

Moral Law Equals Authentic Love

Part 3 of a Register Series

by Edward Sri

“So when is the Catholic Church finally going to update all its teachings on sexuality?” That was the challenging question posed to me in the aisle on a flight home recently. The man had watched a film series on TV that I had been a part of, so when he saw me while boarding the plane, he stopped to ask if we could talk. “I love the show,” he said. “I’m learning so much, and I’m not even Catholic! I’m a Methodist. I had some questions about the Catholic faith. When we get up in the air, could we talk?” I agreed, assuming he had simple questions about Mary and the Bible, or confession or the Mass. “It will be fun to help him out,” I thought to myself. Little did I know what I was getting myself into.

After our plane leveled off at 38,000 feet, he tapped me on the shoulder to talk. The other travelers were immersed in reading or working on their laptops, oblivious to our theological conversation — oblivious until he dropped the bomb on me with his question about the Church’s teachings on sex.

Immediately, everyone put down what they were doing and looked up at me, wondering how I’d respond. I, too, was wondering how to respond — but I didn’t get the chance. For several minutes, he pressed me on how all other Christian denominations have gotten with the times; how the Catholic Church’s teachings on sex are archaic, oppressive and inhuman; how people should be free to express love the way they want to; how the Church should be more open-minded. He was friendly, but intense and relentless with his questions.

Finally, I sensed I needed to jump in and stop the tirade for a moment: “Excuse me,” I said with a smile. “Do you know why the Catholic Church teaches what it does about sex? And do you know why it’s always going to teach what it teaches about sex? It’s because the Catholic Church loves people!” That’s not what he was expecting. “I am blessed to work with thousands of college students and young adults around the country in various schools and ministries,” I continued. “And these young people are very familiar with the ideas you’re describing — ideas from the sexual revolution. They’ve grown up with these ideas from the culture. “They’ve experimented with casual sex, the hook-up culture, free-flowing relationships. And it’s not working for them. It has left them empty and wounded. They describe the fears and insecurities they have in dating relationships ... the pain and heartache in their lives ... how they have felt used ... how they have felt let down ... how they have become disillusioned. “Many of them come from broken homes and have experienced the heartache of divorce. Many of them doubt they will ever find a lasting love. Do we want more of this for the next generation?”

I also discussed with him how fewer and fewer people are getting married today. Many young people say to themselves, “Marriage? Why bother? I have a girlfriend. We get along; we live together; we have good jobs. Why do we need a certificate from some church?” Many of them have not seen strong marriages modeled in their own families, and they themselves have gone from one hookup to another and one dead-end relationship to another. So the very idea of a lifelong, joyful committed marriage does not even seem possible. And yet — and this is utterly fascinating — the strong majority of adults in the U.S. still say that one of their main goals in life is to have a happy marriage.

How can that be? If fewer people are bothering with marriage these days, why are so many still saying they hope to have a happy marriage? Because God made them for authentic love, and they still desire that kind of love. They just don’t think a lifelong love is possible. That’s why we need to proclaim the good news of marriage: The desires young people have for a lasting, committed, total love are good! And they can have their heart’s deepest desires fulfilled — if they follow God’s plan for love and sexuality, not the world’s way.

These are some of the ideas I quickly shared with my Methodist friend at 38,000 feet. I can’t say I convinced him in our short conversation, but our chat made him ponder the issue more and admit there were some things he hadn’t previously considered. And sometimes that’s the best we can do in an initial exchange. But one thing that is crucial to do in our conversations with relativistic friends is to reframe the discussion. Instead of letting others paint Catholic moral teaching as something negative — something oppressive, judgmental or intolerant — we need to frame each moral teaching within the context of love. For that’s what all of Christ’s moral teachings are about.

The moral law is an expression of God's love: He made us, he knows how we work, and he loves us so much he gives us the law to show us how to live in a way that will lead to our happiness. And the moral law helps us grow in love. These aren't just random rules from our religion. The moral law corresponds to how God made us. It's the instruction manual for our lives. So whatever the particular moral issue might be — whether it's about marriage, contraception, care for the poor or abortion — we must always bring out how the moral law helps us to love. Indeed, law equals love.

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Edward Sri, Ph.D., is a professor of theology at the Augustine Institute.

This series is based on his newest book, [Who Am I to Judge? Responding to Relativism with Logic and Love](#) (2017, Ignatius Press).

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