



LETTER ON HUMAN SEXUALITY — 5. SUNDAY OF LENT 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The forty days of Lent recall the forty days Christ fasted in the wilderness. But that is not all. In salvation history, forty-day periods mark stages in God's work of redemption, ongoing to this day. The first such intervention took place in the days of Noah. Having seen the destruction man wroughtⁱ, the Lord subjected earth to a cleansing baptism. 'Rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights'.ⁱⁱ The result was a new beginning.

When Noah and his kin stepped back into a world washed clean, God made his first covenant with all flesh. He promised that a flood would never again destroy earth. Of humankind he asked for justice: to revere God, to construct peace, to be fruitful. We are called to live blessedly on earth, to find joy in one another. Our potential is wonderful as long as we remember who we are: 'for God made man in his own image'.ⁱⁱⁱ We are called to realise this image by the life choices we make. To ratify his covenant, God set a sign in heaven: 'I set my bow in the cloud, it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When the bow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth'.^{iv}

This covenantal sign, the rainbow, is claimed in our time as the symbol of a movement that is at once political and cultural. We recognise all that is noble in this movement's aspirations. In so far as these speak of the dignity of all human beings and of their longing to be seen, we share them. The Church condemns unjust discrimination of any kind, also on the basis of gender or orientation. We declare dissent, however, when the movement puts forward a view of human nature that abstracts from the embodied integrity of personhood, as if physical gender were accidental. And we protest when such a view is imposed on children as if it were not a daring hypothesis but a

proven truth, imposed on minors as a heavy burden of self-determination for which they are not ready. It is curious: our intensely body-conscious society in fact takes the body lightly, refusing to see it as significant of identity, supposing that the only selfhood of consequence is the one produced by subjective self-perception, as we construct ourselves in *our own* image.

When we profess that God made us in his image, the image does not just refer to the soul. It is mysteriously lodged in the body, too. For us Christians the body is intrinsic to personhood. We believe in the resurrection of the body. Naturally, 'we shall all be changed'.^v What our bodies will be like in eternity we cannot yet imagine. But we believe on biblical authority, grounded in tradition, that the unity of mind, soul, and body is made to last forever. In eternity we shall be recognisable as who we are now, but the conflicts that still prevent the harmonious unfolding of our true self will have been resolved.

'By God's grace I am what I am'.^{vi} St Paul had to battle with himself to make this statement in faith. So, often enough, must we. We are conscious of all we are *not*; we focus on gifts we did not receive, on affection or affirmation lacking in our lives. These things sadden us. We want to make up for them. Sometimes this is reasonable. Often it is futile. The journey to self-acceptance passes through engagement with what is real. The reality of our lives embraces our contradictions and wounds. The Bible and the lives of saints show that our wounds can, by grace, become sources of healing for ourselves and for others.

The image of God in human nature manifests itself in the complementarity of male and female. Man and woman are created for one another: the commandment to be fruitful depends on this mutuality, sanctified in nuptial union. In Scripture, the marriage of man and wife becomes an image of God's communion with mankind, to be perfected in the Lamb's marriage feast at the end of history.^{vii} This is not to say that such union, for us, is easy or painless. For some it seems an impossible option. More intimately, the integration within ourselves of masculine and feminine characteristics can be hard. The Church recognises this. She wishes to embrace and console all who experience hardship.

As your bishops we stress this: we are here for everyone, to accompany all. The yearning for love and the search for sexual wholeness touch human beings intimately. In this area we are vulnerable. Patience is called for on the path towards wholeness, and joy in every forward step. A quantum leap is made, for example, in

progress from promiscuity to fidelity, whether or not the faithful relationship fully corresponds to the objective order of a nuptial union sacramentally blessed. Every search for integrity is worthy of respect, deserving of encouragement. Growth in wisdom and virtue is organic. It happens gradually. At the same time growth, to be fruitful, must proceed towards a goal. Our mission and task as bishops is to point towards the peaceful, life-giving path of Christ's commandments, narrow at the outset but growing broader as we advance. We would let you down if we offered less; we were not ordained to preach little notions of our own.

In the Church's hospitable fellowship, there is room for all. The Church, says an ancient text, is 'the mercy of God descending on mankind'.^{viii} This mercy excludes no one. But it sets a high ideal. The ideal is spelt out in the commandments, which help us grow out of too narrow nations of self. We are called to become *new* women and men. In all of us there are elements of chaos that need to be ordered. Sacramental communion presupposes coherently lived consent to the terms of the covenant sealed in Christ's Blood. It may happen that circumstances make a Catholic unable, for a time, to receive the sacraments. He or she does not therefore cease to be a member of the Church. Experience of internal exile embraced in faith can lead to a *deeper* sense of belonging. Exiles often turn out that way in Scripture. Each of us has an exodus journey to make, but we do not walk alone.

At times of trial, too, the sign of God's first covenant surrounds us. It calls us to seek the sense of our existence, not in fragments of the rainbow's light, but in the divine source of the full, gorgeous spectrum, which is of God and calls us to be God-like. As disciples of Christ, who *is* God's Image,^{ix} we cannot reduce the sign of the rainbow to less than the life-giving compact between the Creator and creation. God has bestowed on us 'great and precious promises, so that through them [we] may share in the divine nature'.^x God's image imprinted on our being calls out for sanctification in Christ. Any account of human desire that sets the bar lower than this is inadequate from a Christian point of view.

Now, notions of what it is to be a human, and so a sexual, being are in flux. What is taken for granted today may be rejected tomorrow. Anyone who stakes much on passing theories risks being terribly hurt. We need deep roots. Let us, then, try to appropriate the fundamental principles of Christian anthropology while reaching out in friendship, with respect, to those who feel estranged by them. We owe it to the Lord, to

ourselves, and to our world, to give an account of what we believe, and of why we believe it to be true.

Many are perplexed by traditional Christian teaching on sexuality. To such we offer a word of friendly counsel. First: try to acquaint yourself with Christ's call and promise, to know him better through the Scriptures and in prayer, through the liturgy and study of the Church's full teaching, not just of snippets here and there. Take part in the Church's *life*. The horizon of the questions with which you set out will be enlarged in this way, as will your mind and heart. Secondly, consider the limitations of a purely secular discourse on sexuality. It needs to be enriched. We need adequate terms to speak of these important things. We shall have a precious contribution to make if we recover the sacramental nature of sexuality in God's plan, the beauty of Christian chastity, and the joy of friendship, which lets us see that great, freeing intimacy can be found also in non-sexual relationships.

The point of the Church's teaching is not to curtail love but to enable it. At the end of its prologue, our 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeats a passage from *The Roman Catechism* of 1566: 'The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.'^{xi} By this love the world was made, our nature formed. This love was made manifest in Christ's example, teaching, saving passion, and death. It is vindicated in his glorious resurrection, which we shall celebrate with joy during the fifty days of Easter. May our Catholic community, so many-faceted and colourful, bear witness to this love in truth.

ⁱ Genesis 6.5.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 7.12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 9.6.

^{iv} Genesis 9.13, 16.

^v 1 Corinthians 15.1.

^{vi} 1 Corinthians 15.10.

^{vii} Revelation 19.6.

^{viii} From the fourth-century Syriac midrash *The Cave of Treasures*.

^{ix} Colossians 1.15.

^x 2 Peter 1.4.

^{xi} *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 25; cf. *Roman Catechism*, Preface 10; cf. 1 Corinthians 13.8.