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MEN, WOMEN AND THE MYSTERY OF LOVE

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5. What is wrong with pornography? How would you respond to someone who said pornography is just another form of art and there is nothing wrong in looking at it? Consider the following passage from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "To the extent that it is inspired by truth and love of beings, art bears a certain likeness to God's activity in what He has created.... Art is not an absolute end in itself, but is ordered to and ennobled by the ultimate end of man [Cf. Pius XII, *Musicae sacrae disciplina*; Discourses of September 3 and December 25, 1950]" (CCC, 2501). In light of this, how does pornography fall short of the *Catechism's* definition of art?

6. Commenting on the Gospel passage from Matthew 5:28, John Paul II warns against using someone's body even when that person is not physically present. What is morally wrong with someone having lustful thoughts about another person?

7. In his addresses known as the "Theology of the Body," John Paul II makes a radical statement: "Man can commit...adultery in the heart also with regard to his own wife, if he treats her only as an object to satisfy instinct" (TOB, 157). Discuss how "adultery of the heart" might occur even within a married relationship.

How can married men and women strive to preserve inner integrity and purity in regard to their relationship with their spouses? Similarly, how can single people strive for this same purity of heart in relationships with members of the opposite sex, particularly in preparation for a vocation to either the married or religious life?

## *Sense and Sentimentality: The Proper Role of the Emotions*

HOW COULD MR. RIGHT TURN OUT TO BE SO WRONG?

Many young people have had the experience of *feeling* they were in love with someone who at first seemed absolutely wonderful, only later to become greatly disappointed in the person, disillusioned about the relationship and perhaps even pessimistic about the opposite sex as a whole.

John Paul II explains why this often happens to men and women, and how we can avoid such disillusionment in the future.

### **More Than Physical**

In the last chapter, we considered one powerful aspect of the attraction between men and women: sensuality. We saw how this physical attraction is often characterized by a longing to enjoy the body of another person as an object of pleasure.

There is a second kind of attraction, however, that goes beyond physical desire for the body. John Paul II calls it *sentimentality*. This represents more of an emotional attraction between the sexes.

For example, when boy meets girl, in addition to noticing her "good looks," he also may find himself powerfully drawn to her femininity, her warm personality, her kindness—or as the pope calls it, her feminine "charm." Similarly, when girl meets boy, she not only may recognize that he is handsome, but also may find herself having strong feelings and admiration for his masculinity, his virtue, the way he carries himself—or as John Paul II calls it, his masculine "strength."

Such emotional reactions toward persons of the opposite sex happen all the time. We may experience sentimental affection for a spouse, a coworker or long-time friend. Or we may experience it toward a person we're introduced to at a meeting, a stranger we see at the mall, or even a fictional character we see on TV. Sentimentality can become part of what leads to authentic, selfless love for another person, but if we are not careful we can easily become enslaved to our emotions in ways that prevent us from truly being able to love others.

### A Sinking Ship

Love *should* integrate our emotions. In its fullest form, love is not a cold, calculated decision, devoid of feelings. A spouse saying, "Honey, I love you. I have no feelings at all for you, but know that I am committed to you," is not

the ideal situation. Our emotions are meant to be caught up into our commitment to our beloved, thus enriching the relationship and giving us an even deeper experience of union with the other person (75).

As the pope explains, "Sentimental love keeps two people close together, binds them—even if they are physically far apart—to move in each other's orbit" (110). Consequently, "A person in this state of mind remains mentally always close to the person with whom he or she has ties of affection" (111).

John Paul II, however, is concerned that people today often think of love *only* in terms of feelings. His concerns seem all the more applicable in a culture like ours, in which love songs, romance films and TV shows constantly play with our emotions and prompt us to long for quick, emotionally thrilling relationships like the ones Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan seem to find in the movies.

Real love, however, is very different from Hollywood love. Real love requires much effort. It is a *virtue* that involves sacrifice, responsibility and a total commitment to the other person. Hollywood love is an *emotion*. It's something that just happens to you. The focus is not on a commitment to another, but on what is happening inside you—the powerful, good feelings you experience when you're with this other person.

The *Titanic* phenomenon of the late 1990s demonstrates how many people have bought into the illusion of Hollywood love. Millions of young Americans returned again and again to experience the intensely

emotional romance between the two main characters in this film—a romance that develops over just a few days between two people who really don't know each other and have no true commitment to each other. Yet viewers felt deeply that this attraction is the ideal kind of love that would have lasted a lifetime. With this kind of model to imitate, it's no wonder so many of our real life relationships are ending in shipwreck.

Of course, our feelings can and should be incorporated into a more fully developed love (a theme we will explore in subsequent chapters). However, when we are carried away by our emotions, we end up avoiding a very important question that is crucial for the long-term stability of a relationship: the question of truth. We must first and foremost consider the truth about the other person and the truth about the quality of our relationship: "What kind of character does this person really have?" "How strong is our relationship, really?"

### Avoiding the Question of Truth

One danger of making emotions a measure for love is that our feelings can be very misleading. In fact, the pope says feelings themselves are blind, for they are not concerned with knowing the truth about the other person. Thus, our feelings alone do not make a good compass for guiding our relationships.

He explains that we discover truth through using our reason. I know that two plus two equals four not because I *feel* it equals four. I come to certainty about this truth through my reason. Our feelings, on the other hand, do

not have the job of seeking truth, the pope says.

Our feelings, therefore, will not be as helpful a guide for seeing the honest truth about another person and the truth about the quality of our relationship. "Feelings arise spontaneously—the attraction which one person feels towards another often begins suddenly and unexpectedly—but this reaction is in effect 'blind'" (77).

This becomes especially clear when we consider what happened to our emotions after the fall. Before sin entered the world, man's intellect easily directed his will to choose what is good and to guide his emotions so that he would pursue the good with all his passions and emotions.

After the fall, however, the intellect does not see the truth clearly, the will is weakened in its resolve to pursue what is good and our emotions are no longer properly ordered but go in many different directions. We now often experience much instability in the emotional sphere, and many chaotic ups and downs—love and hate, hope and fear, joy and sadness—throughout our lives. Yet ironically, the modern view of love tells us to turn precisely to our feelings—to look right in the middle of this emotional roller coaster ride—to find an infallible measure of our love. No wonder there is so much confusion and instability in relationships today!

### Is It Really So?

Furthermore, not only do feelings *not* have the task of seeking truth, but feelings also can be so powerful that they cloud the way we think about a person. John Paul

II explains that when we are carried away by our emotions, sentimentality may hinder our ability to know that person as he or she really is.

This is why he stresses that, in any emotional attraction, the question of truth about the person is crucial: "Is it really so?" We should be asking ourselves, "Does this person really have the qualities and virtues I'm so attracted to?" "Are we really as good a fit for one another as I feel we are?" "Is he or she truly worthy of all my trust?" "Is there a problem in our relationship that I'm overlooking?"

Our *feelings* do not address these important questions. In fact, our feelings often get us to avoid these questions, leaving us with a distorted and exaggerated perception of our beloved. (Note: In the following quote, John Paul II uses the philosophical term "subject" to refer to the human person.)

This is why in any attraction—and, indeed, here above all—the question of the truth about the person towards whom it is felt is so important. We must reckon with the tendency, produced by the whole dynamic of emotional life, for the subject to divert the question "is it really so?" from the object of attraction to himself or herself, to his or her emotions. In these circumstances the subject does not enquire whether the other person really possesses the values visible to partial eyes, but mainly whether the newborn feeling for that person is a true emotion. (78)

This, again, does not mean that feelings are bad. But they cannot be the primary criterion for discerning the hon-

est truth about another person or for clearly evaluating a relationship that we're in.

### Out of All Proportion!

This tendency to be swept away by our emotions and to avoid questions of truth is characteristic of sentimental love. We are inclined to exaggerate the value of the person we have feelings for, downplaying their faults and ignoring any problems we have in the relationship.

Here, John Paul II makes an amazing statement about how much our feelings can control our perception of the person to whom we're so attracted. "Thus, in the eyes of a person sentimentally committed to another person the value of the beloved object grows enormously—as a rule out of all proportion to his or her real value" (112, italics added).

Did you catch that? He doesn't say that in the beginning stages of sentimental love we might *sometimes* exaggerate the value of the person. He says this happens as a rule—we do it all the time! And he didn't say that we tend to exaggerate the person's value only slightly. We tend to idealize the value of the person "out of all proportion" to whom he or she is in reality.

This idealization can manifest itself in many ways. For example, a woman shows up at a Catholic young adult gathering and meets a devout man who exhibits three-and-a-half of her favorite virtues and actually is somewhat good-looking. Though she just met him, she catches herself wondering, "Maybe this is the one!" and thinks about him throughout the week.

A young man who exaggerates his girlfriend's good qualities while ignoring many problems in their relationship may rush into marriage with the illusion of having found true love. When the real nature of their relationship becomes apparent, he says to himself, "I wish I thought about this *before* I got married."

A married man not feeling close to his wife may develop an emotional attachment to another woman. He finds himself thinking about her often and going out of his way to see her. He idealizes this other woman, saying to himself, "*She* really understands me much better than my wife does."

Given our tendency to idealize, we must approach our relationships with the opposite sex with eyes wide open. Especially at the beginning stages of a relationship, if we naïvely say we're not idealizing the other person at all, it's probably a sign of how far we have already drifted from reality. In these early stages of love, if we are so quick to notice our favorite qualities in our beloved, we should be just as quick to admit that we are likely falling into the tendency to exaggerate these qualities. As John Paul II explains, "...a variety of values are bestowed upon the object of love which he or she does not necessarily possess in reality. These are ideal values, not real ones" (112).

Why do we tend to idealize those we're attracted to? These ideal values are the ones that we long, with all our heart, to find in another person some day. They exist in our deepest wishes, desires and dreams. When we finally meet someone with whom there is the slightest bit of

chemistry, our emotions tend to rapidly call up these ideal values and project them onto that person.

### Using People Emotionally

When we speak of a man using a woman, we tend to think in terms of him using her for sexual pleasure. John Paul II, however, highlights that men and women can use each other for *emotional* pleasure as well. A devoutly Christian man and woman can have a physically chaste dating relationship, but can still be using each other for the good feelings they experience when together, for the emotional security of having a boyfriend or girlfriend, or for the pleasure they derive from imagining their wedding day, hoping the other person will finally be "the one."

If I fall into such sentimental idealization, my beloved is not truly the recipient of my affections. Rather, the other person represents an opportunity for me to enjoy these powerful emotional reactions stirring within my heart. In this case, I do not love the person, but the ideal values I have projected on to her. I do not truly love the person for her own sake, but use her for the emotional pleasure I derive from idealizing her. As John Paul II explains, the beloved who is idealized "...often becomes merely the occasion for an eruption in the subject's emotional consciousness of the values which he or she longs with all his heart to find in another person" (112). (Note again, John Paul here uses "subject" to refer to a human person).

**Disillusionment**

The most tragic effect of sentimental idealization is that we end up not really knowing the person we find so attractive. A man in sentimental love may seek to be close to his beloved, spend a lot of time talking with her, and even go to Mass with her and pray with her. If he has idealized her, though, in reality he remains quite distant from her: The powerful affection he feels depends not on her true value, but only on the ideal values that he has projected on to her.

Inevitably, this unchecked sentimentality will end in great disillusionment. When the real person comes to the surface—with all her faults and weaknesses—she cannot live up to the ideal. The lover will become quite disappointed in the beloved (113). The strong feelings will wane, and there will not be much left for the relationship to stand on. Even though the couple may give every outward appearance of being emotionally close to each other, they remain in fact quite divided from each other (114).

I've seen this with young people on college campuses who give the impression to each other and the rest of campus that they have a strong, intimate and even very Catholic relationship. They may study together, eat meals together, walk arm-in-arm everywhere, stay up late talking or praying the rosary together. When they break up two months later, everyone is shocked, including the couple. Yet no matter what external signs of closeness they manifested, if sentimentality and idealization were driving the relationship, they may not have really known

each other personally even though they felt close.

John Paul II goes a step further. He points out that couples may even be using each other for the emotional pleasure they derive from such idealization. These kinds of relationships quickly fall into disillusionment, frustration and maybe even hatred as the beloved can no longer provide the powerful rush of good feelings that came from the ideal that was projected onto them (113).

In sum, sentimentality can be a beautiful, enriching part of love, but it must be integrated with other essential ingredients, or risk becoming the very opposite of love. In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to the single most important and most essential aspect of love in any relationship: self-giving.

**For Further Reading**

*Love and Responsibility*, pp. 73–80, 109–118

**For Discussion and Reflection**

1. C.S. Lewis wrote:

Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing. There are many things below it, but there are also things above it. You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling... Who could bear to live in that excitement for even five years?... But, of course, ceasing to be "in love" need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense—love as distinct from "being in love"—is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; rein-

forced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both parents ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be "in love" with someone else. "Being in love" first moved them to promise fidelity; this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run; being in love was the explosion that started it.<sup>1</sup>

What is the difference between "being in love" and love itself? How is a deeper, quieter love, as Lewis calls it, actually better than "being in love"?

2. This chapter offered the example of the blockbuster movie *Titanic* as one that particularly played on the emotions of the audience. What are other examples of films, television shows, books and music that overemphasize the sentimental aspect of love?

3. Why do you think this type of media tends to appeal so highly to our modern culture? What effect does the media's sentimental portrayal of love have on people and their relationships? How can you be more vigilant in your exposure to these distorted portraits of love in modern entertainment?

4. According to John Paul II, how much do we idealize people we find ourselves attracted to? What did John Paul II say about *why* we tend to idealize?

5. What effect does this idealization have on our relationships? Have you ever suffered disillusionment from being "blinded" by your emotions or feelings for another?

6. How can you guard against even unintentionally using or being used by others emotionally?

7. According to John Paul II, women tend to struggle more with sentimentality. A woman's inherently sensitive nature, however, is part of what contributes to her true attractiveness and beauty. In his Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, John Paul II stated that, "Grace never casts nature aside or cancels it out, but rather perfects it and ennobles it."<sup>2</sup> How can women embrace those feminine qualities that make them unique, without becoming overly sentimental in their relationships? How can they help other women do the same?

8. What are the aspects of a potentially romantic relationship that divert us from asking the crucial question, "Is it really so?" How can you strive to evaluate your relationships from a more integrated, truthful and objective perspective?