

FIDELITY AND INTIMACY

Germain Grisez, *Professor Emeritus of Christian Ethics*

Mount Saint Mary's University

Emmitsburg, Maryland

This presentation will not be a typical academic lecture. I shall speak about and sing the praises of faithful marital love. If you look forward to marrying, my hope is to help you prepare. If you prepare couples for marriage or look forward to doing so, my hope is to help you see how to carry out that important service more adequately. If you already are married, my hope is to share with you encouraging reflections, partly based on Jeannette's and my experience of our own married life, which began 9 June 1951.

Since our marriage has been good, it might seem that I am boasting, but I am not. Yes, we have worked to make a good marriage. But I claim no credit for that. Jeannette was and remains one of God's best gifts to me. And our good marriage has been his blessing. Everything good in Christian life is grace.

In discussions of marriage during the twentieth century, there was a great deal of talk about love. All of that talk about love put fidelity in the shade. I am going to try to bring it into the bright light once more, and I hope that you will join me in reflecting upon this virtue. Furthermore, I am going to praise fidelity and sing its praises. And so this lecture will be more a meditation than an academic exercise. I hope to invite you to enter gently into my personal thoughts—gently, for I also will reveal to you the secret heart from which these thoughts spring, the intimacy of my own marriage, expressed in poetic words of love.

Our word *fidelity* translates the Latin word *fides*, and *fides* also means faith. Thus when we speak of fidelity in marriage, *fidelity* translates the same Latin word that is translated *faith* when we say that there remain these three: faith, hope, and charity. In discussions of marriage, this fact used to be pointed out only to exclude a possible confusion; it was assumed that the use of the same word to refer to fidelity and to faith is mere equivocation. But I think that assumption was a mistake.

For faith, which is the foundation of Christian life, is in the first place openness to God who remains hidden from us even as he reveals and communicates himself to us. It is only for the sake of maintaining this openness to God that faith must also take the form of a steadfast conviction of the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the divine Truth who promises us intimate knowledge of himself in the unending joy of heavenly intercourse.

I suggest that fidelity in marriage is similar to religious faith. For marital fidelity is a commitment of one's whole life to the true self of another. In this commitment, one opens oneself to the reality of one's husband or wife, a reality that never can be known in advance. As God remains a mystery to us, so in a way does our marital partner remain a mystery to us. Thus much of what I have to say about fidelity in marriage will apply as well to faith toward God and the truths he reveals in revealing himself to us.

Someone might say: "Fidelity is fine, but it is only a minimum." To think so would be to look at fidelity in an essentially negative way. From such a negative viewpoint, fidelity seems to be little more than the restriction of oneself to a single sexual partner—"forsaking all others"—in a relationship that gains a narrow intimacy at the price of an otherwise universal exclusivity.

Of course, even this minimal and negative fidelity does not come so easily to human animals. The human heart can be fickle. Human love is an inconstant flame, which needs always to be fed fresh fuel, and even so it threatens to go out if it is exposed too soon to gusts that are too strong for it, or if it is confined and smothered.

The defects and limitations of what one already has are obvious. Thus when we look at someone we have loved, after we have had time to become familiar, we see all the qualities that weaken our hope. The possibilities of the other mostly remain hidden, even though they might be so great that they would force us to set aside the ideal by which we so quickly condemn the inadequacies we see.

Moreover, if our love was not perfect to begin with—and whose love ever is?—the one to whom we were once so much attracted repels us by disappointing us again and again. For in every love, to the extent that it is an imperfect love, I ask another to treat me as if I were God. No one can satisfy such a demand; no one should try to satisfy it. And so every imperfect love disappoints.

Is it any wonder, then, that perfect fidelity is rare and difficult? Someone new comes along whose defects are not at once obvious. False hopes are not yet disappointed by a fresh love. One's illusions of perfection tempt to infidelity toward one's familiar partner. Moreover, the human being is uniquely subject to boredom. The sensation of change seems desirable in itself; the excitement of novelty seems an unmixed good. Thus, after a while, one's partner has not the same capacity to excite as a stranger. With familiarity, fascination ends. Romance is dead.

At this point, if fidelity is present, it will prove itself superior to what is usually regarded as love. For such love dies with romance, and is reincarnated only in a new experience. The search for novelty goes restlessly forward. But fidelity endures while romantic love dies. While the flower of romance wilts and becomes ugly, fidelity waits for the fruit that surpasses the flower, the fruit that could not come if the flower did not die.

The great lover, the Don Juan, is really apathetic, seeking novelty sufficient to excite, to provide another experience of love. But no experience is ever allowed to reach any fulfillment beyond the experience itself. Change itself is his necessity, as the carnal knowledge of sexual play distracts from the aching void of not being—of not being someone, of having no identity based upon permanent dedication to a good greater than oneself. Since a good greater than oneself goes beyond one's own experience, which always remains part of oneself, one who lives for the sake of experience is likely to sneer uncomprehendingly at fidelity, which will seem mere self-limitation and acquiescence to inertia.

The venom that accompanies such a sneer at fidelity suggests that there may be a buried suspicion that fidelity bears the superior value, that fidelity has a beauty to be envied. But lovers of experience, advocates of experiment, cannot admit this superior value to themselves. They must be careful to hide from it, because fidelity is a judgment on such

infidelity, as every virtue is a judgment upon its opposite vice. Unfortunately, only the person who has begun to enjoy a virtue can see that the judgment is one of compassion rather than condescension, for the beginning of virtue also knows its own alloy of imperfection. I believe, help Thou my unbelief. I would be faithful; forgive thou my infidelity.

Genuine love, confirmed by fidelity, never rejects the change that belongs to flourishing life and growth. The healing up of wounds, the filling out of what is wanting, the unfolding of possibilities hidden in the true self of one's beloved—fidelity never turns away from these changes, but always welcomes them. Yet even such changes are welcome neither because they are changes, nor because they are something new. If fidelity does not live in the past, neither does it live in the present, nor at any mythical moment of fulfillment in the future.

Fidelity aspires to live outside time. Such a life is too rich to be characterized either in terms of static fixity or of change. Whoever does not understand the aspiration for such a life does not know what real love is. The demands that the true self of one's beloved be immortal and that the bond of union be eternal arise, not from any anxiety about one's own security nor from any jealous clinging to one's possession, but from the fidelity of love itself.

Spanning the distance between time and eternity, love confirmed by fidelity welcomes change only insofar as change contributes to flourishing. Such love admits no variation in commitment to the goodness of the beloved; such love seeks to rescue the communion of love from the torrent of time. That is why, many years ago, I wrote for my wife:

“Jeannette . . .”

*How often have I uttered this, your name,
And felt its softness gently run my tongue,
But still the sound is never quite the same,
For each new sounding gives it meaning new.
For you and me there is too little time,
The years of youth, our youth, fly quickly past.
Some day that passes will carry past the prime
Of life and love from us. Oh, never change!
Though changing ever, never change in this:
Our love once given must never be recalled,
The joy of hearing you, your glance, your kiss,
Your gentle soul and goodness must remain.*

Not only one's beloved, but the bond of union itself must be unalterable. This bond of union cannot be merely subjective, something felt that remains within. Nor can the bond of union be a merely outward tie that binds but that can be untied or broken. The bond of union must be a real and immediate uniting of two persons who grow together as one.

We know how deceptive is the subjective experience of love. One person says to another: “I love you; I truly love you.” But what does it mean? No one need be a cynic to

observe that it often means simply: “At the moment, I want to make use of you. When you are no longer of use to me, I will send this love, now so enchanting, to the junk yard of smashed dreams.”

Still, one who hears the words “I love you” cannot take for granted any such translation. Perhaps this time the words are truthful. Even one who utters them does not always know what the words mean, for it is so easy to deceive oneself—easier even than it is to deceive others.

Of course, a proponent of the new morality might argue that it is precisely this ambiguity of the words of love that makes necessary the performance of the act of love if there is to be genuine communication. Acts speak louder than words, after all.

Louder, yes, but not necessarily less ambiguously. Sexual intercourse and every partial act that stops short of it is not less ambiguous than a verbal expression of love, but rather more ambiguous. Is the motive for the deed a desire for release, for emotional satisfaction? Is it a question of acquiring status, of feeling wanted, of showing that one can be successful in playing a game at which no one in our society feels anything less than proficiency acceptable?

An old song began: “He told her he loved her, but—Oh!—how he lied.” Simple observation shows that sexual acts can resound with selfishness and can generate hatred just as easily as they can resound with love and beget joy. In the past, prostitution was unmistakable in its meaning. Today, sexual relationships that are a kind of mutual prostitution, inasmuch as two persons make selfish use of each other, are wrapped in an illusion of romance. Such counterfeits of sexual communion are passed off as genuine. In fact, some deny that there is any criterion by which to distinguish between the counterfeit and the genuine.

More profoundly, the words and deeds of love cannot express or communicate unity unless a real unity has begun to grow. Love must exist; then words and deeds can play their role. And love must exist as a bond that goes beyond the experience of the lovers, embraces their whole reality, and, because it penetrates this personal reality, cannot be cast aside. Fidelity is neither an expression, nor a state of mind, nor a yoke. It is the recognition and the acceptance of a real communion of love as an ineluctable fact.

Fidelity is a taking, a taking of each other without regard for future contingencies—for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. Fidelity is a taking of responsibility, and taking responsibility is something more than taking one’s pill regularly or taking care to arrange for a good, safe abortion. Fidelity is the will to accept the true self of one’s beloved, a choice of this one in preference to any other—even in preference to any false self that may have to pass away. Fidelity is the will to become the person one will have to become if this communion is to last and become more perfect.

The sexual communion that is sealed by fidelity demands social recognition and respect. This is why genuine love itself calls for the institution of marriage. Of course, the mere fact that one has pronounced the marriage vow does not guarantee that love is genuine. Marriage is only a beginning, the undertaking of the work of love, not love already accomplished, not fidelity as an ideal realized.

But so-called responsible interpersonal relationships that involve sexual acts apart from marriage reveal their true character by their refusal of fidelity. They seek to conjure up a unity that is absent, by talking and acting as if it were present. The bond that arises is not a real unity. Instead, it is a bondage in which each partner is enslaved to egoism and to the selfishness of the other—the bondage of mutual exploitation.

Genuine love welcomes the confirmation of fidelity, and genuine love generously gives that confirmation. Or, if confirmation cannot be given, genuine love waits patiently, maintaining in advance fidelity to the one to whom the pledge of fidelity will be given in the future. From this point of view, fornication—and all the acts short of it that a good husband and wife would not engage in apart from their own marriage—represents a kind of anticipated adultery.

If the unity of fidelity is more than subjective, still it is not anything apart from those who love each other. Fidelity is a common and intrinsic bond that joins two persons into one—they leave father and mother and cleave to each other. But how can one commit oneself to another, knowing that the other is imperfect as oneself? One can do this only because fidelity is to the true self of the other person, because it is dedication to the perfection of the beloved.

But is not this perfection an unreal possibility, a mere abstraction? No, because the mutual fidelity of two human persons introduces their communion into divine perfection. In God the perfection of one's beloved is already real, and thus one can be faithful to this perfection without spending one's life in the service of a *mere* ideal. By virtue of fidelity, lovers can say to each other:

*We are two. Our love is a third.
 So we are three.
 But by the third we are one.
 We are old. Our love is young.
 We aged, it new.
 And in its birth, we are reborn.
 We are weak. Our love is strong.
 We fall, it rises.
 And by its power we are heartened.
 We are small. Our love is great.
 We diminish, it grows.
 Through its growth, we are magnified.
 We are human. Our love divine.
 We fail, it wins.
 For its victory, may we be crowned.*

Of course, if marriage is only the beginning of the work of love, not its ultimate perfection, it is clear that fidelity must be not only conservative, but also creative. Yet we must be careful to see exactly what this creativity means.

One thing creativity does not mean is reversal. A reversal returns a distance already covered; it takes away something. Creation never takes away anything. Nor does it merely add more of the same. Creation is true to the beginning and returns to it for inspiration. Creativity is renewal. A man and woman who are faithful to each other will not seek to destroy each other in order to make a fresh start in the midst of the rubble.

Religious faith seeks understanding. So does fidelity. The true self of the other person, the perfection of the beloved, is the mark toward which fidelity always aims. As married life goes on, illusion after illusion must be surrendered. Marriage is one long series of disillusionments. There is nothing cynical in saying it. One finds that one's perception was distorted by one's own imperfection, and that the true self of one's beloved also remains hidden behind masks that cover imperfections there too.

Some have suggested that many marriages might be annulled, simply on the ground that the union of a couple who enter into a lifelong commitment while still young and immature, while still laboring under many illusions, really is defective in consent. The suggestion is that consent to marriage is revealed to be lacking when, later on, the couple decide they would prefer not to be married after all.

This theory is superficially attractive. It would permit divorce in practice while in theory maintaining the letter of Jesus' condemnation of it. However, upon reflection, the theory is less attractive, for it would take away the confirmation that fidelity seeks and gives. What is consent to marriage if it is not a commitment to seek perfect unity regardless of any surprises and disillusionments that may be in store?

The problem is not simply a pragmatic one—that marriage as an institution is undercut if the possibility of divorce in difficult cases makes every union less stable. No, the difficulty enters in right from the beginning. To wish to make the permanence of marriage contingent upon success, or, at least, upon some reasonable limit of shocks and surprises, is to reduce the communion of marital love to the status of an ordinary contract. In a mere contract, one is not committed to the true self of another person, but only to some limited area of cooperation for some particular, predefined purpose. Beyond this area, one does not commit oneself. So there is always the possibility that one will find an ordinary contract no longer a true obligation to which one is conscience bound.

Marriage is a commitment to the true self of the other—or, better, it is a joint commitment to the true self of the larger person whom the married couple pledge themselves to become. This larger person cannot be known in advance, except to God. Thus fidelity anticipates: it is the substance of what is hoped for. Those who join themselves in marriage never know what they are doing. Such ignorance is essential to marriage. For a couple in marrying undertake to discover a mystery. They are certain only that this mystery exists, that it is precious, and that fidelity will be a sure guide to it.

Precisely in order to hold fast to the mysterious reality of God, a Christian keeps firm faith in the fundamental doctrines that are a bridge into mystery. In a similar way, marital fidelity remains true to the terms of the vow in which it is expressed: "until death do us part." There is no access to the mystery of the common self apart from this fidelity.

One cannot rightly say that a marriage has broken down. In reality, no such thing is possible. Marriage is not some kind of mechanism. One can only say that sometimes couples become lost in a fog of confusion, or that they refuse any longer to be faithful,

choose the darkness of infidelity, and seek to lose themselves in this darkness. The fiction of the breakdown of marriage has been invented to cover such a refusal. Sympathy, sensitive to the sufferings of persons in difficulty, makes the fiction attractive. A real charity, more perceptive than mere sympathy, sees that if marriage can break down, then it never can be anything more than an arrangement.

Certainly, in the life of each individual, one has no certitude what one will find if one lives one's life in a constant effort to discover and perfect one's true self. Simply because there are all sorts of setbacks, shocks, and surprises, one has no right to say that the effort is hopeless and that one is authorized to quit. For the individual, suicide is unjustifiable. The same thing is true of marriage. A married couple must continue to seek what they might be, to try to discover the mystery to which their fidelity points, no matter how many sufferings must be endured.

Such a quest requires courage. While we may gain confidence from the past, if it has gone well, we cannot be sure that the future will resemble the past. Nevertheless, fidelity allows us to face the future with light hearts, for fidelity, like religious faith, is childlike:

*I glance back and see behind me twelve who smiled.
I peer ahead and see only impenetrable mist!
Who can tell whether the face of the next will be frowning?
Who can know what lies in the path to trip him as he passes?
I look aside and see there one who smiles,
Unafraid to accompany me
Along the unknown path that lies ahead.
Stand close to me; hold my hand tightly.
Forgetting fear, we will go on together.
Like children on a summer's day,
We'll skip through life's year.*

Sartre put a line that was hardly lighthearted into the mouth of one of his characters: "Hell is other people." Students seem to be fascinated by this line; it often turns up in term papers. I do not believe that the line is true, but neither do you, if you are like the students who cite this line in their papers. They usually lean toward the opposite: "Hell is aloneness." I do not believe this line is true either. Being an unreconstructed, pre-Vatican II liberal, I cling to the traditional view that hell is separation from God.

However, the point on which I wish to focus just now is a certain conception of love, insofar as love is regarded as a remedy for aloneness. The conception, which became widespread in theological writings in the 1960s, is that love is an encounter of persons, an exchange between two persons who come face to face and perceive each other as persons, rather than as mere objects. In another, we are supposed to believe, one in love finds the fulfillment one cannot find in one's self alone.

Now, I question whether this conception of love is altogether sound. If persons are not fulfilled by themselves, why should their mere relationship to each other bring about their mutual fulfillment? Might it not be that the law of arithmetic holds—that zero plus zero

equals zero—and thus that the bringing together of two emptinesses does not in truth make beautiful music, but only the reechoing of hollowness to hollowness?

Love, we have been told, is a communion of persons, and a communion of persons is not a confrontation with an object. When I face an object the relationship is that of I to it. But in love the relationship is that of I to thou. This analysis is unquestionably sound and valuable as far as it goes. But I do not think it goes far enough. I and thou are not fundamental to the unity of genuine love. More basic is the unity of us—we two together.

To put so much emphasis upon I and thou and to talk about personal relationships in terms of encounter is to reveal an unsound assumption, namely, that persons naturally are isolated individuals, separate from each other like atoms floating in a void, only now and then bumping into one another. If one sets out from such an assumption, two possible directions can be taken. One is to obliterate the integrity of individual personality in order to make community possible. This way is—to keep the metaphor—to reduce the atoms to fields of force intersecting and merging into one another. The other way is to admit the atomism is final. In this case, otherness remains, the other remains object, thou remains it, communion remains possession, although perhaps a very special kind of having.

Yet if the unity of us, of we two together, must be more basic in love than the relationship between I and thou, how can this more basic unity be constituted without destroying the integrity of the individual personalities? This is the most important question that any adequate reflection upon love must answer.

The first answer likely to be suggested is that two persons become one we simply by being together. Mere contact is given credit for causing the wonder of community. But contact does not create unity. The touch of skin to skin, no matter how intimate, cannot initiate community between a couple who are not bound together by a common dedication to a good beyond themselves. This good, if it is to create community, must be more than an abstraction, more than an ideal possibility. The community-forming good must be a reality.

Moreover, the community-forming good must be more than a reality that both partners enjoy together, for if it were no more than this, the unity it initiates would be only accidental. No, the two must become one by their dedicated cooperation in view of something really “greater than both of us.” The partners must be possessed by a common cause that they can love more than themselves; they must become servants of a reality beyond themselves and comrades in this service. Not face to face, but side by side, the two of us become we two. And the genuine I and thou are abstracted from such a we.

The unity of marriage arises from such a reality beyond the couple themselves. They are enlisted in the service of life; they are invited to help the creator of life to pass on to human persons yet to be all the gifts they received from their own parents. In the child, man and woman become one flesh, and their community is perfected only in the child, for the child really is one, and yet truly is the flesh and blood of both. Thus the child is necessary, not of course as an accomplished fact, but rather as a beloved hope, if communion in marital love is to be possible.

At the same time, marital fidelity is necessary for the child. To give life is not merely to cause conception. There are all the other beginnings, all that a human person must receive from other persons, and to be a parent is to give all the beginnings, or at least to give the beginning of all the beginnings. The role of the parent is like that of the creator: to

give to one who cannot at first even cooperate in receiving the gift. The child should leave the hands of the parents at least able to cooperate in receiving others' gifts.

Thus, the gift of life takes time, and parents must work together for many years. But, someone might say, there are people who cannot have children and there are couples whose children are grown. If the fidelity of marriage is an implication of the cooperation required between man and woman in the acts by which they give life, then may not the bond of union be terminated under such conditions? And what if it seems better even for the children that the parents separate and try again with another partner? Must not fidelity make room for a few exceptions here?

These would be telling objections if marriage were only a contract to produce something, if marriage were like a business partnership. But one cannot contract to make a child. The coming to be of a new person is not a matter of production. There is no art adequate to cause the human person, except the art of God.

The child is not a limited, predefined, particular objective that can be sought and adequately attained by a limited, predefined, particular effort. The child is not the result of a nine-month plan nor even the goal of an eighteen-year plan. The person-to-be cannot be projected by any plan at all. Planning must always know in advance the meaning of what is to be carried out. But the child means more than the parents can ever know. Only God knows what a child means.

That is why a man and a woman who would be parents must really unite their whole lives together. The cooperation that is required of them is a merger of their lives into one life, a common life that begins in them but extends beyond themselves.

The necessity of this union—because a child is immeasurable in meaning and value, and what a baby will be is indivisible from the mystery of the human person and the mystery of divine providence—is the basis for the peculiar fidelity that characterizes marriage: “Formerly you lived your separate lives. Henceforth, you shall live as one.” One in mind, one in heart, and one in giving life. Parents live as one, and children are the fruit of this parental life, which has been made one for their sake.

In this relationship, there is no room for the concepts and the equipment of technology. One of these concepts, which ought to be rigorously excluded, is the idea of experimentation. Experimentation is a fine thing when it is applied to what is not really human, to what is not really personal. But experimentation is altogether out of place in the domain of persons.

Every human life, every instant of every human life, is intrinsically valuable. It is unique and irreplaceable. It can never be lived twice, and so it can never be a mere tryout. Experiment is in place where repetition is possible—for example, if one is manufacturing something or raising pigs. The errors that are inevitable under a regime of trial and error are justified by the successes. Faced with failure, one can cut one's losses and try again. But in the domain of persons, repetition is impossible. So there is no room for experimentation in marriage. Marriage is not the place for trial and error, for it is not the place for trying, although it has its trials. Marriage is life, the only life those joined in it will ever have. In this personal domain, fidelity is required—until death do us part.

Hence, to understand marriage and to appreciate the meaning of genuine marital love, one must understand and appreciate fidelity. It is consecration, an unconditional dedication of two persons to each other because of their commitment to what is beyond themselves. But how can any human being make such a commitment? Suppose one's partner turns out to be a miserable wretch, or is unfaithful, or goes insane?

There is never a hopeless case in any human ill. Any case seems less hopeful the less the spirit of fidelity; every case is hopeless the moment one refuses to remain faithful any longer.

Yet some cases are pitiful. How is one to be expected to remain faithful despite everything? Certainly, in merely human terms it seems too much to ask. But the terms of all truly human things are more than merely human terms. Fidelity, patience in suffering, joy in hope amidst pain—these are the path to perfection promised by him who commanded us to take up our cross and follow in his footsteps. There is no other way to share in the glory of his resurrection and in everlasting life.

Blessed are they who are faithful, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven—this is not one of the beatitudes recorded in the Gospel. But do you think Jesus will mind if we add it to his list? I do not think so, for he exalted marriage and marital fidelity, and he blessed the little children who are the fruit of the love this fidelity confirms, just as they are the source of the meaning for this fidelity, which alone makes genuine conjugal love possible.

But perhaps what I have been saying is too theoretical. Then listen to the way a young man said it long ago to his bride:

*To what shall we compare our love, Jeannette?
It is a plant too young to blossom yet
That needs long months of patient care until
One quiet night when all is warm and still
It will put forth a single, tender bloom.
This little life will grow within your womb
Until you bring him forth one day in pain
And hold in flesh our love for whom we've lain.
You are dear earth; our love shall grow in you
And I the water and the air for it,
But God must bathe us in the light of life.
Be fertile soil, and be we always true
To vows we've made for doing what is fit
To gain perfection as a man and wife.*

Still, some people feel that any talk of fidelity is out of place here. They ask: Why not simply leave everything to the spontaneity of love? Doesn't fidelity kill that spontaneity by replacing it with something cold and rigid? And can fidelity, can anything at all, substitute for a love that is absent?

No, nothing can substitute for love that is not there. Nor does fidelity pretend to do so. It confirms love that is there. This much, at least, is clear. But then there is the bit about spontaneity. What are we to think of it?

In part, an answer will depend upon what we understand by spontaneity. Spontaneity suggests youth and freshness; it is perhaps best contrasted with maturity. And so we must begin by thinking about maturity.

Now, I do not think that what is older is necessarily better. Moreover, the word *maturity* sometimes is used to refer to what is stale or nearly rotten. Further, I do not accept the view that psychological maturity and moral goodness necessarily go together. It is possible for a person to be very good although immature and subject to all sorts of psychological ills. Such a person's goodness takes the form of a noble struggle against the psychological handicap.

And it also is possible for a psychologically mature person, acting with the fullness of freedom, to opt against openness to the Good Itself in favor of a more limited but immediate, particular good. The psychologically mature person can be morally evil. In fact, only such a person can be morally evil in the fullest sense.

Nevertheless, if we go beyond the adolescent notion that once one is grown up one is free, we begin to understand human maturity. For the adolescent, freedom means spontaneity—following impulses without regard for reasons, without the need for control. And the adolescent imagines that where good and evil are involved, there is no freedom; where there is freedom, there is no place for morality. Freedom means no rules that one must obey, in the adolescent view. For the mature person, these notions simply do not hold any longer. Freedom means sharing in responsibility, fulfilling commitments that constitute one's own identity. Spontaneity must change its meaning too.

In a mature perspective, spontaneity means the initiation of acts from within the self, not from an outside cause. But one's self is defined by one's commitments, not by impulses that lack one's reasonable endorsement. On this view, much of what passes for spontaneity in the field of sexual behavior is not a manifestation of one's real self at all.

One might imagine that sexual behavior is dominated by instinct, but even this notion is false. Though human beings have strong sexual impulses, unlike other animals they have little sexual instinct. The appropriate direction of sexual impulse must be taught. The teaching, unfortunately, is less than wise. It is a conditioning by the entire culture, through every medium of communication. The result is that most children have developed a set of learned reflexes for sexual behavior by the time they are past puberty, and this early miseducation affects sexual behavior for the rest of their lives. From these conditioned reflexes comes the experienced phenomenon of sexual appetite, an imperious demand that has no rational relationship with the procreative meaning of sex and that has even less to do with love.

“Even less . . .”—that is, less than no relationship? Yes, because the demand is related to anxiety, to hostility, and to a whole host of feelings that only obstruct genuine love. If the desire for sexual activity is to be truly spontaneous, it must come from the self that is constituted by commitment. This is what spontaneity of a fully mature kind is. The

adolescent who thinks of spontaneity as response to impulse without control and direction actually is a slave to conditioned reflexes.

Maturity would unite the self, so that every inclination to act would express a self that had been fully examined, accepted, and integrated by free self-determination. Fidelity belongs to the maturity of the good person, in whom spontaneity follows the path of dedication and fruitfulness. The mature person who is faithful will not really feel inclined to engage in any sexual act that would be against fidelity. Or, at the least, if such an inclination arises, it will be recognized at once as an impulse of one's imperfect self, and not mistaken for the spontaneity of one's true self.

At the same time, within the kingdom of fidelity and under the steady guidance it offers, there can be a return of spontaneity with innocence, for there is less and less reason to fear that spontaneity will suggest any violation of what is sacred. Fidelity transforms momentary passion into an ecstasy that goes beyond time, into a now that remains the same without being frozen. Fidelity transforms passion into an eternal now, a now that is always alive, never frozen.

We have heard of such fidelity and what it can do to passion. The passion, that of Jesus; the fidelity, his obedience to the will of his Father. Fidelity transforms passion: "Jesus Christ—the same yesterday, today, and forever." His brief passion is transformed into the eternal glory of his resurrection. He is the model for the spontaneity of our love, and this model, as always, infinitely humbles our effort to imitate him. Still, Christian lovers have his example before them, and the sacrament of matrimony invites and empowers them to follow him.

That is why we have reason for confidence that fidelity need not crush spontaneity, and that the true spontaneity of genuine and mature love need not threaten the consecration of fidelity.

*Flying bending, silent speeding,
Rising slowly, slowly falling,
Red-brown goldness shyly calling,
What beyond this veil impeding?
Hot soft firmness, hope exceeding;
Primal peace perhaps recalling?
Past and future both forestalling.
Now, the now, this only needing.
Flying curving, now receding,
Lifting gently, calmly falling,
Past and future now recalling,
You and I, love once more heeding.*

If love sealed with fidelity can be rich in true spontaneity, such love also is patient. "Amor aedificat"—love edifies, builds up, constructs a permanent home—St. Paul says. He certainly was speaking of faithful love.

Fidelity builds patiently, slowly but surely. It never gives up the task as hopeless, however great may seem the obstacles. It looks for some constructive step, any step at all, that can be taken, however insignificant and inadequate that step might appear, and takes it. Fidelity also is wise, too wise to be deluded by illusory expectations. It knows it seeks perfection, and that perfection will never be found in this world. And so fidelity does not expect that revolution will suddenly remove all obstacles and immediately achieve all the good love wishes.

That is why fidelity does not obliterate everything with the expectation of building anew on the rubble. After a setback, fidelity always is ready to begin again, but never from the beginning. To attack all that has been, to expect to attain perfection next time by obliterating the edifice love has built this time, however imperfect the love and however poor the edifice it has built, shows a rare presumption. Even the Second Vatican Council could not forget Trent and Vatican I in order to begin afresh from Pentecost. Neither can a married couple forget their intervening life and go back to their honeymoon for a fresh start. There is no such undoing of what has been done, no unliving of life that has been lived.

And marital fidelity means that this union is for keeps; it is no game of trial and error. This is a lesson people should learn before they marry, despite practices among young people that teach precisely the opposite lesson. These practices, involving experimentation before marriage, are in almost every respect a uniquely poor preparation for marriage. Young people learn how to create and enjoy an illusion of love without ever coming near its reality.

Fidelity is the sworn enemy of all such romantic illusions. Whether in marriage or in theology, romantic illusions always are accompanied by realistic compromises. We must act in a way that is appropriate to our age. That is what everyone says, and I grant that it is true. But what is our age? If we are contemporary persons, we might say that our age is post-Christian, that it is the time for the new morality of freedom and enjoyment. But if we are Christians, we should say that our age is the time between the Ascension of Jesus and his second coming, that our age is the time of the building of God's kingdom, the acceptable time, the day of salvation.

Before Jesus, realistic compromises were in order for fallen humankind: "Because of the hardness of your hearts, Moses permitted divorce." But we no longer have an excuse for despair, because we have been given adequate ground for hope. After the end of the world, romantic illusions will be impossible, for either we shall be in hell or what is beyond anything that has entered our hearts will put all our dreams out of mind. But we have not yet the right to relax, because the fact of our failure, the imperfection of our fidelity, requires us to admit that we still must be converted.

Love builds up patiently, slowly, without clean sweeps and fresh starts—humbly willing to do the little of good that is possible, accepting the evil that we have done as the point of departure for further effort, working out salvation in fear and trembling, rejoicing in the suffering that is inseparable from such work, since this suffering unites us with the passion of Jesus, and promises a rich share in his glory.

How strange is the time in which we live, these years of the beginning of the third millennium. Fidelity has nearly been forgotten, and a strange mixture of presumption and despair seems to have taken the place that properly belongs to hope. Some people assure us that love, all by itself, is an adequate guide, as if our imperfect love could be trusted implicitly, as if our weakness never needed support from the firm hand of God. But at the same time, common opinion in our society regards the standards of Jesus' law as impossibly harsh, as too much for frail human beings to bear.

The truth is that if we wish to live faithfully, we must begin early to cultivate fidelity. It is never too soon to begin. Marriage does not make one into a different person. It does not solve problems not faced previously. Even in marriage, one must seek the grace of fidelity, foster it, fight to defend it. But this fight is not always dramatic. It can take the most commonplace form, and be but a little step in an effort of building that must be lifelong. Shall we end this meditation by recalling one little step, taken very early in a marriage?

*Darling, last night, as you and I, having kissed good night,
Parted, one of us on either side of our door,
And I heard the lock click as you locked it tight,
My memory stirred with other nights and other partings.
Just then, as I began to climb the steps,
Heading toward the train to town and to work,
A warm breeze lifted the corner of my coat and flapped it.
It was like the first night of spring.
I imagined you getting ready for bed.
I felt an urge to return to you.
I wanted so much to kiss you once more, just once more,
And then to remain with you all night, not to leave.
You could tell them:
"He isn't feeling well tonight; he can't come in to work."
And we could talk and stay up late,
And then, finally, go to bed together.
But there is work. I must make a living for us now.
If I'm not sick, I'm not sick.
And so I left you there alone and went on to work.
Alone? I forget. You are not alone now.
You are with child, our child. He is with you.
He waits now, to burst forth when the trees bud,
To find the world, to live his first spring in it.
Darling, God love you and him and keep us all.
Wake me at 8:30 tonight; I have to leave at 10:00.
There's fresh bread in the box.*

