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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

October 3, 2023

My Dear Sons and Daughters in Christ,

As we continue to review important truths of our Catholic faith, I am writing to you today to address the fifth truth in my Pastoral Letter of August 22, 2023: “Sexual activity outside marriage is always gravely sinful and cannot be condoned, blessed, or deemed permissible by any authority inside the Church.”

Human sexuality is a beautiful gift from God and is woven into the being of each man and each woman. Every person is created in the image of God, and all people—both married and single—are called to chastity and to live out God’s divine plan for their lives. “The chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. This integrity ensures the unity of the person; it is opposed to any behavior that would impair it.” (CCC 2338). God’s plan for our sexual nature is this—that we abstain from sex before marriage, and that we are faithful to our partner within marriage; or if single, that we are celibate (not engaging in sexual relations). This is God’s plan for us because He loves us so much and wants the best for us, and He has given us the awesome power to be participants with Him in bringing forth new life. This is a tremendous gift which also carries with it tremendous responsibilities. If this gift is misused, it can lead to much sorrow and human suffering. Conversely, if this gift is used properly, it leads to much joy, and to strong and healthy families which build up society and bring glory to God.

Christian marriage is a sacrament in which God pours out His grace upon the married couple so they may grow together so profoundly that the two become united together as a new, single creation. “But from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother [and be joined to his wife], and the two shall become one flesh. So, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” (Mk 10:6-9). The husband and wife are called to a mutually exclusive union, open to the gift of new life. So just as they are no longer two, but one flesh—when the husband and wife come together in the conjugal embrace, they have the potential to bring forth new life wherein the two of them quite literally have become one flesh in their offspring. “God blessed them, and God said to them: ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.’” (Gen 1:28). The gift of human sexuality is to be lived within the bonds of marriage even if the couple is not able to bear children. Pope St. John Paul II stated regarding couples without children, “You are no less loved by God; your love for each other is complete and fruitful when it is open to others, to the needs of the apostolate, to the needs of the poor, to the needs of orphans, to the needs of the world.” (St Pope John Paul II, Homily; February 13, 1982).

This basic truth of morality—that human sexuality is ordered towards a lifelong, mutually exclusive union open to the gift of new life—must be recovered for the sake of humanity. The so-called sexual revolution that blossomed in the 1960’s has overtaken human society in devastating ways. Many have accused the Catholic Church of focusing too much on sexual morality, but if we look at our present landscape, it seems evident that we, the shepherds, have failed to focus enough on this gravely important issue. Instead of

having an understanding of the importance of living a chaste life, humanity seems to be caught up in an “anything goes” mentality regarding sexual activity. Furthermore, rather than the focus being on God’s creative plan for life through a man and woman in a committed and sacramental marriage open to children, the focus seems often to be only about sexual pleasure even if it departs completely from God’s plan, and even if it erodes the dignity of the human person.

This distorted understanding of our sexual nature—one in which human relationships are understood on a transactional level with a so-called “hook-up” culture, widespread and easy divorce, easy availability of contraception and abortion, and deviant sexual practices—seeks to reduce relationships to what one person can take from another, denigrating the dignity and sanctity of the human person, and leaving its participants feeling empty and unfulfilled. Sexual sins are discussed and glorified, even on social media, as casually as though one were discussing the weather.

One of the necessary elements of recovering a healthy understanding of human sexuality is to regain an understanding of the fact that our sexual nature is a beautiful gift from God. The fact that God has created us male and female and established a complementarity between the sexes is truly one of God’s most profound blessings. Pope St John Paul II beautifully explained this in his teachings called *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*. These teachings are a reflection on this profound gift, and on the fact that human beings, who are made in the image of God, are made for self-giving love, not self-getting love. In an Apostolic Letter, St. John Paul II explained that man and woman exist not only “side by side” or “together,” but also exist mutually “one for the other.” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, para. 7).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “The intimate community of life and love which constitutes the married state has been established by the Creator and endowed by him with its own proper laws ... God himself is the author of marriage.’ The vocation to marriage is written in the very nature of man and woman as they came from the hand of the Creator. Marriage is not a purely human institution despite the many variations it may have undergone through the centuries in different cultures, social structures, and spiritual attitudes. These differences should not cause us to forget its common and permanent characteristics. Although the dignity of this institution is not transparent everywhere with the same clarity, some sense of the greatness of the matrimonial union exists in all cultures. ‘The well-being of the individual person and of both human and Christian society is closely bound up with the healthy state of conjugal and family life.’” (CCC 1603).

We must also reclaim the concept of covenant which is so prevalent throughout both the Old and New Testament. Simply put, a covenant is an exchange of persons – “I am yours, and you are mine” – and is an important part of the creation of a family unit. In marriage, the man and the woman give of themselves entirely to the other, being open to the begetting of new life. Pleasure is a component of sexual relations, but it is not the only component; sexual relations as designed and intended by God also entail openness to new life and a lifelong, unbreakable bond between a man and a woman. If a couple, regardless of who they are, enter into a sexual relationship without intending that relationship to be faithful, exclusive, and open to new life (all of which is what the sacrament of Matrimony is intended to foster), then they are engaging in only an imitation of true love which is gravely sinful, and which ultimately deviates from the happiness, joy, and fulfillment that God truly desires for His children.

When the so-called sexual revolution began in the 1960’s, with a movement towards sexual expression no longer being confined to marriage, many greeted it as a doorway into unfettered freedom, but what

this freedom actually looked like was epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases, tens of millions of abortions, rampant pornography, increase in rape and child abuse, and devastating effects on the family and marriage. And yet, still we hear the cry—that the thing human beings really need is more freedom.

It is estimated that over 40% of all couples in the U.S. now live together unwed, as opposed to being married. We are sure that we have “made progress” because we are now so “free.” However, most people misunderstand the true nature of freedom. As St. John Paul II once stated so eloquently, “Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” As our society moves further away from truth and from God’s design for families, we will inevitably destroy the very foundation of the society in which we live. Many fail to see that if a society which is built on God’s truth dies, individual freedoms will die along with it. The destruction of marriage and the family lead to the death of the society, and even more profoundly, to the loss of so many souls who participate in this self-destruction. This is why the Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Fatima, warned Venerable Sister Lucia dos Santos that “the decisive battle between the kingdom of Christ and Satan will be over marriage and the family.”

As we discuss the extreme importance of marriage and the family, I would also like us to turn our attention to the most tragic fruit of the sexual revolution—abortion—the gravely serious sin of murdering our children. Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy by removal or expulsion of an embryo or fetus (a living child) from the uterus, resulting in the child’s death. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.” (CCC 2270). And yet many demand the “freedom” of being allowed to abort their child.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), every year in the world there are a staggering 73 million induced abortions. This corresponds to approximately 200,000 abortions per day worldwide. In the U.S. alone, the Guttmacher Institute reports 930,160 abortions were performed in 2020, a rate of more than 2,500 abortions per day. This is almost one million American children killed in the womb each year before they are even allowed to take their first breath. There can be no greater or more tragic example of the complete breakdown of marriages and families than this, and this is why abortion is the pre-eminent issue that the Church faces today.

After the birth control pill came into being in the mid-1960’s, birth-control advocacy groups such as Planned Parenthood and others claimed that there would be a decrease in abortions, as women could now engage in sexual activity with a greatly reduced chance of pregnancy. Instead, the connection between higher contraceptive use and an increase in the number of abortions has now been firmly established. In 1981, abortion advocate Dr. Christopher Tietze wrote: “A high correlation between abortion experience and contraceptive experience can be expected in populations to which both contraception and abortion are available ... Women who have practiced contraception are more likely to have had abortions than those who have not practiced contraception, and women who have had abortions are more likely to have been contraceptors than women without a history of abortion.” (Dr. Christopher Tietze: “Abortion and Contraception.” *Abortion: Readings and Research*. Butterworth & Company, Toronto, Canada 1981, pages 54 to 60.) The conclusion which has now been made manifest by decades of data is that the use of contraceptives encourages more sexual activity outside of marriage, and when contraceptives fail, women turn to abortion as a remedy.

At the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C, on February 5, 1994, St. Teresa of Calcutta prophetically stated, “Once that living love is destroyed by contraception, abortion follows easily ... And abortion, which often follows from contraception, brings a people to be spiritually poor, and that is the worst poverty and the most difficult to overcome.”

As we approach the beginning of the Synod on Synodality, it is important for us to remember and embrace the profound sacredness of the conjugal union between husband and wife, and the truth that sexual activity outside of marriage is always gravely sinful and cannot be condoned, blessed, or deemed permissible by any authority inside the Church. God calls us to stand firm and reject any path that deviates from His truth, so let us be on guard against any who would attempt to condone, bless, or encourage such activity, as this would be opposed to Christ, to His Church, and to the Sacred Deposit of Faith. We must remember that God’s divine truth can never change, and neither God nor the Church can cooperate with or bless sin.

In conclusion, it is a fact that we as a society have become all too familiar with a long list of sexual sins including fornication, adultery, contraception, sodomy, masturbation, pornography, and many other forms of unchastity that are so prevalent today. The call to sexual continence is a struggle for many, and it certainly runs contrary to the tide of our current culture which revels in unchastity. However, the Church points us to the truth that human sexuality is a beautiful gift from God which is intended to draw us closer into Him as we commit to live a holy and chaste life. We should look to the examples of saints, both married and single, who embraced holy and chaste lives so that we may see that not only is it possible to live lives in accordance with God’s plan for chastity, but it is essential to do so in order to find the true joy that comes with fulfilling God’s call for our lives.

We should also see that the devastation and dire spiritual poverty that we see in society from the forsaking of His truth stand in stark contrast to the profound beauty of God’s plan for us if we would embrace His divine will regarding our authentic human sexual identity. We must open our hearts and our minds to Christ’s message—that the road to salvation is narrow, and the road to perdition is broad. “Enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to destruction is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” (Matt 7:13-14). Christ shows us how to give of ourselves entirely for the sake of the beloved—to die to oneself, to sacrifice—as He did on the cross for His bride, the Church. When we or our loved ones wander into lust and sin, we should never despair, but instead throw ourselves at the merciful feet of Almighty God. Let us always remember that God’s mercy is ever-present if only we will repent and seek His forgiveness.

May Almighty God bless you, and may we rejoice in the mystery and the God-given gift of our sexual nature as we strive to conform ourselves in humility to God’s plan of love for our lives.

Remaining your humble father and servant,



Most Reverend Joseph E. Strickland
Bishop of Tyler, Texas