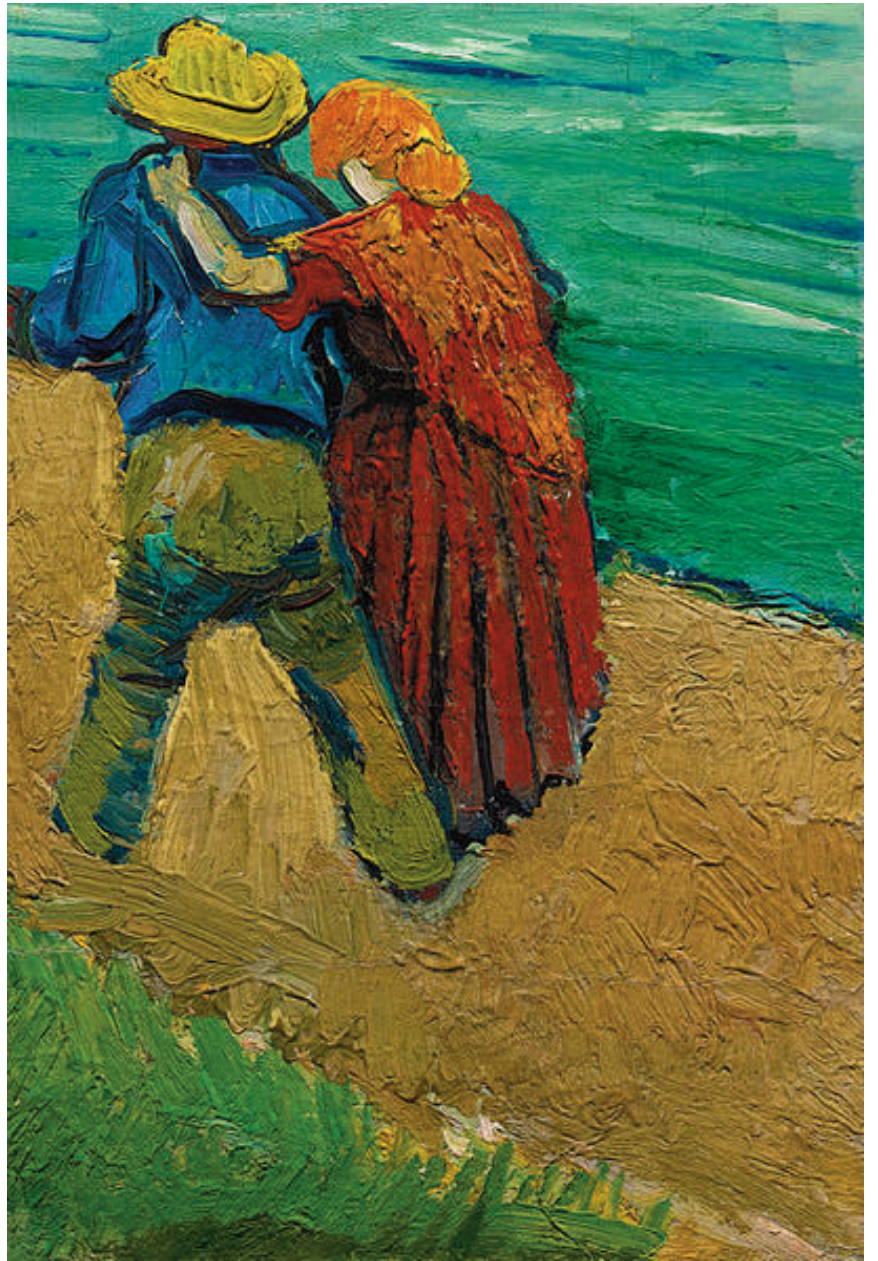


# learning to love

*An introduction to  
Catholic Relationship  
and Sex Education  
(RSE) for Catholic  
Educators*



**Department of Catholic Education and Formation  
Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales**

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**Cover image:**  
**Two Lovers, Vincent Van Gogh (*private collection*)**

**Back cover:**  
**Children reading, Pekka Halonen (*Espoo Museum of Modern Art*)**

# contents

Introduction	2
Chapter 1 - Our Incomplete Identity	5
Chapter 2 - The Language of Desire	10
Chapter 3 - Appreciative Love	15
Chapter 4 - Honouring the Body	18
Conclusion	22
Further Reading	23

# introduction

On 20th March 2016 Pope Francis published a document which he entitled *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love) . In this teaching document, the Pope gathered together the fruits of reflections and discussions with Bishops and theologians from all over the world on a broad range of issues affecting family life. It is an inspirational document, rich with insights and fresh descriptions of the Church's teaching on this vital subject.

The publication of *Amoris Laetitia* coincided with Pope Francis' Year of Mercy which drew to an end in November 2016. It is very appropriate that this theme of mercy should permeate *Amoris Laetitia*, because however much joy there is in loving, difficulties and failures are commonplace in every relationship.

Pope Francis devotes the seventh chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* to the difficulties young people face in finding ways to express and experience love that brings true joy, rather than insecurity and anguish. And a challenge is issued:

*The Second Vatican Council spoke of the need for 'a positive and prudent sex education' to be imparted to children and adolescents 'as they grow older'... We may well ask ourselves if our educational institutions have taken up this challenge.'*

Amoris Laetitia (AL) 280

***“All of us spend our entire lives learning how to love. We never stop learning...”***

To mark the first anniversary of *Amoris Laetitia*, we have taken up this challenge to guide all of those charged with helping young people in particular to confront these difficulties. We offer this document as an introduction to the subject, and have given it the title *Learning to Love*.

All of us spend our entire lives learning how to love. We never stop learning because all of our efforts will be imperfect, since we are imperfect human creatures, essentially in need of the grace of God and of His merciful healing. Marital love, which lies at the heart of *Amoris Laetitia*, and which we see as the model of all loving relationships, is a continuous lesson in learning how to love, with the family as a school of loving where parents and children learn from each other how to love, and how not to love. In the course of this document we will quote extensively from *Amoris Laetitia*, which contains so much of value that can be used to animate the lessons in love we need to impart to our children and young people.

***“Parents have the prime responsibility in teaching their children how to build healthy, loving relationships, and our Catholic schools play a vital part in supporting parents.”***

Parents have the prime responsibility in teaching their children how to build healthy, loving relationships, but our Catholic schools play a vital part in supporting parents.

We expect all Catholic schools to ensure that space is made in the curriculum for Relationship and Sex Education (RSE).

The content of what is taught must express the teaching of the Church, and should be delivered to suit the age of the children or young people to whom it is addressed. We all need to recognise that

without providing an education in this area, we leave many young people vulnerable to receiving their education second-hand, and often from sources which damage them and their capacity to love.

This document is written for those who are engaged in the development and presentation of the broad range of subjects which are covered in such a course of study. For those who wish to deepen their knowledge of the Church’s teaching, it concludes with a list of suggested further reading.

We hope *Learning to Love* will inspire teachers to help them present the Church's teaching effectively and engagingly. But also we hope that it will inspire parents as the primary educators of their children, those engaged in catechesis, in further education, in parishes, and more widely in the Church at large, for none of us can stop learning lessons in love.

Our purpose is to show why the Church's teaching on matters relating to building loving relationships and the role of the sexual expression of love is liberating, rather than imprisoning. For us, ‘sex education’ is a rootless and diminished field of study, unless it is situated more broadly in healthy, loving relationships:

*It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialised and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an education for love, for mutual self-giving. In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched.*

Amoris Laetitia (AL) 280

*“...we all need to learn lessons in love, and to find joy and fulfilment in life.”*

Important as all this is in helping to articulate the teaching of the Church, we want especially to present the Church's teaching in the light of Sacred Scripture, the source of God's will revealed in His inspired Word.

It is therefore essential to make God's Word our starting point as we reflect on what His Word tells us about learning to love.

Lastly, we would like to draw attention to the cover picture we have chosen for this document. It is a painting by Vincent Van Gogh, and it depicts a couple, struggling along, arm in arm, supporting each other as they battle through life. There is nothing particularly religious about this picture. As the front cover of a document on love produced by the Bishops of the Catholic Church, the image serves to remind us that *we all* need to learn lessons in love, and to find joy and fulfilment in life.

# chapter 1 - our incomplete identity

We are clothed, or we clothe ourselves in complex layers of identity. We present ourselves to the world as we would like to be seen. Some of these identities we adopt to cover up what we perceive as human weaknesses, some of them we acquire to enable us to fulfil our vocation in life, and beneath all of these, at the most basic level, lies the biological identity which we receive at the moment of our conception.

Our faith teaches that beneath these foundations we experience a crisis of identity. In the first account of our creation in the Bible, we read how we are made in God's image, and in the next breath, made male and female. Only then does God recognise His self-portrait as being 'very good':

*God created man in His own image in the image of God He created him; made and female He created them. And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.*  
Genesis 1:27-31

However in the next chapter of Genesis, in another account, we hear how God made His self-portrait only to break it apart, so as to create a companion, because otherwise he would be lonely:

*It is not good that the man should be alone; So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God and taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.*  
*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*  
Gen 2:18a.21-.24-25

Adam and Eve, to whom we look in order to learn about our human nature, are presented in this account as dependent upon each other.

And that is how it should be, since in being dependent, we more perfectly conform to how God meant us to be.

The Creation of Eve, Michaelangelo, in the Sistine Chapel



However, as we know, the story of Adam and Eve takes a tragic turn when these models of dependency try to become complete in themselves and independent of God. The tragic result is that they become alienated not only from God but from each other, and certainly no less dependent than they were previously. All of this serves to remind us that we aren't meant to be alone; we 'make sense' only in relationship with each other, and of all loving human relationships, the foremost is marital love. So it seems a fitting way to begin here with some reflections on the institution of marriage.

The Christian Tradition calls marriage between a man and a woman 'Holy Matrimony' and, between the baptised, a 'Sacrament'. This is because the two parts of God's self-portrait come together definitively. The two become one, and the picture is complete, or as complete as it can ever be while we live away from Almighty God in this imperfect world.

All relationships point towards the relationship we have with our Creator, and prepare us for its fulfilment in the world to come. And so from the outset of their coming together in marriage, the newly married couple have to learn how to lean on each other:

*Married life is a process of growth, in which each spouse is God's means of helping the other to mature...Fostering growth means helping a person to shape his or her own identity. Love is thus a kind of craftsmanship...At every new stage, they can keep "forming" one another. Love makes each wait for the other with the patience of a craftsman, a patience which comes from God.*

AL 221

So, far, in all of the above, marriage has been pictured as a relationship in which the couple are inward looking. But for the relationship to grow, the two need to join together in loving away from themselves. In this way, their marriage bears fruit. The marital love of husband and wife bears fruit especially (but not exclusively) in the new life which children bring to them:

*The Word of God tells us that the family is entrusted to a man, a woman and their children, so that they may become a communion of persons in the image of the union of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Begetting and raising children, for its part, mirrors God's creative work.*

AL 29

Let us reflect now on the role of children within the family. Children complete the family; they share equally in the dignity accorded to their parents and are also made in the image of God. This, their parents can too easily overlook. But they are also vulnerable and remind their parents of the great challenge of parenthood



which grows no less, as their children continue to grow into adulthood:

*The overall education of children is a “most serious duty” and at the same time a “primary right” of parents. This is not just a task or a burden, but an essential and inalienable right that parents are called to defend and of which no one may claim to deprive them.*

AL 84

*“When a couple have children to pray with, they lose their self-consciousness, and learn how to pray as a family.”*

In their role as the primary educators, we take this opportunity to encourage parents to make the family home a place of prayer. It is when the family pray together that they most openly express their radical dependence upon God’s mercy. In praying together they continually remind each other of their equality of need before him, and of his paternal love to all of his children - whether they call themselves adults or not.

When a couple have children to pray with, they lose their self-consciousness, and learn how to pray as a family. They practise the virtue of humility when they join their children in prayer. Moreover, by exercising the virtue of humility in the family cradle of prayer, we have a daily reminder of our identity as radically dependent, flawed creatures.

And this prayerful humility helps the family learn how to live alongside each other rather than over each other:

*Jesus told his disciples that in a world where power prevails, each tries to dominate the other, but “it shall not be so among you” (Mt 20:26). The inner logic of Christian love is not about importance and power; rather, “whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:27). In family life, the logic of domination and competition about who is the most intelligent or powerful destroys love.*

AL 98

These fleeting observations on marital love set the standard for anyone wishing to learn lessons in love. There is a lot more in *Amoris Laetitia* to inspire and support spouses and their families in their lifelong vocation, though nothing ought to distract attention from the importance of forgiveness in any loving relationship. But what of those young people who naturally crave to learn lessons in love yet aren't ready to exercise their vocation to love, whether in marriage or in some other way?

Those of us who are older can easily forget how important it once was to feel as though we are lovable, or to experience the almost painfully intense desire to express love for another.

And what of those who aren't called to marriage? We take this opportunity to say that our Catholic schools should always be places where all young people can begin to discern how God is calling them to find true happiness.

*“... our Catholic schools should always be places where all young people can begin to discern how God is calling them to find true happiness.”*

Just in the way that a school provides career advice, so it should ensure that the question of discerning God's will is one that is raised throughout their time in school.

We recognise that there are many whom it seems God doesn't yet call to recreate the Biblical picture of marital love, or will ever call.

And what of those who have more profound misgivings about the gender they were given at birth, and who wish to identify themselves differently than their body suggests?

The Church warns against a tendency to deny the sexual difference with which we were created, when we try to replace it with the idea that somehow our personal identity has only a casual reference to the bodies into which we were born:

*It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality.*

*Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator.*

*We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift.*

*At the same time we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created.*

AL 56

Human beings are not just souls or spirits or intellects. We are also bodies! We have one nature, a human nature that is both material and spiritual. Our bodies grow from being an embryo in the womb, through childhood into adulthood and old age. Our bodies change beyond all recognition.

They are indeed flawed, because they are not designed to last, but we need to accept these limitations and weaknesses as part of God's plan, as we journey towards the home that has been prepared for us:

*We know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling — if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*

2 Corinthians 5:1-4

Let us acknowledge that as well as living in 'incomplete' bodies, we all share in having identity 'flaws'. All of us are dependent and vulnerable, and all of us are bound to look outside of ourselves to find completion.

This insight ought to inform the character of Catholic education. Our schools need to be places where everyone feels valued for their innate dignity, even if young people are struggling to find themselves.

They also need to be places where pastoral support is at the forefront of what they provide, so that no-one is abandoned, even if some might fall away from the teaching of the Church in the manner of their living.

All of us, whatever our status, however we choose to identify ourselves, need to have a clear idea of what is implied when we talk about 'love'. We should never forget that beneath our human identity lies that fundamental incompleteness which paradoxically helps rather than hinders our learning to love, and which leads us to cultivate the art of forgiveness in all our relationships.

And lastly, whether or not we are called towards matrimonial love, we are all called to learn how to love in ways that best approximate to the definition of self-offering love as revealed to us in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the chapters that follow, the Church's teaching on sexual ethics is presented within this pattern of self-giving selfless love, and because each of us is capable of resembling Jesus, so we can say that the Church's teaching on sexual ethics flows from the commandment that was given such prominence by Jesus himself: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'.

***“Our schools need to be places where everyone feels valued for their innate dignity, even if young people are struggling to find themselves.”***

## chapter 2 - the language of desire

Sacred Scripture opens to us the truth that God speaks in Words, and that His Word is active. In the opening words of the Bible, God's Word brings life into existence. Later, in the Law and Commandments, His Word communicates His nature to us and reveals how we can live in relationship with Him. Finally, and definitively, His Word culminates in becoming the means of our salvation:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him; yet the world did not know Him. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.*  
John 1 :1-2.10.14

As God's self-portraits, however flawed, each of us instinctively realises that our words contain residual power; they can rise above the level of 'chatter' to potentially change things in the world that surrounds us, for good or bad. The words we use to convey love are rightly the most highly esteemed; in love songs and in poetry, our hearts are stirred and moved beyond measure, and in the promises made in marriage. It is through words that our very nature is changed as we bind ourselves to our spouse.

But the language of love stretches beyond words. We delight in depictions of beauty and love which have the power to affect us deeply, whether in art or film.

However, words and pictures also have the power to damage and diminish us to the point of enslavement, such as in pornography.

Although there is nothing new in this, the internet delivers words and images



**The Jewish Bride, Rembrandt, (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)**  
that penetrate our daily lives far more profoundly than ever in the past, and sometimes with devastating effects.

In the same way, advances in social media enable and encourage users to do much more than keep in touch with people; they have become a way of projecting a self-image that can end up, paradoxically, damaging the image of the person behind the screen. Practices such as ‘sexting’ objectify and cheapen the bodies of living people, reducing them to a commodity for the entertainment of others:

*It is not helpful to overwhelm [children and young people] with data without also helping them to develop a critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality. Young people need to realise that they are bombarded by messages that are not beneficial for their growth towards maturity. They should be helped to recognise and to seek out positive influences, while shunning the things that cripple their capacity for love. We also have to realise that “a new and more appropriate language” is needed “in introducing children and adolescents to the topic of sexuality”.*

AL 281

Responsible parents begin this process of formation for their children from a young age, and it is at the forefront of what they hope to find for their children in a good school. Indeed, we encourage our own Catholic schools to see this formation as a primary objective in their mission to educate for life. But parents could learn from the example set by schools in protecting their children from damaging internet content, so that whether at school or in the privacy of the family home, children are protected from damaging material that can overwhelm and in Pope Francis’ words ‘cripple our capacity for love’.

Besides words and pictures, love is communicated especially in our actions, the highest and most noble of which is sexual intercourse. In us, of all God's creatures, sexual intercourse is more than a means to generate new life. In us, the creation of new life comes as a consequence of the expression of desire.

We are driven by desires, which escalate from simple biological desires such as for food and drink, through the desire to acquire material goods for our well-being, to the higher desire of acquiring talents and virtues, up to the summit of all desires, which is to love:

*Earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*

*And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.*

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3

In writing this passage to the Corinthians, St. Paul presupposes that they are already mastering their desires, trying to acquire an appetite for the 'higher things'. We too learn to acquire appetites for things which don't immediately seem desirable: the desire to take exercise for example. Such a desire is acquired through controlling our natural instincts in order to satisfy a greater desire, which in this case might be to feel or look healthy.

Our innate desire to express love in the act of 'making love', is natural and good but, like all of our desires, it too needs to be owned and oriented to a higher good. To accomplish this, we need to learn the art of being patient and self-controlled. Patience isn't something that comes naturally to us, especially when we are young.

We want everything now, and in the affluent culture in which we live, we come to expect that we can get things instantly. This impatience carries over into what we are led to expect in relationships which need time to grow into love.

*“...we hope that imaginative ways can be found to foster the idea that being patient brings greater rewards, greater happiness and psychological stability.”*

At the heart of any Catholic Relationship and Sex Education programme aimed at young people, we hope that imaginative ways can be found to foster the idea that being patient brings greater rewards, greater happiness and psychological stability.

Alongside patience, and linked to it, we want to promote an appreciation of a proper understanding of the virtue of chastity, and how important it is in any relationship.

In practising chastity, we are promoting a mature response to emotions, ordered towards finding ways to celebrate love that preserve dignity, and allow appreciative love to blossom and bear fruit. Young people should come to see that the practice of patience and chastity are powerful signs that they are growing in maturity.

Patience and chastity are qualities we associate with maturity. Sadly, for one reason or another, many of us remain immature in this respect:

*There are those who feel themselves capable of great love only because they have a great need for affection, yet they prove incapable of the effort needed to bring happiness to others. They remain caught up in their own needs and desires. In such cases, emotions distract from the highest values and conceal a self-centredness that makes it impossible to develop a healthy and happy family life.*

AL 145

As we have seen, most of our desires come from feeling incomplete, and in need of something from the 'outside' to feel satisfied. In taking what we think will satisfy us, we often 'consume' the object of our desire, and assimilate it into ourselves, such as food.

That would be natural and good, if the desire was truly oriented towards our wellbeing. However, there are desires, such as for money or possessions, which can become addictive and which never bring fulfilment because they aren't necessarily oriented towards the greater good of ourselves, our relationships, or indeed, of our society. In addition to the damage they can do to us as their subjects, uncontrolled desire can do great damage to those that surround us:

*Consideration needs to be given to the growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one's personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute.*

AL 33

We need to be encouraged or inspired to control such desires, and here again for young people this is a responsibility which is shared between parents and the school, drawing support from the parish in its formation programmes. All of us have to struggle against the temptation to let desires 'shape' our lives, but it is a struggle that is greatly eased if we help each other to confront them.

In all of this, the desire to be possessive of people is at work. However important someone else might be in seeming to provide something which we lack, if the desire for that person becomes possessive, the relationship is unbalanced and potentially damaging:

*We do not have to control the other person, to follow their every step lest they escape our grip. Love trusts, it sets free, it does not try to control, possess and dominate everything. This freedom, which fosters independence, an openness to the world around us and to new experiences, can only enrich and expand relationships.*

AL 232

Such possessiveness is often first evident in the school playground, especially amongst those who feel insecure. Lessons learnt there have the potential to become ingrained as a behavioural pattern which continues into adulthood. For this reason, prudent education in the art of making friends is another important part of what we call Relationship and Sex Education.

While possessiveness can diminish the freedom that young people need to mature, it can be even more damaging to abandon them, leaving them to their own devices. In this, far from showing respect, we risk depriving them of the security and wellbeing which they are owed at an age when they are often particularly vulnerable.

Everyone charged with a duty of care for young people has a responsibility to be protective, rather than possessive. For this reason we must all reaffirm our commitment to the culture of safeguarding which we rightly strive to embed in our society and its institutions.

In Jesus, we have the model of perfect desiring love. He invites us to draw near and live within His love as if we were 'pitching our tent' within the shelter of His embrace. This is always and simply an invitation; there is no compunction to abide in His love, other than the prospect of depriving ourselves of joy if we refuse:

*Jesus said to His disciples, 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'*

John 15: 9-12

***“Jesus challenges us to love one another as He has loved us, and not in a possessive, diminishing way.”***

Jesus challenges us to love one another as He has loved us, and not in a possessive, diminishing way. He offers all of us, His loved ones, the chance to think of love as a state of life in imitation of Him, rather than a transient series of loving encounters.

In the next chapter, we explore another way to learn how to love as he loved us.



## chapter 3 - appreciative love

*Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.*

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

In this passage from his same letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul provides a wonderful description of love.

An entire chapter of *Amoris Laetitia* is devoted to meditating on this 'lyrical passage' which 'describes the features of true love' (AL90). These features illustrate a quality of love that is different from the more conventionally recognisable one presented in the last chapter. It describes love in the ordinary daily business of living in companionship. It is the sort of love that grows in the face of adversity:

*The life of every family is marked by all kinds of crises, yet these are also part of its dramatic beauty. Couples should be helped to realise that surmounting a crisis need not weaken their relationship; instead, it can improve, settle and mature the wine of their union...Each crisis becomes an apprenticeship in growing closer together or learning a little more about what it means to be married.*

AL 232

This form of love, born out of companionship, is closer to the quality of love which the ancients valued so highly, called *philia* by the ancient Greeks or *amicitia* by the Romans, which is translated as 'friendship' in English. But our word friendship is too banal and overused in everyday language to properly convey the real sense of *philia*.

CS Lewis wrote an excellent book on love (*The Four Loves*) in which he coins the expression that we have used as this chapter heading - Appreciative Love:

*[Appreciative love] is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others. This love, free from instinct, free from all duties but those which love has freely assumed, almost wholly free from jealousy, and free without qualification from the need to be needed, is eminently spiritual. It is the sort of love one can imagine between angels. Have we found a natural love which is love itself?*

CS Lewis, 'The Four Loves'

To love someone in this way is not to desire them for ourselves, but to desire for them what we would desire for ourselves. This is the quality of love enshrined in the solemn promises that couples make to each other in marriage when they promise to love and to honour each other for the rest of their lives.



Two Friends, Daniel Ridgeway (private collection)

We 'honour' or admire people for qualities of character which we have grown to recognise in them.

Appreciative love is the sort of love which grows in a good marriage when physical desire begins to fade with age. In that sense it is a love that 'never ends'. It is the sort of love that ought to be prevalent between members of the family - parents to children as well as children to parents:

*Tenderness, on the other hand, is a sign of a love free of selfish possessiveness. It makes us approach a person with immense respect and a certain dread of causing them harm or taking away their freedom. Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs.*

*This enables me to seek their good even when they cannot belong to me, or when they are no longer physically appealing but intrusive and annoying. For "the love by which one person is pleasing to another depends on his or her giving something freely"*

AL 127

For those in a state of appreciative love, what St. Paul says to the Corinthians at the start of the chapter or in this passage from his letter to the Romans below would come naturally:

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord.*

*Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

Romans 12: 9-11

Let us draw as a conclusion from reading these scriptural passages that all of us, as disciples of Christ, are called to practise appreciative love.

It is a high form of love, and we are all encouraged in faith to recognise its value and engage in purifying our love for each other by celebrating our best qualities:

*The aesthetic experience of love is expressed in that “gaze” which contemplates other persons as ends in themselves, even if they are infirm, elderly or physically unattractive.*

*Love opens our eyes and enables us to see, beyond all else, the great worth of a human being. The joy of this contemplative love needs to be cultivated. Since we were made for love, we know that there is no greater joy than that of sharing good things: “Give, take, and treat yourself well” (Sir 14:16). The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven.*

AL 128/9

**“...the language of love is not confined to sexual expression...”**

Here we would like to emphasise that this exalted form of love exists just as powerfully in relationships between people of the same sex as it does in heterosexual relationships.

We applaud the great progress that has been made in countering all forms of discrimination against homosexuality in recent times, and wish to collaborate with efforts to make such discrimination obsolete:

*Learning to love encompasses a range of relationships not just sexual ones, because human beings flourish through various and different relationships with other people.*

*God’s gift of friendship is a way of loving, and while sexual loving presupposes friendship, friendship does not require full sexual involvement.*

Cardinal Basil Hume, A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality, 8 April 1997

We finish this chapter by reiterating that the language of love is not confined to sexual expression, and that appreciative love is an exalted expression of love in its purest form, the love that our Lord Jesus had for His disciples, and it is the quality of love which we should all be ambitious to cultivate:

*The love of friendship is called “charity” when it perceives and esteems the “great worth” of another person. Beauty – that “great worth” which is other than physical or psychological appeal – enables us to appreciate the sacredness of a person, without feeling the need to possess it...Loving another person involves the joy of contemplating and appreciating their innate beauty and sacredness, which is greater than my needs.*

AL 127

## chapter 4 - honouring the body

*The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*

*Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?*

*He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with Him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price.*

*So glorify God in your body.*

1 Corinthians 6:13.17-20

At the heart of the Church's teaching on sexual ethics is the belief that our innate human dignity embraces also our bodies. Our dignity is not dependent on whether we are old or young, disabled or incapacitated, unborn or in the fullness of life, beautiful or otherwise. By being incarnate we have the dignity of being made in the image of the 'Word made flesh' and we have the prospect of eternal life before us.

This insight, born of our faith and transmitted to us through the Church, ought to form a great part in how we learn to love each other. It forms the basis of much of our teaching on life issues such as abortion and euthanasia but also on issues of social concern, and not least on the way we are bound to behave towards each other in all loving relationships.

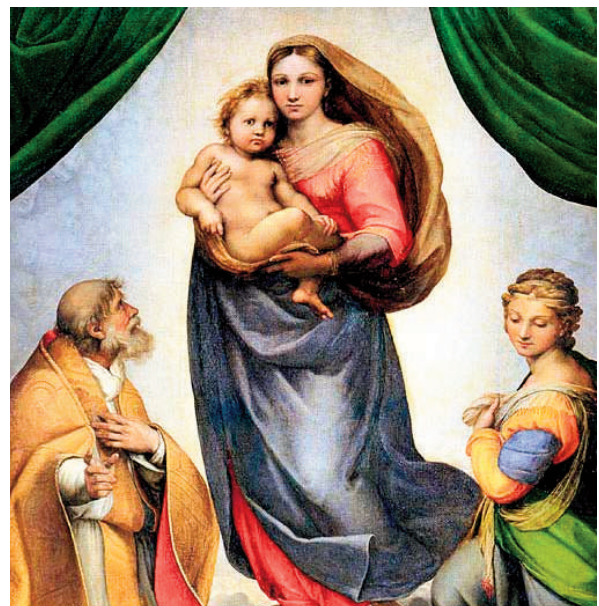
*We love the other person for who they are, not simply for their body. Although the body ages, it still expresses that personal identity that first won our heart. Even if others can no longer see the beauty of that identity, a spouse continues to see it with the eyes of love and so his or her affection does not diminish.*

AL 164

This insight into our inner dignity also has important implications for how we see ourselves when we look in the mirror. We can look into the eyes that stare back at us through the glass and say to our reflection, 'Despite what you think of yourself, when God looks at you, He loves you, He delights in you because He sees His own image in yours.'

It's an uplifting and beautiful thought.

Raphael's Madonna, Sistine Chapel



*“... our bodies have been given to us to communicate love, not to take refuge from love, where we take refuge from the Lord who loves us so deeply...”*

From this flows all the teaching of the Church which sometimes seems so hard to accept when we think of the human body as a vessel of pleasure: masturbation, drug and alcohol abuse, trivialising our bodies and our dignity on social media: all of these and others are habits which intrinsically damage our real, supernatural dignity, and prevent us from seeing that our bodies have been given to us to communicate love, not to take refuge from love, and in doing so take refuge from the Lord who loves us so deeply:

*Walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us.  
Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

*He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of His body.*

*Ephesians 5:2.21.28-31*

Lastly, flowing from this insight that the body has innate dignity, there are implications which inform the Church's teaching on sexual intercourse, whether in marriage or outside of marriage. For a married heterosexual couple, the Church teaches that the sexual expression of love is a precious, God-given means by which the spouses offer themselves to each other. God is always in the picture, wishing to bless the union of the married couple with His divine favour.

However, if the couple use sexual intercourse to express something less noble, then by degrees they fall away from the will of God. For this reason the Church considers sinful those who within marriage dishonour their spouses by using their bodies as an instrument for the purpose of self-centred sexual pleasure. If sexual intercourse is performed with such a selfish intention, then it is damaging to the marriage. The callousness of such an attitude will spread from the bedroom into the heart of the marriage, and the sexual language of misplaced desire will eventually lead to there being no room left for sexual intercourse to communicate love.

Likewise, when a married couple reject the possibility that their love could bear fruit in children, they fall away from the will of God if they do this out of self-interest, rather than for the good of family. For example, a couple who shun the possibility of having children because they'll interfere with 'career development' or their social life, is thinking sinfully.

On the other hand, a couple may well have good reasons for wanting to avoid children, for instance when parents feel unable to provide for more than a certain number of children, or when they wish to devote their time to a newborn child before opening themselves to the possibility of another. If the couple are thinking selflessly, and make the decision jointly, maturely and in good conscience, then they should feel no guilt.

But even in such circumstances, the Church encourages the couple to avoid tampering with the dignity and beauty of the sexual expression of love by artificial means. Instead of using contraceptive devices, they could learn to find other ways of expressing marital love than sexual intercourse in the few fertile days of the woman's cycle. Far from thinking of this as something negative, the couple have an opportunity to enhance their love for each other by sharing time together in a spirit of joy:

*Excess, lack of control or obsession with a single form of pleasure can end up weakening and tainting that very pleasure and damaging family life.*

*A person can certainly channel his passions in a beautiful and healthy way, increasingly pointing them towards altruism and an integrated self-fulfilment that can only enrich interpersonal relationships in the heart of the family. This does not mean renouncing moments of intense enjoyment, but rather integrating them with other moments of generous commitment, patient hope, inevitable weariness and struggle to achieve an ideal.*

AL 148

We understand that it can seem difficult for many to hear the Church continuing to stand by its ageless teaching, passed down from earliest times, on the immorality of sexual expressions of love in relationships outside of marriage. We recognise that it doesn't at all accord with the attitudes prevalent in contemporary society.

This is not the only area where the Church stands out against what has now become culturally acceptable in our times, but the Church has had to tread a lonely path in every age, since those earliest of days in the history of Christianity. We are called to proclaim the truth as it has been passed down to us in and out of season, preaching what might well seem foolish and unpalatable in the eyes of the world.

Our faith calls upon us to consider marriage as the only proper state in which the sexual expression of love truly reflects its divine purpose. But thankfully, sexual intercourse is not the only way to express our devotedness, nor the only language to use as we travel through life with someone whom we love.

Lastly, almost as a crowning observation on the subject, we return to what was said at the beginning of this document: For us, marriage is a religious vocation. Moreover, between a baptised man and woman, marriage becomes a Sacrament, as it is well described in the opening prayer of the Catholic Rite of Marriage:

*O God, who in creating the human race  
willed that man and wife should be one,  
join, we pray, in a bond of inseparable love  
these your servants who are to be united in the covenant of Marriage,  
so that, as you make their love fruitful,  
they may become, by your grace, witnesses to charity itself.*



**Washing of the Feet, Giotto, Scrovegni Chapel**

This prayer describes marriage as a 'covenant' where the couple become a Sacramental sign pointing to both our origin and our fulfilment: backwards to the original desire of God that 'man and wife should be one' so that their love can bear fruit, and forwards to the prospect of bearing witness to charity itself. In Christian Marriage this quality of love is raised to the level of a Sacrament, but whether or not we are married, and whatever our state in life, all of us are called to 'become witnesses to charity itself'.

All of us are called to fulfil our own God-given vocation in one way or another and grow more like the God who made us and redeemed us by His grace.

Finally, we return to what must always be in the forefront of any Catholic RSE programme: it is God who provides us with our definition of the word 'love', and by His grace we receive the means to make that definition descriptive of our feeble attempts to love as he loves:

*We have known and believe the love that God has for us.  
God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

1 John 4:16

## conclusion

Pope Francis challenges us to find 'a new and more appropriate language in introducing children and adolescents to the topic of sexuality'. It is a challenge which we take up readily, because we have to provide a counter-example to the values which often prevail in our sexualised culture, where sexual prowess and conquest is presented as a desire to be attained. The message of Christ in contrast is already written within us, and with the help of God's grace can indeed be achieved.

In our RSE programmes we shouldn't be afraid to acknowledge that our own Christian values can also seem to present a remote, unattainable ideal, but there is a great difference: our values are grounded in reality and imbued with forgiveness.

*Here is a saying that you can rely on and nobody should doubt:  
that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.  
I myself am the greatest of them.  
1 Timothy 1:15*

All of us can make those words from St. Paul to Timothy our own.

As we boldly aim to make God's definition of love our own, all of us are bound to fall short. But with every fall, we give Christ the opportunity to help us start again, and travel 'arm in arm' with us as we journey through life, as do the couple in Van Gogh's painting. We finish with the words which are used to close *Amoris Laetitia*.

*May we never lose heart because of our limitations, or ever stop seeking that fullness  
of love and communion which God holds out before us.  
AL 325*

***“Our values are grounded in reality and  
imbued with forgiveness.”***



## further reading

In addition to the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church', there follows a selection of resources for further reference:

### introduction

On the importance of RSE:

Bl. Pope Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis* 1.

The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *Educational Guidance in Human Love* 12, 34-35.

The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*.

On the need to have a positive presentation of the church's teaching on sex

Pope Benedict XVI, *Interview Of The Holy Father Benedict XVI In Preparation For The Upcoming Journey To Bavaria* 2006.

On the dignity of the human person:

Saint Pope John Paul II (JPII), *Evangelium Vitae* 2.

JPII *Letter to Families* 1994 - *Gratissimam Sane* 6.

### incomplete identity

On the mystery of man:

*Gaudium et Spes* (GS) 22,24.

JPII, *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) 11.

On marriage as a vocation:

Bl. Pope Paul VI *Humane Vitae* 8.

*THMS* 26-30.

On fostering the nobility of marriage and the family:

*Gaudium et Spes* 47-52.

On the communion of love in marriage:

*Familiaris Consortio* 18-21.

On marriage and family:

JPII *Letter to Families* 7-10.

On children in the family:

*Gaudium et Spes* 50.

On love involving the whole person:  
Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 5.

On family as the first place of education in prayer:  
JPII *Letter to Families* 4.

### **the language of Desire**

On language of love:  
Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*

On love and generosity:  
The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* 9.

On patience and chastity:  
*Evangelium Vitae* 97.

On education in chastity:  
The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* 58.

### **honouring the body**

On dignity of the human body:  
JPII, *General Audience (16 January 1980)*  
*Gaudium et Spes* 14.  
*Evangelium Vitae* 2.

On homosexuality:  
Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*

On principles behind social media damage and pornography:  
JPII *Letter to Families* 20.

*Love is patient and kind;  
love is not jealous or boastful;  
it is not arrogant or rude.*

*Love does not insist on its own way;  
it is not irritable or resentful;  
it does not rejoice at wrong,  
but rejoices in the right.*

*Love bears all things,  
believes all things,  
hopes all things,  
endures all things.*

*Love never ends.*

**1 Corinthians 13: 4-8**



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