

The Key to the Sacrament

In the book Man and Woman, by Dietrich von Hildebrand, this whole theme is explored more deeply. He writes:

A true understanding of the greatness and consecration of marriage – that final, supreme state of mutual love which has been compared to the relationship of Christ to the Church – as well as any profound comprehension of the specific nature of spousal love, leads directly to the insight that an entirely unique spiritual enrichment between persons is the issue here, long before the sexual sphere comes into consideration. This spiritual replenishment is of a nature that is only possible between men and women, but never between man and man or woman and woman. To understand the unique spiritual supplementary quality of man and woman, one must first realize that the difference between them is not merely biological but is rather a profound distinction affecting the basic structure of the personality, and that this difference has its own value. The difference is metaphysical, as the Pythagoreans rightly suspected when they – although with inadmissible exaggeration – made two categories of Being out of masculine and feminine.

Persons are not merely higher animals. This view attempts to interpret the *meaningful* connections between motivations as *causally determined* associations. It seeks to understand the structure of the human person and its innately given differentiations as pure functions of biological-psychological ends.

For the person who has freed himself from this basically mistaken tendency, which still haunts modern psychology, it is not difficult to see that the difference between man and woman is not only a biological one, but that it concerns two different original types of the spiritual person that is man.

The difference between man and woman cannot and does not affect mankind's ultimate calling: to be transformed in Christ, to become holy, to glorify God, and to reach eternal communion with Him. In the confrontation of creature and Creator the difference between man and woman disappears entirely.

The same exaggeration of the distinction between the sexes is found in the frequent attempts to interpret the commandments for moral perfection and holiness differently for men than for women. Again and again one hears the totally false statement that, as far as purity is concerned, the commandments are stricter for women than for men, and other arguments of the same brand.

A second, quite different danger of this exaggeration occurs when one makes of masculinity or femininity a conscious goal to strive for; that is, when one does not see that man and woman both must simply strive for the right and the God-willed, and that the difference between the two sexes, in fact becomes quite distinct all by itself. This is just as distressing as when someone constantly emphasizes his own particular individuality and, instead of simply striving for the objectively right, only concentrates on the preservation of his own personality.

An artist who wants to create *German* art affects us with a sort of embarrassment. If he is a German and wants to create *good* art, the specifically national tone appears by itself. Conscious self-reflection leads to irrelevance and an awkward *feeling like a man* or *feeling like a woman*.

This leads straight to the third type of exaggeration. This feeling like a man – or a woman – can lead to a special communal feeling among each of the sexes, even to the point of seeing women and men as two opposing interest groups. Many men and women feel that they belong to a faction and then look at everything from this *partisan* viewpoint.

The specific, organic meld of heart and mind, of the affective and intellectual centers in woman, the unity of her entire nature, the delicacy and receptivity of her whole being, the precedence of Being as a personality over objective accomplishments – versus man's specific ability for pure objectivity which predestines him for official positions, his specific suitability for efficacy and the accomplishments of objective works, his clarity, strength, and greatness, these differences mark the two sexes in their own peculiar nature.

We need only think of the holy men and women in order to see how this difference creates a distinct and specific aura. The same love for Jesus lives in both, both are exclusively concerned with the *unum necessarium*, both are totally receptive to God, in both is the same purity, the same meekness, the same heroism, the same victorious strength; and yet each represents the highest form of femininity and masculinity.

The spiritual contact of man and woman also has a positive mission, namely a unique stimulation and mutual spiritual fecundation. Particular virtues in both are awakened which otherwise remain undeveloped. The chivalrous attitude awakens in the man a stronger self-control, a more humble attitude, a greater delicacy and purity, a certain melting and enlivening of his nature. With the woman, on the other hand, a widening of her intellect takes place, a broader and more principle-tied foundation for her sense of values, a noble reserve on one hand and a specific warmth and devotion on the other, appears.

On the other hand, we must not forget that as mistaken as it is to attempt to develop the spiritual coordination of both sexes out of their sexual relationship or even to consider their spiritual relationship as being basically something sexual, yet fallen man is constantly exposed to the danger of a sexual element illegitimately creeping into this relationship. In fallen man, the lower sphere has so emancipated itself from the higher one that it not only actualizes itself in harmony with the higher, spiritual sphere, and particularly in unison with the will, but it also appears in isolated form. Therefore, a leap into the sexual sphere, even an illegitimate one, can always occur in every relationship between the two sexes. The words apply here, too: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (I Pet. 5:8)

This is our actual problem: which factor can keep an ultimate I-thou relationship between both sexes free from every intrinsically normal overlapping into the sexual sphere? When can a relationship be purely spiritual and yet full of ultimate ardor and devotion? Only when it is a communion in Jesus, from Jesus, and for Jesus. Only through being totally anchored in the supernatural can an ultimate I-thou relationship remain free of every sexual shadow and yet represent a unique fulfillment of the spiritual mutuality of man and woman.

A mutual elevation to the intellectual sphere is not sufficient. We must rise to the spiritual – that is, the supernatural sphere – in order for this holy communion to develop. In this relationship the coordination of man and woman can then unfold in all its value, permitting a spiritual union in Jesus which would never be possible between men or between women.

This presupposes that Jesus is the theme of this relationship, that for each partner the other's salvation is of primary concern, that they each participate in the love of Jesus for the other, that His Sacred Heart is the place where both souls meet and where they, as it were, interpenetrate.

Love is never blind. A friend's shortcomings are viewed as contradictory to his true nature. They are neither reckoned as his, nor looked upon as if they were as typical of him as are his good qualities, but this does not imply that one is inclined to overlook them or explain them away. Nor does it pretend that they are any the less plain or noticeable. Love makes us sensitive to faults in another because the beauty of his personality is present to our mind as a whole. And so it is of very great importance to us that he remain wholly faithful to what he most truly is and that his real self become fully manifest.

It is altogether mistaken to think that love is blind. Actually it opens one's eyes. But pride, which one finds so often with love, does make one blind – especially where a loved one is considered an extension of one's own ego. The mother who looks upon her child as an extension of herself believes the child incapable of any faults, of course. But this is typical of pride and not at all of love.

Where there is a question of faults there is naturally a big difference between those which concern someone we love and those of a person we do not love. Faults are irksome in anyone for whom we have little love. They cause us to become irritable and make us indignant. We do not see them against the background of the beauty of his personality taken as a whole. Instead we look at them separately and attribute them to him along with his good qualities.

But when there is a question of someone we love, nothing is irksome. We are not irritated. We are only unhappy for the loved one and for the fact that he has these faults. We grieve at the presence of what is essentially untrue of him, and this we do out of deep sense of unity with him. In profound awareness of our own weakness and frailty, mindful of how unfaithful we are to ourselves and to what God desires of us, we lovingly face the faults when they occur, meeting each such instance of weakness with empathy, rejecting them inwardly for him and with him.

Only love is truly objective. Where there is love, our perception of the other's faults is more objective than in instances where there is no love whatsoever. We come to better grips with reality when we see another's failings in the light of his whole personality, understanding them from within, sorrowing over them because of what the loved one is. There is even keen suffering for his sake, not because his faults are a burden but because our love for him makes his inner growth and attaining perfection a matter of great concern to us.

The kind of credit which love makes possible has a particular nobility about it. One discovers in it the special largesse of love – a value which does not, however, take its origin

altogether from the responsive attitude evoked by value. Such conviction, rooted in love's act of giving, involves an element of hope which carries a special blessing for the loved one – a blessing which is also one of love's gifts.

There is, however, still another kind of credit. We refer to what concerns the other's nature in areas which have not yet had the chance of discovery. Love believes only the best of another person. At first it does not even credit to him the undesirable traits that are attributed to him (or it assumes that they were not correctly interpreted).

Attending this credit is the resolve to interpret everything in the other person positively, so long as nothing in him is clearly suggestive to the contrary. There are of course, so many things about a person which can be understood in different ways. There are many things done, said, or concealed which are not definitively moral or immoral in themselves.

They are neither stupid or intelligent. But they are meaningful and fully significant in the light of a given person's background and his whole personality. Even as it is typical of jealous and hateful behavior for one to be ever alert to catch the other in his mistakes, giving a negative interpretation to everything he does, so it is basically characteristic of love to be hopeful of seeing the other adopt a course in accord with what is good, right, and beautiful – a dwelling on God's path. Basic to love, also, is its continual readiness to take everything that could be understood differently in the best possible light. Such willingness to give the other person the benefit of the doubt is closely related to the faithful credit one maintains with respect to the other.

Love always assumes what is best in the other. So long as there is no reason for reckoning with the presence of a fault, love entertains the more favorable opinion toward all that is doubtful. When love encounters a fault in the other, it is like meeting disloyalty or infidelity to what is truest in his nature (and it is never accepted on a par with his positive qualities). This threefold attitude is characteristic of the credit which love – and love alone – grants.

Love must be learned. We should strive continually to be impressed with the greatness and seriousness of love and also with the realization that love is much deeper and more important than most professional activities. This should be noted especially in our day when work so often makes up the only serious side of life and when the quest for amusement and recreation stands in the way of everything else. But this is possible only if we rescue ourselves from the whirl of activity and the anticipation of the next moment's confusion which deprives us of any full awareness of the present. In other words, it can happen only if we provide a special place for contemplation in our lives.

Only if we strive always to plumb the depths and, in this way, attain to Christ and ultimate reality, can we ever hope to learn how to love truly. Only as we continue to consider this one we love and his love for us as unmerited gifts – and this in deep gratitude, never taking them for granted – can we attain to true love.

Out of such respect and gratitude alone can true love blossom. The human person awakens completely only in love; and it is in love alone that he attains the transcendence to which he is called. St. Augustine tells us that in loving, man himself becomes worthy of love.

In fact, wherever the transforming power of Christ has touched each of love's manifestations, the person who loves is as a dim but glorious reflection of that of which he attains a fuller share – the fire of which our Lord speaks when he says: I have come to bring fire upon the earth, and what is my desire but that it should burn?" (Lk. 12:49)

Nevertheless, marriage does not confer upon the spouses the right to have a child, but only the right to perform those natural acts which are *per se* ordered to procreation. A true and proper right to a child would be contrary to the child's dignity and nature. The child is not an object to which one has a right, nor can he be considered as an object of ownership: rather, a child is a gift, "the supreme gift" and the most gratuitous gift of marriage, and is a living testimony of the mutual giving of his parents. For this reason, the child has the right, as already mentioned, to be the fruit of the specific act of the conjugal love of his parents; and he also has the right to be respected as a person from the moment of his conception. (*Instruction on Respect for Human Life*, 8)