

GIFTED AND FRAGILE: THE WONDER OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

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Fr Szymczak is friend and guide to a wide circle of married couples. He is known for his ability to draw tears of emotion, but also of laughter, and for providing practical tools to build lasting relationships. His marriage course **I + YOU = WE** now runs in many parts of Poland and is taking root in five other countries. He ran a pilot of the programme for the Diocese of Shrewsbury while in England.

GIFTED AND FRAGILE: THE WONDER OF HUMAN SEXUALITY

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It may seem strange that a priest should be talking about the gift of sexuality. After all, a priest doesn't need and he shouldn't have any direct experience in that area, as Karol Wojtyła, and later Blessed Pope John Paul II, said in the introduction to his wonderful book – *Love and Responsibility*. On the other hand, we may say that a priest has more experience, because that experience comes to him from many different sources. It is brought to him by the people seeking his advice or help. Many bring to him their despair and broken lives – broken also because of the problems experienced in the area of sexuality.

I have worked with married couples all my priesthood, for twenty-seven years. I've dealt /delt with hundreds of instances of marital crisis, conflict and betrayal, and I've witnessed many marriages fall apart. I pray for all the couples I work with, it is with my personal cost of concern and worry that I pay for that kind of assistance. If I run a marathon, which happens once or twice a year, I also offer that effort especially for those couples, for whom the words of the marriage vows are only a painful memory of a feeling they no longer know. But I've also seen many happy families: loving spouses with wonderful children. Very often they are the people who have managed to overcome conflict. Many of the couples who have asked me for spiritual guidance and whom I've confessed regularly for years, experience the same problems as everyone else, but after a time they are able to cope with them in a much better way.

Through my work as a marriage counselor, confessor and spiritual director, I have also come to see how delicate and fragile the gift of sexuality is. St Paul says in his Letter to the Corinthians, "But we have this treasure in pots of clay" (2 Cor 4:7). That treasure may either be the source of great happiness and personal development, or it may be lost, wasted and destroyed. When a person does not take good care of the gift of sexuality, or when he or she abuses it, it will make their humanity shrink. It may also become the site of great personal suffering and drama.

I'm honoured to be a guest speaker at this conference. We're here to appreciate the gift of sexuality and to highlight the importance of those things which we hand down to our children in this area. Blessed John Paul II said that parents are the first and most important educators in sexuality-related issues, and school should provide complementary support for their effort. In practice, the school often has to take on the role of primary educator, when parents – for various reasons – fail to fulfill their parental obligations.

An important part of my experience for all those years has also been my work as a university teacher. Similarly to you, Dear Teachers, I meet young people who bring into the classroom not only their knowledge or thirst for knowledge, but also their family dramas, rejection, the tension caused by the parents who have filed for divorce, conflicts with the Mum's "new boyfriend," or the father's "new girlfriend." Your students bring in the anxiety caused by the changes in their body and mind caused by the growing awareness of their sexuality, and that anxiety remains unnoticed by the parents who have no time for their kids. Instead, invasive liberal media do not waste their time and bombard the children's vulnerable psyche with so-called "adult" and hideous content. So the pupils, and the students, expect us to listen to them, to understand, to be patient with them – because they long for love and attention, but often don't get them from their parents.

So we restore self-esteem in those children or young adults whose parents treat them as if they weren't there. For those who have no friends other than their Facebook pals - we're creating the world to which they would like to belong, we demand from them, so that they may develop, we help them find their way.

When I was asked to give lectures in Rivne, in the Ukraine, I was also invited to a kindergarten. Children were brought to that facility at 8 a.m. and picked up by their parents at 8 p.m - with the assumption that it will be enough for the parents to put the kids to bed. The head of that kindergarten, feeling quite helpless, asked me to hold a talk for the parents and to explain that children need something more from their parents than simply finding a replacement to feed them and offer diversity of activities.

We can give so much more to our children apart from only teaching our subject. We can inspire them, help them recognize their talents, form their character, become creative personalities. The teachers of sexual education, however, are nowadays asked to become just "sex instructors" who will explain physiology, and who will unleash desire, egoism,

narcissism and utilitarian attitude towards another person. And are we naively to believe that those children will become responsible members of society, able to start happy and lasting families of their own, based on values and virtues? As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.

When we give our students the true vision of human sexuality, we teach them how to recognize their inner beauty and richness. We teach them also how to foster those wonderful materials on which love may grow: emotionality, sensuality, sexual attraction, but also reason, free will and the ability to build relationships. That potential, when properly looked after, will bear the fruit of honesty, fidelity, nobleness and sacrifice.

All parents, including teachers who are parents, command their children to school staff hoping that the kids will return home enriched, inspired and motivated. I remember a 12-year-old girl named Zosia. She told me she loved her biology teacher, who was so different from the others, because when she asked the pupils to be quiet, they were quiet. As parents we are very grateful to the teachers whose system of values corresponds with ours. As teachers, we truly appreciate the parents who themselves feel responsible for bringing up their children, also in the sphere of sexuality. That gives the potential for cooperation. And we need cooperation so much.

I was asked to offer a course in a school for teenage girls, juvenile delinquents with court sentences for mugging, theft, escape from home, and prostitution. They live and learn in a closed facility. The course was based on the book by Karol Wojtyła, and later Blessed John Paul II, which I mentioned at the beginning, *Love and Responsibility*. My students held classes for the girls, and I offered lectures for the separate groups of teachers and parents. The topics, though presented in different ways, were the same, so that we could find a common ground for mutual understanding and support. I asked the school staff to think of a list of values which they themselves think most important. They put on the list: respect, honesty, and patience. The situation at school is similar to that in the family: when mother and father value honesty, punctuality and tenderness, their children will learn the same values in a most natural way, and almost effortless. That will not be the case if the father keeps on saying that “Honesty doesn’t pay.” So it is at school: when the teachers share a common hierarchy of values, children will follow. The authority of both parents and teachers results from that inner strength linked with consistency and fascination with truth. No efficient “sexual education” is possible when our children are pulled in opposing directions. Where do we seek for the truth about human sexuality?

For those 27 years of my priesthood I have lectured at the Faculty for Studies on the Family, and through my work as a lecturer I got to know very thoroughly the teaching of the Church on human sexuality. I have fallen in love with the depth and the beauty of the teaching of Servant of God Pope Paul VI, and Blessed John Paul II, and recently also Benedict XVI. They show the unspeakable beauty of relationships in the family, and the wonder of “human love in the divine plan” (TB 119). Priesthood and celibacy, which include the renunciation of that particular kind of love, only show how valuable it is. There is no true priesthood which arises from the negation or contempt either for the body or for sexuality. I may freely and consciously give up married life, and make it my gift to the Lord to be entirely at His disposal, only if I have recognized its extraordinary value. That is what Blessed John Paul II wrote about continence for the Kingdom of Heaven – in the series of Wednesday audiences which made up into that amazing and comprehensive entity known as the “Theology of the Body”.

The human body is a wonderful gift, which God gave to man out of love, and which He designed in the marvellous diversity /**dar'vɜ s tɪ** of masculinity and femininity. He shows appreciation for it in His Incarnation¹ and then in His Resurrection. He lived in the body, experienced the world through the body and in His glorified body He ascended to Heaven. It is so precious, that God has promised to give it back to each of us, after our death, on the day of our Resurrection. It is not something we may disrespect. At the same time, it is hurt by original sin and is weak, and it has the potential to pull a man into a completely different direction from the one his reason and free will would suggest. And that vulnerable human body is the meeting place of what is eternal - with what is finite /**'fanaɪt**. Eternal soul and mortal body. The body may also be the place of the most intimate meeting with another person. And not only that. Because of that meeting, the body may become the place where an entirely new life begins, and a new human being starts its own and unique story.

How will you take care of that treasure of sexuality, which you hold in a pot of clay? A wonderful and fragile gift should be protected. And this is the key to understanding the ethics and the commandments – God, who loves man beyond reason, gives him the rules to protect him from harm. Recently I read a story, published on our Foundation’s blog, of a five-year-old daughter who had broken a glass. She was really scared and uncertain of what was going to

¹ TB

happen next. Her father came to her and instead of telling her off, he said: “Be careful, don’t touch that, you may get **hurt**”. That is why God, our Father, is giving us the rules. He loves you. And he knows that you may get **hurt**. The other people may get hurt because of what you do. This is what Adam and Eve failed to trust in the Garden of Eden.

Contemporary man is surrounded by rules and regulations. They govern the path of your career; you need to collect points and attain levels of proficiency, write plans and submit reports. Sometimes one may feel overwhelmed. I remember my first trip to the USA at the beginning of the ‘90s. For someone born in a communist country, where you had to wait for your passport for years (and you had to return your passport to the office each time you came back, and where you needed a visa to travel to literally any Western country, each time you wanted to leave) – the USA seemed to be the country of dreams, the country of FREEDOM. And the first manifestation of that freedom was the sign at the end of the long queue to the Immigration: DO NOT CROSS THE LINE. And then, in the car: BUCKLE UP, IT IS A LAW. And many years later, when I was stopped by a State Trooper, we had an argument over whether or not I’d exceeded the speed limit. Fortunately, it was me who was right that time. So there are rules everywhere, and you have to observe them. God’s commandments are very logical and simple, and love explains all of them. It may be observed that whenever a society abandons God’s law, it needs a great number of its own laws to regulate virtually every corner of common life.

Why do we need commandments in the area of sexuality, which, as many propose nowadays, should be the area of spontaneous freedom? We could try to imagine a world in which there are no rules for drivers. If you have a car – you are free to drive it. As you wish. No limits. No prohibitions, no orders, no information. Just complete freedom. I wonder if any of us would dare to walk around the streets. I also ask you to imagine yourself in this lawless situation handing over the car keys to your 13-year-old son or daughter.

And yet this is what is expected in the area of human sexuality. There should be no limits, just total liberty of sexual contact whenever you wish, with whomever you wish, how you wish. And there should be no authority one might relate to. Would the world really be a better place if we agreed to that?

Present culture is trying to convince us that man is nothing more than his body. But this is only partially true, and it does injustice to the complexity of a human being. John Paul

II reminds us of the fact that man does not **have** a body and soul, but he or she **is** a body and soul. This is his complex identity. As we read in the Pope's exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, man is "an **incarnate spirit**, that is a soul which expresses itself in a body and a **body informed by an immortal spirit.**"² Whatever you do to your body, leaves the imprint on your soul. And the other way round: you are able to communicate yourself to another person thanks to your body.

Thanks to the gift of sexuality, the mutual attraction between man and woman is possible. Sexual attraction shows that one person alone is not yet complete. You discover your femininity in relation to a man, or you discover your masculinity in relation to a woman. God created man male and female, and wrote in the physicality of their bodies a potential sign of being "for someone". John Paul II says in his "Theology of the Body" that "the body ... expresses femininity 'for' masculinity and masculinity 'for' femininity."³ Your body is a potential gift for another person. And you may receive another person as a gift. But sexual attraction is not enough for that. Only love makes this mutual gift possible. And by love we understand the attitude which engages reason and will, and which is a choice to strive after what's best for another person.

Why does the Church teach that the only proper place for a man and a woman to actualize the gift of sexuality is in marriage? If your body is programmed to become a gift for somebody else, it is not unimportant who you are going to give it to, how and when. When you give away your body, you give all who you are: your personality, emotions and spirituality. Yes, contemporary culture either denies that there is anything more than the drives

of the body, or wants to tear ^e /te r apart the body from the rest. It is fashionable to say: "Oh, I don't love her (or him), we just had sex." But that is not true. The sexual act engages the whole person. The situation in which one feels that one's body is a separate and alien item takes place only during traumatic events, like physical, mental or sexual abuse, and it is called "dissociation." People who have experienced that defense mechanism say that they could watch themselves as if they were standing aside and the acts of violence were performed on

² FC 11

³ MN EN 14:4

somebody else. It is then no natural way of experiencing things. We normally respond to what happens to us through bodily, emotional and spiritual reaction.

The gift a person is making of their body is then no ordinary gift. You cannot give it and then have it back. It is a matter of a lifetime choice, because through the gift of the body you are making a true and irrevocable commitment of your entire person to another person. A couple expresses that commitment when they freely and consciously enter the Sacrament of Marriage. Marriage demands maturity, not only physical, which comes relatively early in life, but also intellectual, emotional and spiritual. This is how Blessed John Paul II described the marital relationship in *Familiaris Consortio*, the exhortation on the family:

Sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is **an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death.** FC 11

That gift of a whole person creates a completely new kind of relationship: communion of persons. Their love will be able “not only to survive the joys and sorrows of daily life, but also to grow, so that husband and wife become in a way one heart and one soul, and together attain their human fulfillment,” as we read in one of my beloved documents of the Church, the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* by Pope Paul VI. In other words, even though we have so many tasks which require our common effort, a perfect married couple is not the one who can perfectly manage all those tasks. A perfect couple is those people who, first and foremost, take care of the other person and their mutual relationship. In my life I have got to know too many couples who were perfectly organized, but the spouses had nothing really in common.

The result of that mutual and total self-giving is also potential parenthood. Marriage provides the only safe environment for the beginning of new life. In the marriage of people who make this their lifetime decision, and who know that the most wonderful fruit of their love is the conception of a new human being, a child is getting the chance of a happy life. It is loved and expected from the beginning, and it may enjoy the safe and predictable presence of both parents: mother and father.

Sexual attraction, when it is left with no ethical context, may turn into a deadly weapon. Blessed John Paul II observed in his *Love and Responsibility* that in sexual experience it is

easy to stop seeing another person involved. Since human nature is marked by the imprint of original sin, sexual pleasure, which was originally intended to strengthen the unity between man and woman and to bring offspring, now has a great potential to become the goal just for its own sake. Intense pleasure concentrates man on himself, and another person becomes just the means to an end. This is how my pleasure may violate the dignity of another person. It may happen even in marriage, as Blessed Pope observes, when the husband or wife uses their spouse, and it happens also in all the variety of accidental sexual contacts, when no responsibility for another person is involved. Can I say that I love someone, when I don't take responsibility for that person? In the sexual act you not only give, but also receive a gift made by the other person. You cannot take the body and disregard the rest. When that happens, at least one side is left with the acute sense of personal degradation.

Contemporary culture has forgotten that God created people so that they could LOVE each other, and He created things – so that people could HAVE them. Today you “have” people, and you love the objects. Today you may use another person to have pleasure. In its extreme version, even two people may be using each other at the same time, their egoisms may be synchronized.

That is also where the issue of contraception comes to the fore. If I accept the gift of the whole person, I accept the truth about their fertility. Men are always fertile, and for women – that fertility is cyclical. During a few days in the whole cycle the woman's body is prepared for the conception of a baby. This is also the truth about her femininity, about her physiology and health. Contraception is a hurtful and cynical way of saying that it's the woman's problem to “safeguard” herself from an unwanted pregnancy. The dominant need of a woman in a relationship is the sense of safety, but it should come from her husband, the man of her life, and not the pill which damages her health, disturbs her hormonal balance and leaves harmful side-effects. As a theologian and personalist I've always known that contraception is a wrong choice. Through my close cooperation with Dr Hilgers, the American gynecologist and surgeon, and the originator of NaProTechnology, I have come to see how devastating it is from the medical point of view. Contraception is not a solution, but a disaster. Artificial hormones are completely different chemical compounds from those naturally produced in the female body. It has never stopped surprising me that representatives of the feminist movement opt for contraception. Is it the expression of women's rights that she should remember to regularly take the pharmaceuticals, so harmful to her health, only in order to be always

available for a man, who is never asked to adjust himself to her physical or emotional condition?

As I said, I've witnessed many cases of marital crisis, and many of them have had a happy ending. But the worst cases, typically ending in divorce, were those in which the couple used contraception in building their marital relationship.

When a married couple engages in the marital act, its significance is double. The meaning of the act can be expressed in the words: "I desire to be with you, I give myself to you and at the same time I accept you as a gift." But the marital act, apart from uniting a man and a woman, also means: "I may be a father / I may be a mother." A husband demanding that his wife should use contraceptives informs her that: "Of the whole truth about you as a wife – only your body interests me. 'Your' child would just be an obstacle to me in 'using life.'" Or a woman says to a man: "You don't interest me as a potential father of our children". I've met many women using contraception, either in the form of a pill or other mechanical barriers preventing conception, who were in a kind of silent despair. "I have to be available for my husband, because it is the only way to keep him with me, and the only way to keep the father with the children." The price to keep the man with the family is then, again, undeserved humiliation instead of true love which makes no conditions.

On the other hand, when we ask couples how much they know about their natural cycles, their knowledge often appears to have stopped somewhere in the Middle Ages. In many cases, even the date of last menstruation is fairly dim, and their knowledge of the signs of fertility is reduced to some vague /veig/ calendar-based calculations. Contemporary medical science provides great tools for monitoring fertility, which engage both spouses and take the burden of "family planning" off the woman's shoulders. Our Institute closely cooperates, as I said, with Pope Paul VI's Institute founded by Dr Hilgers in the USA. Dr Hilgers with his associates has developed the method of cervical mucus observation called Creighton Model System. The system does not only highlights when periodical fertility falls, but also helps to identify many diseases and dysfunctions of the body generally. Charting using this system involves both husband and wife.

It is interesting to watch how parents, who themselves use the Creighton Model, introduce their daughters into charting. Those teenage girls soon realize how their reactions to male friends are related to the rhythm of the cycle, which gives them a better knowledge of their vulnerability on particular days, and helps them protect their personal boundaries.

The idea of Natural Family Planning is, by the way, gradually being replaced by Natural Methods of Monitoring Fertility, because conception of a baby does not really depend on “planning it”. In my assistance to infertile couples I’ve witnessed the pain of those who desperately want a baby, but cannot have one. Life is a gift of God.

So now we come to the vital question which this conference is trying to answer: how do we educate children so that they appreciate the gift of sexuality? How do we explain that sexuality is a gift, but not a toy? How do we protect children from getting hurt by invasive sex education, which consists in explaining human sexuality only in terms of biological facts? How do we prevent them from getting even more hurt through early sexual experiences?

Blessed John Paul II said that “it is more difficult to fix the errors of bad sexual education,” than to correctly guide the children to the discovery of the meaning of human procreation and sexual life.”⁴ That guidance, as he says, should be careful and surrounded by parental love. If sexuality is explained in a wrong way, it leaves the child with the knowledge that you can use somebody else for your own pleasure.

I would like to explain here that “sexual education” is a kind of a mental shortcut. We cannot educate “sexuality”. We can only educate a person, foster some attitudes, help them to ground their choices on reason and will, and not blind drives, and in this way to develop mature humanity.

Many parents ask themselves when to start the sexual education of their children so that, on the one hand, the children are ready to hear it, and on the other hand – the parents get in there before their schoolmates do. But sexual education begins much earlier than at the moment when parents start TALKING about it. The majority of psychologists say that the most important processes in the child’s consciousness, also those related to sexuality, begin in the earliest childhood. They do not result from the fact that the parents plan some special educational activity, but simply because the child lives in a family.⁵

4 K. Wojtyła, Problem „uświadczenia” z punktu widzenia teologii, "Ateneum Kapłańskie" 54(1962) t. 64, s. 2.

5 por. H. Święcicka, Wychowanie seksualne w rodzinie, [w:] Erotyka w aspekcie zdrowia psychicznego, pr. zbior., Warszawa 1972, s. 51

The relationship between the parents is the first and the basic input in sexual education of a child. The child, if it is surrounded by proper relationships, experiences love, warmth, proximity and safety. That is how a child learns that love is the foundation of marital union and the foundation of parenthood. The most important moment in sexual education is to give the child the feeling that his or her life is the fruit of love between its mother and father. Children who know they were not wanted by their parents – most often isolate sexuality from love in their adult life.

Parents often don't realize the importance of gestures of closeness and tenderness towards their children, suitable to their age, their needs and their emotional situation. The first language that a child understands is the language of the body. That is why a small child receives the message that he or she is loved when the parents hug them, stroke, touch them, or kiss them. Children need such gestures not only when they are babies, but also when they are pupils and at puberty.⁶ The lack of physical proximity of parents is often the reason behind early "compensatory" sexual contacts.

Another important factor in sexual education is individual dialogue with the children. The book by Louise Kirk, *Sexuality Explained*, provides excellent examples of how those conversations might look and what's vital in them. Emotional climate plays a key role in these conversations. The parents may be giving correct answers, but when their first reaction is embarrassment, confusion or even fear, they may provoke the same feelings in their children and cause a negative vision of their sexuality. When the child does not ask their parents about sexuality-related issues, it means the source of information may be their peers. The parents should then pay attention to the kind of relationship they have with their children. When children don't get on well with their parents, they will not ask them about important issues. That is why it is so important to be able to talk to children, to listen without judging and to give patient answers – a long time before sexuality is discussed.

In the school for juvenile delinquents that I mentioned before I met girls whose hunger for paternal love has often made them seek for that love in all sorts of wrong places. They hunted the promise of proximity which led them, instead, to futile sexual experiences and disillusionment. Now they demonstrate a sad and cynical knowledge of the world. Nothing

⁶ J. Augustyn, *Wychowanie seksualne w rodzinie i szkole*, Kraków 1997, s.29

matters, there are no true relationships, you cannot trust anybody, and still you carry in your heart the desire to trust and to be loved.

The desire for intimacy is a basic human need, constitutive for the human being. People nowadays, with no exception for children and teenagers, may be surrounded by high tech equipment, but they lack the high-touch environment. Connected to all sorts of media, they experience such loneliness that they easily mistake any relationship for love. And any relationship, as popular culture shows it, may have its expression in sexual activity.

The word “fragile” describes very well human sexuality, and the more so when you think about teenagers. It is true that early sexual contacts may result in undesired pregnancy, failed life plans, or diseases (like infections, which may even lead to infertility in adult life). But little is said about the scale of emotional devastation caused by teen sex. Among its psychological aftereffects we should enumerate regret, because the decision is often hasty and thoughtless, which in turn leads to a sense of guilt, loss of self-esteem, and, especially if the sexual intercourse resulted from emotional blackmail, mistrust, or it leads to engagement in further sexual relationships because of the loss of self-respect. On the other hand, teenage relationships collapse when sex is involved – there are no common interests anymore, no conversation, no development of the relationship. When sexual activity begins, it takes the whole focus and robs the world of a teenager of anything else. Another part of that experience is shame, the compulsion to keep the fact of sexual initiation secret from the parents and the rest of the world, which often leaves the young person with a sense of unbearable loneliness. This is true especially for girls who were forced into giving away their virginity in order to keep their boyfriends. Needless to say, the boyfriends are soon gone, and personal damage remains. Abortion is very often the next consequence, and even if a girl has no idea of what she is doing at the moment the doctor is “helping her solve the problem”, the devastation in the form of the Post-Abortion Syndrome will be clear in later years, when she becomes a mother (if she does at all).

First sexual experience leaves the so-called “imprint” which will influence later the idea of an intimate relationship. There is a great conspiracy of silence on the effects of pre-marital sex. The scars of those very seldom happy experiences are felt throughout adult life. Also later, in marital relations, they are the taboo sphere of a never discussed past, and if the spouses are mature enough, they can respect their partner’s personal burden, but can do little

or nothing to help, as the subject is sensitive and often involves profound jealousy. In either case, it enlarges the distance between the husband and wife.

Because the gift of sexuality abounds in paradox. It may bring people closer, or it may damage a relationship and the parties involved. When you approach that gift before you're ready to appreciate its meaning, and when you try to get the most of it for yourself, it'll be like a beautiful firework that explodes in your hands and leaves you crippled. It is a gift which works only if you yourself become a lifetime gift for another person – and also potentially for the new human being invited into this world. If the context of becoming a gift is removed, sexual experience may only hurt: it either causes emotional devastation, or nourishes cynical attitudes of treating another person as an object of use. We want neither of these for our children. If we can teach our children true inner freedom, responsibility and show them how to build a lasting and happy relationship, they will be able to use the gift of sexuality in a most wonderful way. This is what is possible when children have strong backing from parents and teachers who share the same values.