

Your Risus Paschalis: ON OUR HEALTH: A restaurant patron said to the waiter: "I'm going to order a broiled skinless chicken breast, but I want you to bring me lasagna and garlic bread by mistake." Did you know that if you put a crouton on your ice cream sundae instead of a cherry, it counts as a salad? And finally, a Doctor said to his overweight patient: "What fits your busy schedule better – exercising 1 hour a day or being dead 24 hours a day?"

Now down to the three points. A little girl was dying of a disease from which her 8-year-old brother had recovered some time before. The doctor said to the boy, "Only a transfusion of your blood will save the life of your sister. Are you ready to give her your blood?" The eyes of the boy widened in fear. He hesitated for a while, then finally said, "Okay, doctor, I'll do it." An hour after the transfusion was completed the boy hesitantly asked, 'Say, doctor, when do I die?' It was only then that the doctor understood the fear that had seized the child – he had thought that in giving his blood he was giving his life for his sister. (TAKING FLIGHT, Anthony deMello, p. 147)

That is true love, of a young boy for his sister, and an excellent example of the gospel call to lay down our life for one another. Our scriptures throughout this Easter season are rich with love talk and love images, so a word today, first about love, and then about an equally important concept so tied up with love, a word about sex.

First, love. An old sage once advised his disciples: "Do not ask someone who loves you, 'Why do you love me?' If the reply is, 'I love you because you are so beautiful,' someday you will grow old and will no longer be beautiful. Are you sure you will still be loved then? If the reply is, 'I love you because of your intellect,' when the day comes that your mind begins to wander, will you still be loved? If the reply is, 'I love you because you have such a delightful personality,' won't there come a time when you are ailing and are too tired and out-of-sorts to be charming? Then what will happen to the love?" The sage ended by saying, "Only those who do not know why they love, really do love you." (MARKINGS, Mike Heher, Jan 31, 99)

We live in a culture that is in love with love. Blockbuster movies almost always contain a love story. SOAP operas are all about love, despite the weird way it is often portrayed. Love can make a king lay aside his crown and make a peasant feel like a king. It is at the heart of our faith and it is the essence of God. Love is what life is all about. Then why do we do it so poorly so much of the time?

I think it has to do with the fact that everyone of us arrived in this world wanting to be nourished and cherished and treasured and cared for, and no matter how hard our parents tried, they never could do it perfectly – because no one ever loved them perfectly! So we all have gotten bruised and mis-handled and a little cynical along the way. But there is absolutely no escape. Love is what gives meaning to all of human life, and without love, it is not a human life that we live.

The fact that we all must start from is THAT we are loved. Hopefully by friends and family, but MOST DEFINITELY by God. God's love is the FIRST love, and it existed before any human love touched us. It is what brought us into being. We need to remember that – we are here on this earth because GOD WANTED us to be here. He LOVED us into being.

But what we think, worry, and even agonize about has to do with human relationships. What makes us happy or sad is closely linked to what we think or feel other people think or feel about us. You know most of the time, they're not thinking about us at all! We need to GET OVER OURSELVES! We are NOT the center of the universe! And 'other people' are precisely that: 'other people,' people who, like us, are very limited and

can love only in a conditional way. Why is this so? Simply because human love is imperfect, always tainted by needs and unfulfilled desires. That is the first thing that we MUST accept in order to move on – and to even DREAM of having something of a mature relationship in love. EVERYBODY ELSE GOT HURT AND THEREFORE HURTS OTHERS, AND WE HAVE BEEN HURT AND WE END UP HURTING OTHERS. GOT THAT? Until we do get that, we are condemned to an endless adolescence of looking for Mr. or Miss Right, and THERE IS NO SUCH PERSON! There are simply other imperfect human beings looking for love in this imperfect and broken world, looking for what will give meaning and purpose to all of life.

Why do those who love us wound us so much? It is because they cannot fulfill our deep and often unconscious desire for complete communion. Only God can do that. Only God will never wound us. God's love is unconditional, not limited by needs and unfulfilled desires. It is a love that freely gives without strings attached. And only when we realize that we are of infinite worth and value in the eyes of God can we then put up with the fragility and imperfection of all other love.

Ann Johnson tells the story: "I have a vivid memory of my youngest daughter, Hannah. She was 9 years old, and we were in the midst of a move that tore our hearts. We alternated between tears and tight efficiency.

Hannah hummed about the unfamiliar house, making settled places here and there. "Mom," she called out to me, "be careful of the stone steps. I've just moved one of the rocks to put my message there." I was curious, and approached her. "Is it something you can share, Hannah?" "I don't think so." "Ok," I said, and, disappointed, turned away. "Well, maybe I could share it because I'm bigger now. I wrote a note for myself a long time ago when I first learned to write. I wrapped it up and put it under a stone in the garden wall. Whenever I got mad at you, or sad, or had a fight, I used to go and read it. It made me feel better. Then, later, just remembering it was there became enough, and I didn't have to read it every time. But I thought I'd better move my note with me to the new house, just in case. You can look at it if you want. I put it under the stone on the edge of the porch."

I went out, sat still for a while, aware that she had shared a very special part of her secret self with me. Then I moved the obviously loose rock and saw the worn, softly seamed note beneath. Its primitive and young printing said: "God loves Hannah and Hannah loves God." (from EDUCATING FOR CHRISTIAN MATURITY, p. 40-41)

If we could each just remember that first principle about love, I believe that it would truly change our lives, for we could approach all human love with the knowledge that we are grounded in the eternal and ever faithful, merciful love of the God who is love and who created us – to be in love with us. St. Andrew parish – if there is ONE message I want you to get from my preaching while I am your pastor it is this – I feel like shouting it! YOU ARE LOVED! DON'T EVER FORGET THAT. IT IS THE GROUND OF YOUR BEING. IT IS THE NEVER CHANGING TRUTH OF YOUR LIFE! GOD LOVES YOU! And I'm learning to love you too....

Second, a word about sex. A man wondered if sex on the Sabbath is a sin because he is not sure if sex is work or play. He asked a priest for his opinion on the question. The priest said, "I believe that sex is work and is not permitted on Sundays." The man thinks, "What does a priest know about sex anyway?" So he went to a minister, an experienced married man, for the answer. He queried the minister and received the same reply, "Sex is work and not for the Sabbath." Not pleased with the reply, the man sought out the ultimate authority – a man of thousands of years and tradition and knowledge: A Rabbi. The Rabbi thought for just a moment and stated: "My son, sex is definitely play, and therefore permitted on the Sabbath." The man

replies, “Rabbi, how can you be so sure when so many others tell me sex is work?” The rabbi softly speaks, “If sex were work, my wife would have the maid do it.”

In our current culture, most of the old restraints about sex are gone. Purely practical issues like the fear of pregnancy and disease have been greatly reduced by the ingenuity of modern science. “Anything goes,” or among the feebly more responsible, “Anything goes as long as nobody gets hurt,” is the American mantra. The trouble with these cultural lies is precisely that – they are lies. How can anybody know in advance, in any complex human relationship, sexual or otherwise, who is going to get hurt psychologically, emotionally, spiritually?

Recently I was talking with a young woman who was trying to convince me that I, and the church, have a distorted and narrow view about sex. “You make it such a big deal and link it to love. It CAN be that,” she said, “But usually isn’t.” She was talking from considerable experience. Sex is not always about love, I agree – BUT IT SHOULD BE. It is, however, ALWAYS ABOUT THE SOUL, and this is the thing that neither my young friend, nor our culture, really understands. Whether it is mindless, abusive, or sacramental, sex always, and deeply, touches the soul. Sex and soul are inextricably linked. We could say that there are three kinds of sex, with three effects.

- 1) Abusive sex – destroys the soul.
- 2) Casual sex – trivializes the soul.
- 3) Sacramental sex – builds up the soul.

In recent years, our culture has come light years forward in its understanding of the first category. We know how deeply damaging is all sexual abuse. It wounds in a way that perhaps no other thing does.

Where we have less insight is in the understanding of casual sex. To my mind, there are few areas within human relationships where, as a culture, we are as blind as we are in this one. We live in a culture within which, for the most part, sex has become a normal part of dating and within which we have begun to identify contraceptive responsibility with sexual responsibility. Thus, mostly, we are beginning to believe that casual sex, “as long as it is consensual, contraceptively responsible, and loving,” harms no one and leaves no scars. We rationalize this blindness, as does my young friend, precisely by separating real love from what happens in bed. THERE CAN BE NO SUCH SEPARATION. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE.

While our heads may not be hurt our souls are. They are affected in ways that we no longer have the courage to face squarely. Casual sex, however loving and consensual it pretends to be, trivializes the soul and ultimately cheapens the experience of love. In sex, something very deep is touched, even when we do not intend it. It is no accident that past lovers appear in present dreams. Sex and soul are forever linked.

The late Allan Bloom, examining this from a purely secular point of view, suggests that casual sex de-eroticizes and demystifies human relationships since sexual passion now no longer includes intimations of eternity. Sex, for all its power and potential, is now seen as ‘no big deal.’ In Bloom’s words, it, like almost everything else, becomes ‘narrower and flatter.’ There can be no hint of eternity in casual sex. The soul has to make it flat and narrow so as to protect itself against the lie that it is caught up in. This is a fault in the soul and the soul that acts in this way is being trivialized and, in some way distorted.

Third, there is sacramental sex. It has the power to build up the soul in ways that, this side of eternity, few other experiences can. It is eucharist, incarnation, love-made-flesh, truly. In sacramental sex, a soul is joined to another and, in that moment, experiences the central purpose of God’s design for it. When that happens the souls strengthen and swell, in gratitude, stability, and peace....and that kind of experience of soul

is, despite what our culture thinks, truly a BIG DEAL. (Adapted from Rolheiser, AGAINST AN INFINITE HORIZON, p. 41-43) Sex is truly a big deal – for when a husband and wife express their love and create human life – they are DOING THE MOST GOD-LIKE THING IN THE WORLD more God-like than a priest consecrating bread and wine at Mass – for GOD ALONE HAS THE POWER TO CREATE LIFE. To participate in that divine energy, can never be trivial or casual, whether we realize it or not.

Sex, ultimately, is the foretaste of the great union with our God that we were put on this earth to move towards. As St. Augustine wrote, “Our hearts are restless, O God, and they are made for you, and they will not rest, until they rest in you.”

ST. ANDREW’S PARISH – you are LOVED! YOU ARE GOD’S CHERISHED ONES! YOU ARE ALWAYS A BIG DEAL TO GOD! MAY YOU ALWAYS KNOW YOUR HIGH DIGNITY AND DESTINY! And forever grow into the holiness to which all sexual energy leads, into the very heart of God-who-is-love. Amen.