August 14, 2022—20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scott Hahn, the well-known convert and Biblical scholar once said: “**Sex is not good; sex is not great; sex is sacred!**” The teaching of the Church is based on the sacredness of marriage, family and human sexuality. God is the Architect of marriage; Jesus instituted it as one of the seven Sacraments of the Church.

St. Gianna wrote her fiancé a little over a week before their marriage: “**Pietro, how much I have to learn from you! You are such a fine example for me, and I thank you for it. With God’s help and blessing, we will do all we can to make our new family a little cenacle where Jesus will reign over all our affections, desires, and actions**” (The Journey of our Love, p. 81). They both believed that marriage and family life were holy and a gift from God.

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, in chapter, 5 about the meaning of Christian marriage. He made a comparison between the love of Christ for His Bride the Church and the love of the Church for Christ to the love of husband and wife in marriage. St. Paul wrote to husbands: “**Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her**” (5:25). Jesus gave Himself as a gift of love for His Bride the Church by His suffering and death on the Cross. St. Paul is telling husbands to lay down their life for their wife—sacrificing their wants and even, at times, their needs, for love of their wife; the husband’s mission is to becomes a self-gift (in Pope St. John Paul’s words) to their wife, even to the point of death, like Jesus.

St. Paul wrote to wives: “**Wives, be submissive to your husbands, as to the Lord**. (5:22). This doesn’t mean that a husband is to dominate or control his wife and she is just to passively submit. The word “submissive” comes from two Latin words “sub” and “missio”, which means “to put yourself under the mission of another”. St. Paul wants a wife to put herself under the mission of her husband, which is a mission of service and sacrifice for his wife.

In the Theology of the Body, Pope St. John Paul taught that the opposite of love is not hatred; it is the use of someone for one’s selfish purposes. In a word, the opposite of love is lust. Lust doesn’t make a self-gift of one to another but uses the other person as an object. Many people enter a sexual relationship outside of marriage and fool themselves into thinking that they have love. Often, I have heard the woman say, “If I don’t give in to him, then I am afraid he will leave me.” That is not a relationship based on love and trust and a self-gift, but of the use of a person for one’s selfish pleasure.

Pope St. John Paul made an important distinction between sexual desire and lust. Sexual desire is created by God, while lust is a distortion of it. Sexual desire and attraction must be purified and transformed so that it doesn’t become lust.

One of the reasons that pornography is seriously wrong is that marriage and human sexuality are sacred. It takes something that is holy and private and puts it on a stage for the entire world to see and lust after. Not only are there many victims who have been lured into it by false promises and drugs, but it is as addictive as any drug to those who look at it. It is often the hidden monster that destroys marriages and family life. Like any addiction, we can’t lose hope. Frequent Confession, a consistent prayer life and the resolution to fast from the addictive behavior can gradually heal the soul. It takes a deep humility. It is not easy!

St. Paul concludes the passage on marriage in Ephesians, by writing: “**This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband**.” (5:32-33). The Greek word for “mystery” in this passage can also be translated by the word, “sacrament”. St. Paul says that he is speaking about “a great sacrament” when he speaks about Christian marriage.

As a sacrament, Holy Matrimony gives special graces to the baptized couple who publicly make their vows before the priest or deacon and two witnesses. The CCC teaches that “**It is by following Christ, renouncing themselves and taking up their crosses that spouses will be able to ‘receive’ the original meaning of marriage and live it with the help of Christ. This grace of Christian marriage is a fruit of Christ’s cross, the source of all Christian life**” (#1615).

I had the unusual privilege of witnessing the marriage of my mother. I was a young priest when she decided to remarry, and I performed the ceremony. Unfortunately, it wasn’t too many years later that her husband was diagnosed with cancer that entailed a liver transplant. Back in the 90’s liver transplants were not very successful. One day, I came home, and her husband asked to talk to me; I could see he was very depressed. He explained that he never intended to put my mom through all the problems that his health crisis entailed; they were still a fairly young couple. I immediately thought of the wedding vows they professed in front of God and me, “**for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.**” I told him that if it had been the other way around and my mom got sick, he would have stuck by her, just as she was doing for him. That was what they promised!

In marriage, the worse and poorer and the sickness may come. The bond of marriage will be tested but it is worth struggling to love and keep on loving. Jesus understands the struggle of love and we are called to love as Jesus loves us. If we don’t struggle, then how will we ever grow in virtue and goodness? All the sacraments have a Sacred Sign—baptism has water and the words: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Sacred Sign of marriage is the words of their vows and the very couple themselves. The married couple is the living sign of the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. To be continued.