

Panel discussion: *Cultural shifts in sexuality today*

Consequences of the sexual revolution

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Before I explain what we mean by the “consequences of the sexual revolution”, the topic of the talk that I have been asked to deliver, I would like to point out the context in which my observations are being made. They are placed within the setting of a panel discussion entitled *Cultural shifts in sexuality today*. This calls for a premise. A title like this could easily make it seem that we are concentrating on the negative aspects. However, this is not so, because the preceding talks were lessons and testimonies of the beauty of human love and the exercise of sexuality in a conjugal relationship which is a definitive and reciprocal gift by a man and woman in the service of communion and in the service of life. It is a good idea, right from the beginning, to keep in mind all that was transmitted this morning, yesterday and two days ago about the vocation to love, the call to grow in communion, and the vocation of every man and woman to holiness. Indeed, it is only in the positive light of human beings and their aspirations, their bodies that are sexually different and the acts that express in the most intimate way the love of a man and a woman who have truly given themselves to each other, that we can understand what has been taking place during the past half century in the history of human thought and values and which is referred to as the *sexual revolution*.

A historical summary:

The term *sexual revolution* refers to all the changes that have taken place in Western societies in the perception of sexuality and the exercise of sexuality, as well as the emancipation of values. On the theoretical level, this revolution is mainly philosophical, anthropological, moral and social. On the level of values, it is mostly about the total reversal of sexual ethics, customs and legislative systems in many countries. From a juridical viewpoint too we can say that it is a real revolution. The expression itself, *sexual revolution*, was invented during the nineteen-twenties by Wilhelm Reich and Otto Gross who were trying to develop the results of Freud’s work from a sociological perspective. Freud started a new science called psychoanalysis, and one of its results demonstrated the link between human behaviour and the libido. However, what Freud was developing in the sphere of personal therapy, some of his disciples developed from a social perspective. Discourse on the subject of sex, until then held with reserve and modesty and limited to the sphere of therapy, was gradually to become a topic for public discussion, leading to a series of studies, publications of all kinds and political demands. The revolution consisted of a discourse on sexuality which was, until then, limited to its connection with procreation. Henceforth it was to concentrate on human sexuality purely as a physically gratifying drive, and in a way it became a totally different issue from that of the possible transmission of life.

This is our **first key to understanding**: discourse on human sexuality would not remain for long within the area of psycho-emotional and genital phenomena. Indeed, the research that followed was to deal with sexual practice in itself, or more exactly, sexual practices as found in human society. From the moment when sexuality became socially disconnected from its essential purpose of transmission of life within a stable relationship between a man and a woman, it followed that there would no longer be taboos on speaking about the sexual attitudes of men and women, whatever they might be like with respect to the norm. Subjects never before discussed

in public would now become topics of normal conversation: male and female homosexual practice, the search for maximum pleasure in a relationship, and the insistence that sexuality can be separate from any commitment or responsibility.

A **second key to understanding** is the fact that this public discourse trivialises the reserved, modest and rigorously personal dimension of the exercise of sexuality. In fact, there is a natural progression from “shameless” discourse to the claim for total licence in sexual behaviour. The *cultural revolution* becomes a *political revolution*. It is not by chance that the great theorists Reich and Marcuse explicitly referred to the dialectic materialism of Karl Marx.

The **third key to understanding** is that the *sexual revolution* cannot therefore be limited to interpersonal behaviour. It has become a real *social revolution*, and its goal, which is being declared more and more openly, is the radical calling into question of all the foundations of civil and religious society. We can understand how this happened. The public nature given to topics that were strictly private until now gave rise to questioning of the family institution, the only civil framework that generally encompasses the exercise of the sexual faculty. It also challenged the churches, the moral authorities that bring ethical and spiritual discourse to the necessary dignity of acts which entail deep union between a man and a woman. This key helps us to understand that discourse that trivialises the exercise of sexuality in its very diverse and contradictory forms contributes to a radical reversal of all the values that have held society together for centuries: spousal relations exclusively between spouses, reverence for human life – the transmission of which was always seen as a blessing, love for children, a vision of future generations, respect for previous generations, a sense of personal and family history, the religious aspect of spousal commitment that always took place in a liturgical celebration in all religions, and finally, protection of people’s intimacy, especially that of the young.

The **fourth key** is the challenging of Church ethics and family ethics, satirically presented as the ethics of the “bourgeoisie”, an expression used by the Marxist theorists of the period. This challenge was inevitably presented as liberation from the yoke of the Judaeo-Christian ethics and from a family tradition of patriarchal dominance.

The **fifth key**: The demand for total sexual licence and the emergence of permissive morals that were unthinkable some decades ago, would inevitably be accompanied by the rejection of any kind of authority in any domain: family, politics, education and religion. There would be a systematic and violent challenge to: the father figure in the family, the ruling figure in the government of a nation, the figure of teacher in the education system, the figure of moral and spiritual authority of priests, bishops and the magisterium of the Church in general. This clean sweep of all the pillars of society was made by the movement known by the name *May 1968*. This name describes both the very brief and violent events that took place and a current of libertarian thought which was the forerunner of the delicate questions that rock our societies today.

The period from 1930 to 1990 generated political and social reforms that also represented symbolically significant changes: in 1948 the *Kinsey Report* was published, a study on the sexual behaviour of the human male, and several years later, on the sexual behaviour of the human female. These studies carried out by Indiana University at first caused shock but then they began to take root: they were followed by the *Masters and Johnson Report* in 1966; towards the end of the nineteen-fifties the female contraceptive pill was invented and was put on the market in the United States in 1960 and in Europe soon afterwards.

The nineteen-sixties were a time of animated discussion about contraception. As you know, the Church’s position was stated in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* published on 25 July 1968. In 1975, the first law decriminalising abortion was issued in France with the *Loi Veil*. At the start of the nineteen-eighties they developed procedures for *in vitro* fertilisation. It would now be possible to initiate the existence of a human life without there being sexual relations between a

man and a woman.

In the nineteen-eighties, the difference between legitimate children and natural children was abolished with regard to rights of inheritance in several European countries.

During that decade, there was public debate on euthanasia and measures were taken to legalise it in several European countries.

In 1998, for the first time, legal status was given to domestic partnerships.

In the nineteen-nineties and the first decade of this century, developments in genetics are no longer made for exclusively therapeutic purposes, but also for eugenic aims.

We should bear in mind that, during the nineteen-fifties and sixties, at the cultural level there was a progressive removal of all artistic censorship, in particular with regard to cinema. The disappearance of all cinematic censorship is the most spectacular manifestation of the abolition of all filters in artistic culture in general: literature, painting and musical trends. Now we know that there has been systematic deconstruction of all the criteria that had brought about the placing of an ethical filter into the filming of motion picture scenes (the Hays Code was abolished in 1966, and erotic spectacles began to develop which gradually turned into a pornography industry).

From this brief summary of symbolic changes that have marked our Western societies and which tend to spread to the legislation of other countries around the world, it is possible to identify other keys to understanding.

The **sixth key**: from the moment when we separate the procreative dimension from sexuality, we inevitably end up with two possible outcomes – the development of a purely hedonistic sexuality, and one without any responsible commitment. The results are evident: an increase in sex outside marriage (that is, without the responsibility of a stable relationship), the disappearance of the need to think of sexuality as being linked to the gift of life, an increase in contraception methods and the progressive loss of the sense of beauty encompassing the transmission of life, pregnancy becomes a threat, and sexual relations have to be protected because they pose a risk. Finally, the fact that procreation can be totally separate from sexual relations could lead to the disappearance of the context of love within which life has been transmitted down through history until our times. Besides, it opens the way for all kinds of manipulation of human life and also reduces children to the satisfaction of personal desire.

The **seventh key**: at no time during these reforms was the interest of the children taken to be an essential element, nor was their right to be born through the stable and loving relationship of their parents. The same observation could be made with regard to legislation authorising divorce. This development, furthermore, would signal the fading out of the sacred aspect of marriage, an aspect that was also honoured in civil law as a matter of course before the appearance of legal divorce.

The **eighth key**: In the field of medicine at the start of the nineteen-eighties, several kinds of sexual behaviour ceased to be regarded as pathologies (homosexuality and lesbianism).

The **ninth key**: In the field of education, the presentation of human sexuality in biology textbooks in secondary schools is strictly limited to the physiological presentation of sexual relations. There is no mention of the psychological, emotional or moral commitment dimensions. Over the past number of years we have seen minority ways of behaviour being presented as normal and legitimate. Modes of behaviour once thought to be aberrant are now presented as being perfectly normal. In a large number of European educational systems, the ethics now being taught are clearly based on values drawn from relativism, like tolerance in its ideological form. New violations of the law have appeared on the scene: homophobia, sexual discrimination, intolerance, etc.

The **tenth key**: A chronological study of all these reforms reveals a clear intention to impose a new moral code. There is considerable political pressure put by international organisations on the national legislatures in an effort to impose new ethical criteria. This is done by means of the

creation of new concepts like, for example, *reproductive health*. Abortion is a typical case of this. In 1975 they spoke of the decriminalisation of abortion; some years later, the term *liberalisation of abortion* was introduced; after that, they began to speak of the *right to abortion*; then this “right” was explained: *it is a woman's right to choose what she does with her body*. This example shows us that the motives put forward at the beginning (to prevent underground abortions) were really pretexts aimed at bringing about a revolutionary reform that would give adults the legal right to kill children that are still in their mother’s womb. We also notice that the common use of contraception over the past forty years has not reduced the number of abortions.

The **eleventh key**: at the start of the nineteen-eighties, the AIDS virus began to spread. At first, the infection was transmitted among certain at-risk groups like homosexuals and drug-addicts. In the cases of other sexually transmitted diseases (STD) like tuberculosis and hepatitis C, it has always been medically recommended to abstain from behaviour carrying this risk. However, in the case of AIDS, this kind of measure would seem to be political condemnation of at-risk behaviour and would therefore question the “achievements” of the *sexual revolution*. This led to preventive action centred solely on contraception, with the results that are well known. We note that the three countries that tried another strategy centred on the education of adolescents and young people for abstinence or the strict limitation to one partner only, all obtained spectacular results in the space of barely two or three years (Uganda, Zimbabwe and Tanzania); when they were forced to return to a policy of systematic distribution of contraceptives, the number of new cases unfortunately rose again.

The **twelfth key**: we can see that governments want to impose a new culture and a new moral code because of a desire to achieve perfect control over human life, especially its transmission. One of the reasons often put forward is the so-called world overpopulation which they say is the cause of poverty, misery and disease. We must note that the fear of overpopulation is mostly expressed in the Western countries. Yet, apart from some exceptions, it is precisely these countries that have the opposite problem, a demographic collapse, together with an aging population. At the economic level, this obliged several of them to encourage immigration in order to compensate for their lack of manpower. It is also a paradox that countries that aim to control world population by taking one direction, are incapable of solving their own problem by taking the other direction. It is beyond doubt that the loss of a sense of the beauty of life that we mentioned before is beginning to pose the question that, in the space of two or three generations, quite a part of the population will have died out. Statistical proof of this state of affairs would require further development.

This brief overview must have seemed quite alarming to you. It is in fact alarming at the social, political and moral levels. However, I would like to conclude on a note of hope. I believe that the present circumstances are, for all people of goodwill and for Christians in particular, a providential invitation to think deeply about all that is at stake in a balanced conception of human life that is sound and holy, and in its transmission through the exercise of the sexual faculty. The greatness of sexuality in God’s plan is always something to be pondered. All the talks that you have heard over the past few days have pointed to the vocation of every man and woman to communion, and through it, to holiness. When a person is at a young age in a cultural context like the one we have just described, there is still a personal dimension that no moral relativism and no cultural ideology can reach: the personal freedom of those who want to respond to the call inscribed in their body, their desires, their hopes, and their will to transmit life together with the person with whom they wish to share their lives. In this sense, there is no reason to be pessimistic if we consider what we have been given in faith. Knowing about the cultural context in question should simply help us to see clearly, and to become more free when standing up to the explicit and implicit enticements carried by a media-run society like ours. Moreover, this knowledge

helps our prudence and discernment in our search for reliable friendships. Now more than ever, it is in human and spiritual courage and strength of soul that young people find the way to freedom that blossoms when there is self giving and love. Love is always a victory. We remember the words addressed by Pope John Paul II to young people at the dawn of the third millennium at the gathering in Tor Vergata in Rome: “Dear young people, in these noble undertakings you are not alone. With you there are your families, there are your communities, there are your priests and teachers, there are so many of you who in the depths of your hearts never weary of loving Christ and believing in him. In the struggle against sin you are not alone: so many like you are struggling and through the Lord’s grace are winning!”.