

Sunday 27th: Indissolubility: A necessity of love, not a precept

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Introduction



There are situations in which both spouses are wondering, with good reason, whether it is still worthwhile to insist in trying to fix a relationship gone bad and that is proving to be irremediably broken. They don't love each other any more, there are character incompatibilities, annoyances, they speak only to offend and even the children are involved in the failure of the parents. What sense has it go on living together? Does God demand the extension of a living together which is a torture? Is it not better for everyone to go his/her own way and rebuild a life?

To these questions the logic of the men replies without hesitation: divorce is better. If so many couples split up after a few years of marriage, is living together preferable? If things do not go well let one go without much trouble.

In no other field, as in that of sexual ethics, man is tempted to give his own morals, and so the salt of the gospel proposal is often made insipid by many "buts," "ifs," "howevers," and "depends."

"To become as little children" is needed to enter the kingdom of heaven, to understand the difficult, challenging proposal of Christ. Only one who feels little, who believes in the love of the Father and trusts him, finds himself in a right disposition to welcome God's thoughts. Not everyone can understand them, "but only those who have received this gift" (Mt 19:11), not the wise and prudent, but the small ones (Mt 11:25).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

"Only the narrow way that Jesus offers leads to life."

1st Reading | 2nd Reading | Gospel

First Reading: Genesis 2:18-24

At the end of creation “God saw all that he had made and it was very good” (Gen 1:31). Everything was wonderful, but the Lord noticed man was not happy in the garden where “every kind of tree that is pleasing to see and good to eat” (Gen 2:9), are growing from the ground. He guessed the reason and decided to fill the gap: “It is not good for Man to be alone; I will give him a helper who will be like him” (v. 18).

Adam enjoyed intimacy with God who, in the cool of the evening, came down to walk with him. He had a job, a land to cultivate love and respect. He was protected and had food. But all this did not satisfy him, because he was alone. He needed someone to talk to, to give and to receive love.

Loneliness is a defeat. How to remedy this?

The Lord created the animals; he fashioned them with the clay, as he had done with the man, and gave them a life similar to that of man. He handed them to man who, grateful, welcomed them as his assistants and companions (vv. 19-20).

Using mythical language, the sacred author recognizes and blesses the deep bond that unites the animal world to man's. He by birth comes from the earth and is a relative of the animals, with which he establishes a relationship of co-existence and collaboration. The animals have a duty to guard, protect, and also save man.

Adam is no longer alone. He cultivates the land, owns cattle, but is still not satisfied. Humans are not satisfied with creatures, professional success, not even God, are enough for man. He needs someone like him to fill his loneliness.

“I have no one; I do not belong to anyone,” this is perhaps the most heartfelt of his laments. The Lord, who wants the joy of man, gets back to work and creates the woman.

The aim of the biblical story is not to teach where the woman comes from, but to answer existential questions: Who is the woman? Why is there sexual bipolarity? Why does man feel a very strong sexual attraction? Is the woman inferior and man's servant?

In the area of sexuality, where the instinct easily numbs the mind and leads to choices that, although dictated by common sense, prove dehumanizing, it is essential to discover God's plan.

- The first message he sends to us through this story, is the demystification of sexuality. Sexuality has nothing sacred and numinous, as the ancients believed. It is a natural instinct, passion “it burns like a blazing fire” (Song 8:6) and is willed by God to push man to get out of himself and to go towards the other. Man exists (from Latin: *existere*, to “stand out”) only when he complies with this divine impulse and, forgetting himself, he offers himself as a gift to another.

- Sexuality is good. The dualisms and Manichaeism that, from the earliest centuries, have infiltrated in the church are opposed to the biblical view of creation (Col 2:20-22). Sexual pleasure is blessed by God.

- Sexuality was intended to induce the encounter, dialogue with each other, and for this masturbation constitutes a deviation. A sound pedagogy, however, takes into account the progressive evolution of personality and is careful not to create, especially in children and adolescents, fears, anxieties and phobias.

- The sexual bipolarity is a constitutive element of the human person; the asexual does not exist. The differences of sexes should be maintained and valued.

- The woman is “similar” to man and is given to him as “support.” Similar and support are the two most significant terms of the whole passage. They reveal who the woman is for God. To grasp its true meaning is necessary to refer to the Hebrew text.

Kenegdò, translated as “similar,” really means “as against him.” “The woman was placed by God before man,” not to be dominated, but to establish a rapport of fruitful dialogue with him, a committed and even tough confrontation that involves inevitable tensions, because the goal is the progressive humanization of both. Woman and man become, in this perspective, “help” one for the other.

The woman is assigned the task of being “help” to man. This job has sometimes been considered, erroneously, a confirmation from God of the inferiority of women. Biblical scholars have shown, however, a significant fact: the Hebrew word ‘ezer, “help,” is used in the Bible almost exclusively for God. “O God, my help”—the psalmist confidently exclaims (Ps 70:6). Only God is believed to be able to rescue man from a life-threatening situation.

Referred to the woman, this title not only not designate inferiority, but defines her sublime task. She is called to make present the God-help beside man. She has to give continuity to the work of the Lord, offering to man the help necessary for his full realization. Without her, man would remain incomplete.

The image of “God the potter,” which occurs frequently in the Bible, helps us to understand the mission of woman.

The Psalmist addresses the Lord a moving prayer: “We are the clay and you are our potter; we are the work of your hands” (Is 64:7). The man is clay to be molded and God has decided not to work alone. He wanted someone to help him fulfill the most extraordinary of his works: “man.” That’s why he created the woman and has given him to her as a clay jar to mold, shape and decorate. She is expected, at the end of life, to return a masterpiece.

- It is believed that the primary purpose of the sexual encounter was procreation. Today’s biblical account speaks to us rather of an absence (a rib taken) and an incompleteness that needs to be filled, a wound that needs to be cared for, a need to get away from the loneliness that demands to be satisfied.

However, it is essential to be aware of the fact that only the proper use of sexuality achieves this goal. When in the man and woman rapport selfishness infiltrates, loneliness appears again, even if married and living under the same roof.

When among the spouses the relationship between man-thing is established and one considers the other an object of enjoyment; when each one lives on his or her own, cultivating his or her own

friendships, interests, leisure; when they are not talking to confront the common project to be undertaken; when decisions are not taken together; when one sullies, effaces and ruins the other in the encounter, then husband and wife fall back into solitude (loneliness?) and return to be sad and unhappy.

- The love between man and woman, contracted “in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39), is “indissoluble” (v. 24). This is not a law, because the use of precepts is always the declaration of a loss of love, but the discovery of the intimate and profound reality of love which, by its nature, cannot die. It is “a divine flame no flood can extinguish,” is a participation in the love of God, love that is able to withstand any test, immovable as solid rock that “no river can submerge it” (Song 8:6-7).

And it is monogamous. Polygamy, which the Bible attributes to a son of Cain (Gen 4:19ff.), is a consequence of sin and the distortion of God’s plan on sexuality.

The extramarital adventure which is a betrayal of love and impoverishes the protagonists; the simple cohabitation and pre-matrimonial relations because they lack full and definitive involvement, clearly premised in the sacred text: “A man... is attached to his wife and with her becomes one flesh” (v. 24) lie outside God’s plan.

- Sexuality is not a game; it is not fun. Building love is an arduous commitment, for which they must avoid impatience, hurry, the messy givings of oneself that always provoke interior dramas, confusion, unbearable situations, although who is involved strives to flaunt an apparent happiness.

Second Reading: Hebrews 2:9-11

Today the Epistle to the Hebrews begins and will accompany us until the end of the liturgical year. The first two chapters are devoted to the presentation of some aspects of the person of Jesus.

After stating, in the first chapter, the superiority of Christ over all creatures, including angels, the author answers the question: Jesus, so high compared to us, will he not be too far away from our condition, our experiences?

To this objection the author responds in the second chapter, from which today’s passage is taken.

“He thought it fitting” (v. 10)—he said—that the Father chose for His Son, the path of suffering and the cross. He destined him, in fact, to be the leader who brings people into the glory of God. Only a guide who has passed through all human experiences, including loneliness, betrayal, abandonment and death, inspires confidence.

The passage’s last statement is touching: Jesus is “not ashamed of calling brothers and sisters” the people he came to save (v. 11). He feels in solidarity with them, understand their miseries and weaknesses, because, as will be said later in the letter, he has learned from what he suffered how hard it is to follow the path laid by the Father (Heb 5:7-9).

Gospel: Mark 10:2-16

It is surprising that the Pharisees address to Jesus the question, “Is it right for a husband to divorce his wife?” (v. 2). Like all Jews, without exception, the members of this sect had no doubts about the lawfulness of divorce, as the Old Testament contemplated the possibility of a second marriage. The argument was, if anything, about the reasons that could justify it.

The theme of indissolubility is introduced by Mark in the middle of his gospel, along with other moral issues such as dialogue with non-believers, charity towards the brothers and sisters, scandal, relations with the weakest, property, wealth. It is placed in this context, because the demand of the absolute and unconditional fidelity in marriage leaves them in dismay and baffled and it cannot be understood unless it is framed in the logic of love of Christ and the gift of life.

Answering the question that has been given, Jesus makes clear, first of all, the true meaning of the law of Moses, law that he does not intend to abolish, but to explain and complete.

The book of Deuteronomy seems to allow the divorce: “If a man marries a woman, and then dislikes her because of some notable defect he discovers in her, he may write a certificate of divorce, give it to the woman, and send her out of his house” (Deut 24:1). Some most severe rabbis taught that the husband could send his wife back only if she had been unfaithful; but others, more tolerant and open to compromise, argued that it was enough that she had badly cooked dinner, or the husband had found another more attractive woman.

Before ruling on the subject, Jesus explains the meaning of the biblical text. It was not Moses—he explains—to introduce divorce. This institution existed long before him, and has always been accepted by everyone as legitimate; he just tried to discipline her, putting a stop to the abuse. He had not demanded from the Israelites, still hard-hearted, a moral behavior higher than that of other peoples. He merely limited himself to dictate a standard that would protect the woman. He stated that the husband handed over to her the document of divorce so that she could remarry.

This provision was particularly timely because many cast their wives out of their home, took another one and, if the first was joined to another, they accused her of adultery, guilt that involved the death penalty. The precept of Moses was intended to protect women from this abuse: the document of repudiation declared her free.

Some of these acts of repudiation came to us. They were signed by two witnesses; here’s one: “You can go, you can get married to anyone, as you wish.”

Jesus recognizes the value of the rule laid down in Deuteronomy and considers it binding. If someone wants to divorce—he asserts—that at least he respects the rights of the woman!

The tolerance shown by Moses, however, is not the ideal expression of God’s original plan.

Having clarified the meaning of the provision in the Old Testament, Jesus invites us to go beyond the

norm and consider sexuality in the light, not the foolish reasoning and deteriorate behavior introduced by men, but of God's plan, revealed in the early chapters of Genesis: "In the beginning of the creation God made them male and female; and because of this, man has to 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 body. Therefore let no one separate what God has joined" (vv. 6-9).

This last injunction, juxtaposed by Jesus to the quote from Genesis, could not but leave his audience stunned. They believed that divorce, in certain situations, is not only a right but a duty.

The rabbis taught that the first commandment given by God is that of procreation, "Be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen 1:28). They considered this duty so fundamental that, if children were not born of a marriage, the husband had to send his wife back to have children by another woman.

Jesus takes a position of breaking against this traditional conception of his people and resolutely proclaims that no divorce is part of the plan of God. The divorce has been introduced by humans, and is a destructive attempt on the work of the Lord who united man and woman in only one flesh.

The kingdom of God came into the world with Jesus. The prophecies were fulfilled, the men were given "a new heart and a new spirit". "The heart of stone has been taken away from them and they were given a heart of flesh" (Ezk 36:26; Jer 31:31-34). The time has come to say enough to the compromises, the pettiness, subterfuges and to point to the ideal indicated "since the beginning" by the Creator.

Only monogamous and indissoluble marriage fulfills God's plan and achieves the purpose for which people were made "male and female". All other forms of cohabitation, although very ancient and culturally explainable, do not respect the dignity of man and woman.

Faced with the harsh and uncompromising position of the Master, not only the Pharisees, but also the disciples are puzzled, almost appalled. Having entered the house, they question him on the subject. But Jesus reaffirms: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against his wife" and adds: "the woman who divorces her husband and marries another also commits adultery" (vv. 11-12). This statement establishes—a phenomenon unheard of until then—the perfect equality of rights and duties of man and woman.

How to interpret it?

Christ has not imposed a new law, more severe than that of Moses. He has only invoked God's original plan that does not include divorce.

The goal is very high, but the footsteps of men are often uncertain. Since only God knows the weaknesses of each, no one can stand in judgment of their brethren; no one has the right to assess the guilt and pronounce sentences. To concrete situations one must always approach with caution. Each brother must be understood, accompanied, helped so that he can give the best of himself.

To show oneself understanding and patient does not mean to soften the demands of the Gospel or adapt to the current morality, but to show pastoral wisdom.

In the last part of today's Gospel (vv. 13-16), Jesus takes the image of children and invites the disciples to welcome God's kingdom like them. Who feels oneself an adult, who trusts in his own wisdom, who is ossified in his beliefs and does not accept that he is called into question by the word of Christ, will never enter the kingdom of God.

To understand the indissolubility of marriage, it is necessary to be like children and trust the thoughts of the Father.

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