whole truth about human relationships rather than accentuating the sensual aspects.

For a married couple, shame is absorbed into a sense of the value of one another as persons, which legitimates their enjoyment of one another in marital intercourse. No third party can share in this emotionally, so shame demands that the marital act takes place in private.

3.3 On Continence

Chastity, we have seen, is a choice to love in accordance with an understanding of the total value of the human person. Will-power may appear able to suppress the promptings of concupiscence, but these promptings will only truly die – and the sense of bereavement diminish – as the objective value of the human person is internalised (emotionally as well as intellectually) over the long term.

Tenderness towards another person can be expressed with total disinterest, but self-control is necessary in order to express tenderness safely. Courting couples must be particularly firm, since premature tenderness can obstruct the cultivation of true love. A wife has a right to expect her husband to empathise with the depths of what she is experiencing: he needs a conscious appreciation of the depth of a woman’s emotional life in order to achieve this.

4.1 Marriage

The basis of marriage is the personalistic norm: this demands that marriage be monogamous and indissoluble, and makes a heroic virtue, though not a moral necessity, out of not remarrying after the death of a spouse. A ritual is needed to justly establish a marriage in the sight of the community and of God (for the two spouses who purport to give themselves to one another are His property).

In order for the conjugal act to avoid being a mere use of one's spouse, it must never be carried out for the sole purpose of pleasure, nor the sole purpose of procreation. It always requires a total act of loving self-giving accompanied by a willingness (though not always a positive desire) to become parents through the act. Awareness of the God-given natural cycle makes canny periodic continence possible; this does not involve a pleasure-seeking attitude unless continence is used persistently to avoid procreation. Regulation of conception is part of responsible parenthood. But any artificial method of contracepting the conjugal act, of its very nature, indicates a pleasure-seeking mentality.

4.2 Vocation

All people are called to recognise God as Lord and Creator, to whom they must ultimately surrender. Spiritual Virginity is the deliberate choice to make this surrender to the degree which excludes the mutual surrender of a marital relationship. Since marriage only lasts until bodily death, however, it does not prevent one's *ultimate* total surrender to God. Each person must reflect on their own gifts, their place in society and relationship with God, and so discern their vocation in life. Once chosen, pursuing this path is a commitment made with love. Spiritual Parenthood – the giving of spiritual nurture and education – reflects God's parenthood and is primarily but not exclusively the role of physical parents.

5.1 Sexology and Ethics

Medicine's intrinsic conception of "the good" is to restore health. But an ethical concept of the good touches the fullness of relationships. Therapists need to work in a paradigm where sexual activity is morally neutral, but personalism indicates where the true good lies.

Natural methods of fertility regulation depend on the woman's knowledge of her cycle. Psychological stresses can disrupt this, so a mutually self-sacrificing low-stress marital relationship is essential. Marriage benefits from building up a culture within which both partners seek to understand the other spouse's experience of sex.

Medical evidence indicates that if a woman is not brought fully to orgasm and sustained afterwards by tenderness, there may be negative consequences both physiological (genital inflammation) and psychological (frigidity resulting from repeated lack of satisfaction). This calls for generosity on the man's part, since his arousal cycle is more rapid. It does not help the long-term relationship if the wife regularly fakes orgasm.