Responsible Attitudes Toward Sexuality

By Archbishop J.A. Plourde

(Excerpted from 1981 July-August Worldwide Family Spirit magazine)

So much has been said and written about sexuality in the last few years that I was tempted not to discuss it here. But, because it is of such importance to the happiness of spouses and families, I am going to touch upon it, albeit only briefly.

Let not what I have just said about the degradation of love give the impression that sexuality is something evil. True, it is wrong to equate sexuality with love but it remains one of God's marvelous gifts which needs to be well understood by those whose ambition is to build happy families.

Sexuality is one of the components of love since it is a way of giving one's self totally to another person and fulfilling the ambition we all have of making our mark in life, of leaving something or someone behind to underscore our stay on earth and of making a contribution to the common good of the human family.

What light does Scripture shed on sexuality thus understood? It recalls at least four of its elements which are essential to its conforming to God's plan:

1 - The physical union between man and woman is the expression of a love that is genuine, exclusive, faithful, and meant to last until one of the parties dies: "Have you not read that the Creator from the beginning made male and female and that He said: This is why a man must leave father and mother and cling to his wife, and the two become one body? They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. So then, what God has united, man must not divide." (Gen 7:27; Mt 19:46; Eph 5:25-33.)

2 - The responsible exercise of one's sexual capabilities is an exercise in human dignity and respect for the other person. Its purpose is not the egotistical satisfaction of one or the other party, but rather the result of mutual accord: "The wife has no rights over her own body; it is the husband who has them. In the same way, the husband has no rights over his body; the wife has them. Do not refuse each other except by mutual consent, and then only for an agreed time, to leave yourself free for prayer; then come together again in case Satan should take advantage of your weakness to tempt you." (1 Co 7:4-5.)

3 - Without restraint and sacrifice, sexuality always runs the risk of lessening in value and failing to conform to the proper order of nature and God's plan. What the Gospel says about Christian living also applies to sexuality: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mk 8:34.)

However, a Christian must not forget that, in this area where humans are so vulnerable and frail, God's grace and mercy can always be relied upon. To stop going to church or
practicing one's religion because of failure to achieve complete self-mastery is not the solution.

4 - Sexuality is the expression of a love that opens onto procreation. Not on blind, foolhardy, irresponsible sex, but what today is called "responsible parenthood." This is the context in which it can rightly be stated that, in itself, human love is productive, not only for the couple, but for society and for the Church. It is an integral part of the couple's global project, since people don't get married solely for their own benefit but also to contribute to the well-being of the whole human race. "You are the heirs of the covenant God made with our ancestors when He told Abraham: in your offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed." (Acts 3:25.)

Here again, parents and adolescents must realize that society all too often devalues sexuality. It does so through the distribution of pornographic literature and movies which a Christian worthy of that name should keep from reading or seeing without having to be told. It does so also by presenting sexual freedom as the ultimate liberation from all taboos. This kind of publicity leads to slavery of the senses rather than to real freedom.

It is, therefore, of the utmost importance for parents and adolescents alike who want to build happy families to assume responsible attitudes towards sexuality and take into consideration God's designs on them, since nothing is foreign to His plan.

It might be worth recalling that assuming responsible attitudes towards sexuality is also the duty of older couples. They too should bear witness to the joy there is in being united in Christ, even after several years of married life. To continue to be happy at this stage of their married life, they must realize that the aging process brings about a normal weakening of the reproductive functions and hormonal changes (more significant in women than in men) but does not mean the end of all sexual activity.

To understand this, one need only remember that the time when the children have left home and the couple gradually discovers that they are alone is the time for husband and wife to learn to grow old together, in tender intimacy. Sexual activity, at a pace adapted to their age, may help them adapt to this change. Without it, they risk allowing themselves just to grow old side by side, in boredom, indifference, perhaps even infidelity. Assuming responsible attitudes towards sexuality, therefore, concerns not only youth and younger couples; it is a duty that applies during a person's whole lifetime.