

SEXUALITY AS AN INVITATION TO INTIMACY AND INTEGRATION

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1. Introduction

The discussion on human sexuality has been decisive on and reflective of a particular civilization. Down through the centuries sexuality has been in the limelight of human debate. It has occupied the central stage of human behaviour and continues to dominate the scene. In the course of history, there were times when sexuality was hallowed with divinity and at other times it was stripped off even its human dignity. A healthy understanding of sexuality is crucial for the wellbeing of persons in a society. It is important to hold that sexuality is for human beings, and not human beings for sexuality. A balanced approach to sexuality, therefore, is essential for decent and dignified human life. Christianity understands human sexuality as an invitation to intimacy and integration, making the image of God visible, tangible, and credible.

2. Sexuality as an Invitation

Sexuality is an inherent and inbuilt feature of human beings. Every fibre of human being is sexual and relational. Sexuality sends constant signals of invitation. It has a natural inclination, an inclination to be related and united. It attracts. Depending on the texture and temperaments of persons, sexuality of a person attracts, appreciates, and accepts other persons. Fundamentally, sexuality is an invitation to bonding and to stay in bond. It is an invitation to enter into relationship. It helps foster relationships. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of love. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of life. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of care.

A close observation of the creation account discloses the truth of sexuality. According to the Priestly tradition, “God created humankind in

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his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). In analysing this key verse, we find that the image of God resembles maleness and femaleness. In other words, human sexuality resembles the image of God. If so, in what does sexuality resemble the image of God? In order to identify the similitude, it is enough to trace the prominent images of God found in the Bible. The images of God that emerge in the Bible are basically one of love, life, and care. God is love. God is life. God is caring. In all these respects sexuality resembles the image of God: sexuality flowers in love; sexuality finds its fruition in life; and sexuality finds its fulfilment in caring.

2.1. Celebration of Love

Sexuality resembles the image of God, which is love. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). God who is love created everything out of love and for love. So too sexuality is fashioned out of love and for love. God’s invisible love is made visible in and through the love of human beings. Love expresses itself in giving more than in receiving. This is truly and clearly manifested in the love of Jesus for the world and humanity. His death on the cross is a true witness to the genuine love. Wherever love is, there is God. If human beings are created in the image of God, which is true beyond doubt from the biblical account, they are called to love, i.e., to love eternally as God loves. On account of human sexuality, which resembles the image of God, human beings are ever more invited to celebrate love.

Celebration presupposes more than one. So too is the celebration of love. This is elucidated by the creation account, when the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18). Sexuality is to be understood as an invitation to be-there-for-one-another-for-ever. It is to share their love for each other. The celebration of love attains completion and culmination in their total and eternal commitment, which is revealed and radiated in the love of Jesus Christ for his bride, the Church (see Ephesians 5:22ff.). The celebration of love may commence with *eros*, continue with *philos* and culminate in *agape*. In an act of sexual love, all these stages of love are mingled together and make a single act of love. Undoubtedly, a genuine celebration love is to be verified in *agape*, even when *eros* and *philos* may be wanting.¹

¹Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, §3.

Human sexuality is an invitation to translate the new commandment of love in everyday life. The new commandment of love (John 13:33-34) presents a great challenge before human beings. In essence, the nuance of the commandment consists in loving others as the Lord loved us. Jesus Christ loved us through the sacrifice of his life on the cross. Celebration of love in reference to sexuality necessarily involves self-sacrifice. It is through the mutual unconditional commitment, which demands great sacrifice for the flourishing of all in the context, sexuality attains its flowering. The celebration of love requires the process of death, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Human sexuality houses the drive and energy suited to the sacrificial love. Unless the sexual love is tested in fire and proved to be triumphant, it cannot be concluded as the true celebration of love. Sexuality, with its immense potentiality, is an invitation to experiment with the celebration of love by finding its fulfilment in free, faithful, and fruitful love.

In this manner, the celebration of human sexuality makes the love of God visible, tangible, and credible to the world. So, too, the celebration of love directs our attention to the image of God, that is, love. Invariably, every form of celebrating human sexuality should be revealing the image and mystery of the divine love.

2.2. Celebration of Life

As human sexuality is an invitation to celebrate love, it is also an invitation to celebrate life. In fact, celebration of love presupposes, proposes, and promises life. Sexuality is essentially linked with the principle of life. Obviously, human procreation is possible on account of human sexuality. Moreover, sexuality is oriented towards life. This does not mean that every event of sexual love is to be resulted in life. Instead, it is open to the principle of life. This is the teaching of the Church: “Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act, while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacitates them for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and of woman.”²

Human sexuality is oriented to life. Through sexual act woman and man cooperate in the creative act of God by begetting new life. In this sense, couples engage in the creation of God, and in making the image of God visible. They not only represent the image of God, but also give birth

²Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, §12.

to the image of God on earth. Truly, couples, through their God-given gift of sexuality and its potentiality, continue the work of creation – the creation of life. While couples celebrate their love, they engage in celebrating their life as well. Couples not only give birth to new life, but they support and promote their own lives. Being companions, friends, partners, etc., at the same time, couples encourage and enrich the life of each other in marital love.

God is the source of life. He is the Creator and Lord of all. Needless to say, God is the author of human sexuality. Moreover, according to the biblical account, it is God who created human beings male and female, the determining and differentiating characteristics of sexuality. Soon after the creation of human beings, God blessed them saying, “Be fruitful and multiply!” (Genesis 1:28). This blessing further emphasizes the precept of God and the principle of life. Understood in the light of creation, it is appropriate to say that sexuality is naturally directed to and divinely blessed towards the beauty of life. According to the divine prerogative and the human happiness, human sexuality is intended to protect, preserve and promote human life on earth.

Sexuality is an invitation to celebrate life. This is one of the focal points attached to sexuality and this is what is being disputed and denied by contemporary free sex campaign. Sexual liberalization has brought about a revolution and promoted its exploitation. It promotes the sale of sexuality as a commodity, devoid of subjectivity and sanctity. Though the celebration of sexuality is given its due recognition in our times, it is being dissociated from the inherently interrelated celebration of life. Pleasure without procreation – seems to be the governing slogan of our times. So many devices are being developed and distributed to disrupt or deprive the flow of life – the celebration of life. The market-driven world promotes pleasure involved in the celebration of sexuality, but prevents procreation. The lucrative multinational companies are good at selling the recreational aspect of sexuality very often to the exclusion of the procreative. All contraceptives, both of temporary and permanent nature, oppose the celebration of life – the fruition of the flowering of love. Hence, one of the challenges that sexuality faces is its reluctance to take it to its reasonable end, that is, celebration of life. People celebrating love forget the principle of life, which apparently enables them to engage, embrace, and enjoy the love of the partners.

Indeed, sexuality has an inherent invitation to celebrate life. Unfortunately, due to devastating designs, human beings prevent the

celebration of life and promote the culture of death, detrimental to human race itself. Jesus came to give us life: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The context of the teaching highlights the point in question. It was in the context of the Parable of the Good Shepherd, in which Jesus revealed the purpose of his coming. Good Shepherd is one who knows, loves, and lays down his life for his sheep. In order to promote the cause of life, it is important to know, love, and live for the one with whom he celebrates his life. Therefore, prolife movement prefers to walk the true way of life (see John 14:6) and is ready “to wash the feet” (see John 13:14) of all, including the feet of the not yet born but will be born soon into the world. All reasonable people would agree on the significance of life, the fundamental good, for any kind of celebration. If the celebration of sexuality does not culminate in the celebration of life, which is inherently and intimately inbuilt into it, the future of humanity will be in jeopardy. Hence, sexuality is an invitation to celebrate life and promote the culture of life.

2.3. Celebration of Care

Sexuality is an invitation to celebrate caring. Just as sexuality extends an invitation to the celebration of love and life, so is also to care. This is a reflection of the image of God. The biblical image of God is necessarily the image of one who cares and accompanies his people. He takes care of the people as his own cherished possession. He leads them to the green pastures and cool waters. The Lord protects the people as a hen keeps chicks under its wings.

Sexuality has an inherent tendency to tender the partner and the children. This tendency is found among the animals as well. Comparatively, human younglings require longer care than the younglings of animal world. This is also an indication of the principle of parenting associated with sexuality. To be a mother or father is instinctual to human persons. It is in the parenthood, people find their maturity and fullness.

Children are blessings of the Lord. To take care of the children is a responsibility of parents. Caring and educating the children have been part of the teaching of the Church. It is not enough to give birth to children, but it is the responsibility of parents to bring them up and give proper education. The Church insists on responsible parenthood, “Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the begetting and educating of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and

contribute very substantially to the welfare of their parents.”³ The Church has been consistently teaching on the importance of caring along with other values of sexuality: “According to the plan of God, marriage is the foundation of the wider community of the family, since the very institution of marriage and conjugal love are ordained to the procreation and education of children, in whom they find their crowning”⁴ It is for the parents to regulate the spacing and the number of children. They should go for the number of children, parents can responsibly care for and educate.

One of the growing evil tendencies found among the couples is female foeticide and female infanticide. It is an abominable crime to have the gender detection of the foetus in order to discriminate and destroy it in the mother’s womb itself. This menace causes a great concern since there is already an imbalanced female-male ratio. It is not too late for the couples to see the image of God in their children regardless of their gender and bring them up as the fruit of their love and life.

The caring aspect of couples is so innate that even if they cannot beget children out of their wedlock, they go for adopting children who are orphans and less fortunate. This need for rearing children is reported to have been found among the so-called homosexuals as well.

Sexuality invites women and men to celebrate caring and parenting after the image of God, who takes good care and provides everything to his people according to their need. To be a parent is part of human sexuality. The Bible and the Church attach utmost importance to the parenthood of the couples; for, the future of humanity depends on right and proper parenting of their children, which facilitates the flourishing of their love and life.

3. Sexuality for Intimacy

Sexuality has an inherent invitation to be intimate with persons. It is for building up an intimacy in and through relationships. Sexuality offers an opening for relationship. By mere appearance, sexuality has an ability to attract and to be attracted by others. It has the power to appreciate the goodness in others. It has the strength to appropriate the beauty in others. In this sense, sexuality is inbuilt with immense possibilities to be in relation with persons. Sexuality requires from persons and enables them to engage in interactions and, thus, to grow in intimacy. Growth in intimacy

³Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, §50.

⁴John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, §14.

is attained through interactions and relationships. Herbert Doms succeeded in highlighting the oft neglected aspect of sexuality. According to him, “In the perfect act, worthy of human beings, the two partners grasp each other reciprocally in intimate love; that is, spiritually they reciprocally give themselves in an act which contains the abandonment and enjoyment of the whole person and is not simply an isolated activity of organs.”⁵

The biblical story of creation gives insights into the depth and breadth of human intimacy:

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” ... 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 had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” 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 (Genesis 2:18-25).

According to the divine design, human beings are created for each other in order to overcome loneliness and to be there for the other. The whole narration on the creation of woman depicts intimacy that is inbuilt and innate. It seems that the process of creation is culminated with the creation of woman. In this sense, woman is the crown of man, who is addressed as the crown of creation. The expression of approval and appreciation, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” is indicative of the intimate relationship between woman and man. Furthermore, the text provides prospective features of human sexuality, namely, “a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” According to the biblical revelation, the intention of the Creator concerning sexuality is one-flesh-union, which speaks volumes on interrelatedness and intimacy.

3.1. Celebration of Oneness

Intimacy leads to oneness. Call to intimacy is part of sexuality. Indeed, sexuality is an invitation to be one: “the immediate purpose of the sexual

⁵Herbert Doms, *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*, cited in Shaji George Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, Roma: Editrice Pontifica Università Gregoriana, 2007, 249.

act was the representation and realisation by husband and wife of their state of two-in-oneness.”⁶ It is a call to be in union and communion. Human being has an existential openness, i.e., an openness to be one with the One and others. Since human beings are created in the image of God, it is natural for them to have the fundamental openness to God and to others. Moreover, since human sexuality resembles the image of God, it is fitting to be one and to celebrate oneness with God and with others.

One-flesh-union is the key to human sexuality. This is outlined at the very outset of creation. In connection with the debate on divorce, Jesus revealed and reiterated the truth, goodness, and beauty of one-flesh-union of husband and wife: “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, let no one separate” (Mark 10:6-9). As it is evident from the teaching of Jesus, there is an absolute prohibition on divorce. This reality and mystery is celebrated in the liturgy of the holy matrimony. At the time of the matrimonial pledge, bride and bridegroom proclaim: “We pledge by this Gospel to live in love and fidelity and with oneness of mind in joy and sorrow, in wealth and want, in health and sickness, from this day till the hour of our death. May the almighty God help us to live in accord with this promise!”⁷

The practice of monogamy in the Church is to be understood from this intimate one-flesh-union. It is a corollary of the nature of human sexuality. It is the physical impossibility to share with others what is already fused into one.

To have an exclusive relationship with the partner, both in body and mind, is one of the fundamental features of human sexuality. Living with the partner forever is further facilitated by the giftedness of sexuality. Against this background, the teaching of the Church on sexuality can be evaluated and appreciated. The Church teaches categorically that the context of sexual life is marriage and only marriage. Hence, sexual act outside marriage is concluded as immoral and unacceptable. Premarital and extramarital sexual relationships are considered as infidelity and insincerity. The teaching of Jesus highlights the sinfulness of such acts,

⁶Doms, *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*, cited in Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure*, 249.

⁷*The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*, Kakkanad: Syro-Malabar Bishop’s Synod, 2005, 148.

including that of intention: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

The primordial observation of the Lord in the paradise, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18), is in perfect agreement with the theology of intimacy. Unity, therefore, is a property of sexuality, and so also a property of marriage. Undoubtedly, human sexuality contributes to the introduction, initiation, and implementation of the beauty of oneness, the oneness of female and male persons by facing each other.

3.2. Celebration of Permanence

Human sexuality moves towards intimacy, which, in turn, brings partners to be bonded and makes them one in body and mind. Consequently, sexuality helps the partners to be there for one another forever. This is the meaning of permanence of marriage. Dissolubility is a property of sexuality, and also of marriage. As far as earthly life of a person is concerned, sexuality and marriage exist till the end. This has been the consistent teaching of the Church regarding sexuality and marriage.

The mention about permanence of marriage, as a natural and mature decision of the partners, is made in the creation account as well. “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Permanence is a requirement for the flourishing of sexuality. It is the faithfulness of the partners in marriage that makes the path of permanent partnership solid and candid. In his teaching on the question of divorce, Jesus clearly and emphatically taught: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9). Permanence of relationship emerging from the sexual and marital bond is not only a natural inclination, but it is also a divine injunction, for the command of the Lord is unequivocal.

The increasingly unstable marriage bonds and the consequent unhealthy familial and social life cause serious threats as far as the future of humanity is concerned and, hence, calls for urgent attention and action. Most ills of the society find their first appearance in the field of sexuality and, then, in the arena of married family life. In spite of the mounting external pressure for dissolubility which precisely goes against stability and honesty in the relationship between partners, the Church clearly,

convincingly, and courageously exhorts on the permanence of marriage, which fosters human sexuality. It is likely that there are ups and downs in human relationships, especially in sexual relationship found in married life. It is these hardships, misunderstandings, and tensions which make the relationship deeper and unflinching. Tempests are bound to come; but those who endure them will be faithful, successful, and joyful.

3.3. Celebration of Wholeness

Sexuality extends an invitation to be and to become whole. This indicates the complementarity of human sexuality. On account of being a human person, which means one who faces others, human sexuality invites and initiates persons of opposite sex to encounter each other – to think together, to talk together, to walk together, to work together, to pray together, to live together, and to lay down one's life for the other. This is the process of becoming one and whole. It presupposes that a person is only a half and the better-half is out there. It is by identifying and dedicating oneself to the better-half, the possibility of becoming whole – fusing both the halves together in body, mind, and soul – is foreseeable and attainable. The posture of human mating – face-to-face – is typical of human sexuality and symbolic of the orientation to wholeness and fullness.

However primitive the creation story is, it has something to offer on the truth of wholeness, the direction to complementarity of human sexuality. “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 had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man” (Genesis 2:22). It is in the context of deep sleep – ecstasy – the other sex, the female is created. In addition, the story tells that the Lord made the woman from the rib of the man. So, God is the Creator of both woman and man: man was made out of the earth and woman out of the rib of the man. This tale depicts the complementarity of sexes. Human experience reiterates the attraction and orientation of woman and man in making wholeness through their lovemaking and life-giving relationships. The pilgrimage towards wholeness is through the sexual love of the partners; of course, it is incomplete till both the partners meet in the presence and according to the pleasure of the Lord.

4. Sexuality for Integration

Sexuality is an invitation to intimacy for integration. The goal of sexuality is personal integration. Personal integration is attainable through

interaction, involving the process of life through death. The path of integration is the way of the cross. It is by dying unto oneself, like the grain of wheat, a person travels to integration. Integration is not possible in isolation or alienation, but in and through relation. Sexuality is basically relational and, therefore, builds up intimate relationship. This relational bond, emerging from human sexuality, demands a lot of sacrifice, if not death. Being mindful of the likes and dislikes of the sexual partner, one goes through the path of purification and sanctification. At this stage, there is high level of mutual understanding and total commitment for the welfare of husband and wife. Saint Paul draws a beautiful metaphor to explain the process of surrender and sanctification leading to integration: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For, the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:21-25).

4.1. Celebration of a Sacrament

Sexuality is an invitation to integration through intimacy which is to be celebrated in the sacrament of marriage. Marriage is the context of sexuality. Sexual life outside marriage is immoral. Marriage is considered a secular reality as well as a sacred mystery. It has been found in all cultures and at all ages. Therefore, it is a social institution. It is through the institution of marriage that the society finds its extension and expansion. The quality of a society depends on the quality of marriage, forming a family.

In creating man and woman, God was giving shape to marriage, for it was God who intended them to be together and to cling to each other. In this sense, marriage is instituted by God. The explicit significance of the institution of marriage, as spelled out in the creation account, is twofold: to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) and to “become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). In other words, marriage is for partnership and procreation, mutual love and fruitful love, companionship and children, pleasure and parenthood. These are the two complementary fundamental dimensions of human sexuality and they are supported and promoted by the institution of marriage. Hence, the Church teaches that sexuality is to be exercised in the context of marriage, where sexual acts are open to the unitive and

procreative aspects of sexuality. The fundamental meaning of sexuality, namely, lovemaking and life-giving principles, are safeguarded and strengthened by the institution of marriage.

Marriage instituted by God is elevated to the status of a sacrament by Christ. Sacrament is a mystery of salvation; it is a visible sign of an invisible grace. Saint Paul teaches that marriage is “a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church” (Ephesians 5:32). Marriage is a mystery of salvation insofar as it makes visible the love, life, care of God, which is otherwise invisible. The love and life of God are made tangible and credible through marriage, the context of sexuality, which resembles with the image of God as well. The reality of divine love and life is seen in the creation of human beings in God’s own image. The mystery of divine love and life is further revealed through the mystery of Christ and Church, which is reflected in the marital relationship of husband and wife. That is, seeing the love, life, and care of husband and wife, the world comes in touch with the love, life, and care of God for the world and humanity. In the same chapter, the apostle tells: “For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Ephesians 5:29-31). Jesus made this point clear in his discourse on divorce and wanted it to be according to the divine design. Hence, Jesus taught: “Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mark 10:9). It is in the light of the teaching of Jesus that the Church holds on to unity and indissolubility, the properties of marriage, through which the truth, goodness, and beauty of sexuality are held in high esteem. In this manner, integrity of sexuality and integration of personality are worked out.

4.2. Celebration of Sanctification

The celebration of sexuality, as stated earlier, is in the context of marriage. Since human sexuality resembles the image of God, the proper celebration of sexuality is a way to sanctity. A reasonable and responsible sexual life of the partners in marriage helps them grow in holiness. In other words, if the mutual love of the sexual partners in marriage is open to the love, life, and care of God, then it is possible to conclude that they are on their way to holiness. Furthermore, if the mutual love of the sexual partners in marriage reflects the love of Jesus Christ for the Church, then it is

appropriate to conclude that the couples, in living their life of love and care for each other, indeed, progress in holiness.

Human beings made in the image of God, needless to say, have to be like God. In this vein of thought, the Fathers of the Church taught: “God became man so that man may be god.” Everybody is called to holiness. All are invited to the perfection of the Father (Matthew 5:48). Each one should be an icon of the compassion of the Father (Luke 6:36), which is said to be the touchstone of holiness. Saint Paul teaches in clear terms: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Therefore, sanctification or holiness is the will of God for the spouses as well. The bold and solid teaching of Saint Paul on sexuality helps in understanding the way to holiness: “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Corinthians 7:3-4). In this case, the apostle indicates the importance of recognising, respecting, and responding to the sexual needs of each other in order to be on the path of holiness for the status of married life. Elsewhere in the same chapter, Saint Paul alludes to the holiness of couples through their marital life: “For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband” (1 Corinthians 7:14).

The Vatican Council II teaches, through its Constitution on the Church, that everyone is called holiness.⁸ In the light of this teaching, there is a reiteration of the original vision on holiness. Accordingly, it is not enough to be good, but to be holy is the goal of everyone in the world. Hence, to be holy, it is enough for persons to live in accordance with the divine vocation each one is given. In this case, sexual intimacy and sexual integration constitute the ordinary way to holiness for the couples. Every moment and event of marital life is the way for the couples to be holy. Saint Ephrem taught that the “marriage bond is pure, honourable, and holy.”⁹

Sanctification of the spouses and the wearing the robe of glory constitute a major theme in the celebration of marriage in the Church.

⁸*Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 5.

⁹Saint Ephrem, *Hymnen Contra Haereses*, 45:7-8, cited in Louis Edakalathur, *The Theology of Marriage in the East Syrian Tradition*, Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1994, 49.

While the priest blesses the *manthrakodi* (nuptial garment) during the ceremony, the following prayer is being recited:

O, merciful Lord, who adorns the human soul with the enduring mantle of grace, bless this *manthrakodi*. Help this bride and groom put You on through their mutual love and self-giving. O Lord, who clothed the holy Church, Your bride, in the mantle of glory, make this couple worthy to put on the robe of glory in heaven after a life of sanctity on earth.¹⁰

The text of the blessing vividly reiterates the belief of the Christians regarding sexuality and marriage. The bride and groom are said to be putting on Christ through their mutual love and self-giving. Marriage is presented as the way to sanctify their life on earth and to put on the robe of glory in heaven. It is through the fulfilment of marital responsibilities, the couple may be made holy.

4.4. Celebration of Salvation

Sexuality, lived as per the divine design, according to each one's vocation, is a means for salvation. Salvation means wholeness. It is attained through relation. Hence, relation is the key to salvation. It is through relationship, persons become intimate and integrated. Sexuality offers a wider horizon to establish deeper and higher relationship. Though sexuality begins with physical and bodily relationship, it travels all the way to the Trinitarian Godhead, for it resembles the image of God. In this sense, sexuality enables persons to have intimacy and integration with everyone and everything of the divine origin. Herbert Doms illustrates the saving and sanctifying aspect of sexuality in the context of marriage in terms of Eucharistic communion: "The physical union in marriage completed the moral participation in the life of the other just as physical union with Christ in the Eucharist completed the believer's moral union with Christ."¹¹

Sexuality is to be understood and appreciated in reference to the mystery of Incarnation as well. The mystery of Incarnation revealed the goodness and beauty of human body in the act of salvation. Since Jesus took human body in order to reconcile and redeem the world, the importance of body in the work of salvation is further highlighted. The acts of Jesus – acts of body, mind, and soul in one – worked out salvation for humanity. Jesus was born of Mary. He established his relationship

¹⁰*The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 146.

¹¹Doms, *Vom Sinn und Zweck der Ehe*, cited in Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure*, 250.

through his total personal acts. He manifested the love of God for the world through his personal commitment to the needs of the people. His presence was the loving presence of his Father in person. He served humanity through his words and works. He, out of his love, died on the cross for the salvation of all. Incarnation of Jesus reveals the intimacy and integration of body and spirit. This is also the way for human beings to act out the love of God and attain their salvation. "The primal symbol of sexual intercourse enacts the psycho-physical intimacy found between spouses as their participation in God's own activity in his self-giving, triune love."¹² Sexuality helps unearth the potentialities to love and to make the love of God manifest. Sexual love becomes intense and intimate in marriage and helps the partners achieve integrity and integration. Marital love enables them to love and live for each other, involving unconditional, self-giving, and sacrificial love, culminating in laying down one's life for the other partner. "A true Christian understanding of marital intercourse will see bodily sexuality, not as an instrument of love, but as two whole persons seeking to attain union through self-sacrificing love."¹³ Jesus worked out salvation through his self-sacrificing love. It is the self-sacrificing love of the couples, in marital family life, which paves the way for their salvation.

The way to salvation was the way of the cross. Dying on the cross, of course, moved by love, Jesus set the path of salvation before the world. It means that salvation is costly. A high price is to be paid to experience it. The images of Good Shepherd (John 10:1-10) and the grain wheat (John 12:22-24) speak for Christ and his saving ministry. The blessing of the *tali*, during the mystery of the matrimony, unveils the rich significance of the cross for the bride and the groom:

O Lord, You, by Your death on the cross, have earned the Church as Your bride, bless this *tali* that unites the bride and the groom in mutual trust and love. May this *tali*, the very symbol of unity, bind them to indivisible love and fullness of fidelity. May the cross, embossed on it, give them strength to bear cheerfully the sorrows of

¹²Charles A. Gallagher, George A. Maloney, et al. *Embodied in Love - Sacramental Spirituality and Sexual Intimacy: A New Catholic Guide to Marriage*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983, 12.

¹³Gallagher, et al., *Embodied in Love*, 12.

life, and to lead a life pleasing to You. May this also be a symbol of their fidelity.¹⁴

Tali is the symbol of wedding and the symbol of salvation through Christ and his death on the cross. It is also a symbol of unity and fidelity. It reminds the bride and the groom about their mutual trust and love. *Tali* is meant for tying the knot of matrimony, a bond of salvation for the bride and the groom. Jesus brought about salvation for humanity through his obedience to be tied to the tree of the cross. Through the tying of the *tali* and following the path of the cross, the bride and the groom work out their salvation. Sexuality is an invitation to seek, stay, and surrender to the partner in love. Sexuality has the potentiality to bear the burden of and share the blessing with the marital partner. As Jesus surrendered himself for the wellbeing of the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33), husbands will submit themselves to the welfare of their wives. It is in giving they receive. It is in dying they live. This is the mystery of the cross, the sign of our salvation. The spouses bear witness to the mystery of the cross in their daily life. Through their faithful living, couples not only bear witness to the mystery of salvation, but also embrace it knowingly and willingly. Mysterious though it remains, real passion and compassion housed in the giftedness of sexuality facilitate and accelerate persons to follow in the way of the cross, the way to their salvation.

5. Conclusion

Christians understand sexuality as an invitation to intimacy and integration. Indeed, it is an invitation to reveal the image of God. Since sexuality resembles the image of God, it is an invitation to represent and realise the love, life, and care. Sexuality is an invitation to actualise oneness, permanence and wholeness in the context of marriage. In the context of marriage, sexuality assumes the status of a sacrament, the channel of sanctification, and the path of salvation for the couples. Pope Benedict XVI has described the truth, goodness and beauty of sexuality and marriage in Christianity as follows:

First, *eros* is somehow rooted in man's very nature; Adam is a seeker, who "abandons his mother and father" in order to find woman; only together do the two represent complete humanity and become "one flesh." The second aspect is equally important. From

¹⁴*The Sacraments of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 145. See also Paulachan Kochappilly, "The Covenantal Love and Life: Celebration of the Sacrament of Marriage," *Ephrem's Theological Journal* 7 (October 2003), 171-193.

the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfil its deepest purpose. Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love. This close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature.¹⁵

According to the Christian perspective, marriage is the only context of sexual life. It is simultaneously a secular reality, a sacred mystery, and a sacrament of sanctity and salvation. In the context of marriage, sexuality unfolds and upholds the essential and inseparable aspects of lovemaking (Genesis 2) and life-giving (Genesis 2), unitive (Genesis 2) and procreative (Genesis 1), fidelity (Genesis 2) and fertility (Genesis 1), vertical (Genesis 1) and horizontal (Genesis 2), intergenerational (Genesis 1) and interpersonal (Genesis 2).

In the light of the above reflection, sexuality is an invitation to the celebration of love and life.¹⁶ It is in the context of faithful, free, and fruitful love and life, the door of celebration is open for the bride and the groom to enter into bridal chamber to sing the song of love and to commence the dance of life with the Lord of celebration. Sexuality enables and enhances human relationality. The key to celebration is relation. While relation is the foundation of celebration, celebration cements relation. It is through the right and fitting celebration of sexuality, woman and man, created in the image and likeness of God, live the life of intimacy and integration.

¹⁵Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, §11.

¹⁶Kochappilly, “The Covenantal Love and Life,” 171-193.