



## **Presentation**

### **of Synodal Forum IV**

**“Life in succeeding relationships**

**- Living love in sexuality and partnership**

**for the Second Reading**

**at the Fourth Synodal Assembly (8-10 September 2022)**

**for the foundational text “Life in succeeding relationships**

**- The principles of renewed sexual ethics”**

**[Result of the ballot in the Forum: 19 Yes, 3 No, 1 abstention]**

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## **Preamble**

The Synodal Assembly is aware of the great importance of taking up a self-critical position on our Church’s teaching concerning the issues of love, sexuality and partnership. It is true that the Church’s sexual teaching is not the direct cause of the unbearable acts of sexualised violence that have occurred. Nevertheless, it forms a normative background that has evidently been able to facilitate such offences.

As members of the Synodal Assembly, we bear responsibility for our Church in different ways. In this responsibility, we expressly acknowledge the guilt which has arisen out of sexualised violence in Church institutions, congregations and communities. We expect those who have been (partly) guilty of this to take personal responsibility. At the same time, we as the Synodal Assembly seek paths of credible conversion.

Members of our Church, but also the Church as an institution and a community of the faithful, have contracted guilt, also by virtue of the teaching on sexuality and the Church’s practice. We therefore adopt the frank confession and the assumption of responsibility of the German-language group at the Roman Synod on the Family in October 2015: “The guidance of the Church [is] particularly called for in situations of distress [...]. It is not only necessary to acknowledge here what the Church does, but also to say honestly what we as a Church have

failed to do: In a misconceived effort to uphold the Church's teaching, merciless attitudes have been taken up in pastoral care again and again that have caused people suffering, in particular to unwed mothers and children born out of wedlock, to people in premarital and non-marital partnerships, to homosexually-orientated people, and to people who have divorced and remarried."

We are also looking at the suffering of married couples who are trying to live their marriage as Christians, out of the promise of the Good News, but have been and continue to be disciplined and patronised by rigid moral dictates. The fixation of sexuality on marriage has also meant that people who live as lone parents or singles for long sections of their lifespan have either dropped out of sight, or have been forced into complete abstinence. This suffering also includes the countless reprimands to which religion teachers and theologians, Catholic institutions and societies were and are subjected when they are critical of the current teachings of the Church. In doing so, we have marginalised people, deeply wounded them, and hindered their developing humanity.

Time and again, people's privacy and decisions of conscience were not respected. We see today that the Church's sexual ethics also facilitated the crimes of sexualised violence in the Church. We ask forgiveness from the bottom of our hearts from all those who have suffered from the effects of the Church's sexual teachings. As a Synodal Assembly, we see it as our duty to follow up this admission with actions, and to formulate impulses for a reorientation of the Church's pastoral care. We know that we cannot simply remedy the wrong that has been done. We wish however to walk a true and verifiable path of conversion and renewal. We pledge, each in his own responsibility, with due regard for the findings of the human sciences, and in faithfulness to Jesus' message of God's love for all people, to work to make sure that changes are made to the Church's teaching and practice in dealing with human sexuality.

We are convinced that it will not be possible to re-orientate pastoral care without re-defining the emphasis of the Church's sexual teaching to a significant degree. This is why we are suggesting such a major re-emphasis, as we consider it urgently necessary to overcome some of the restrictions in questions of sexuality, for reasons of sexual science as well as theology. In particular, the teaching that sexual intercourse is only ethically legitimate in the context of a lawful marriage, and only with a permanent openness to the transmission of life, has caused a wide rift to open up between the Magisterium and the faithful. This threatens to completely obscure other important aspects of God's Good News which could have a liberating effect on shaping dignified sexuality.

We are aware that many aspects of the proposed re-emphasis essentially fall within the doctrinal competence of the Bishop of Rome, in community with the episcopal college, and therefore cannot be undertaken by the Church in Germany. With this in mind, we submit the following reflections and motions to the Pope, and urge him to consider and take them up as the local church's expression of the shared responsibility of all who are baptised and confirmed for the good of the one Church of Christ. We are however also aware that the teaching, which *ultimately* must be answered for by the Pope, must essentially prove its plausibility and meaningfulness in the Church's congregations and communities on the ground, and above all in the lives of all individuals. No one may dispense with or be dispensed from this responsibility. The Synodal Path seeks to bring together the relevant experiences and reflections in this regard

for the Catholic Church in Germany. In this sense, the local church in Germany, joined with the local churches worldwide and with the Bishop of Rome, exercises Her responsibility for the threefold office of Christ: in the office of sanctification, in the office of leadership, and in the office of teaching (LG 32).

## Part A: The starting point and orientations

### A.1. The MHG Study as a motivation

The motivation for addressing questions of the meaning and form of human sexuality in the framework of the Synodal Path is provided by the (continuing) cases of sexualised violence in the Catholic Church, which have been covered up for decades by bishops and other holders of responsibility within the Church, and therefore went unprosecuted under state and church law for decades in most cases. True, the results of their analysis so far do not prove any direct links between abuse or sexualised violence and Catholic sexual morals. But the Study emphasises that “attention must also be paid to the risk and structural characteristics that are specific to the Catholic Church and which encourage the sexual abuse of minors or make it more difficult to prevent such abuse”<sup>1</sup>. The MHG Study explicitly stresses in this context that “(h)omosexuality (...) does not constitute a risk factor for sexual abuse”<sup>2</sup>, and thus demonstrates the need for a change in the Church’s teaching on partnership and sexuality. The Study nevertheless considers that “there is a need to consider the importance attaching to the specific ideas of Catholic sexual morals when it comes to homosexuality in the context of the sexual abuse of minors”<sup>3</sup>. The expert reports and studies that have been drafted in preparation for the investigation of sexualised violence in the German dioceses identify not only sexual morality and the handling of homosexuality as systemic causes and risk factors for sexualised violence and violation of boundaries, but also the lack of sexual maturity and education. This leads directly to the demand that a new status be allotted to sex education in educational and pastoral institutions in the future, and that personnel and material resources be made available for this purpose. This is contingent on taking a look at the overall concept followed in the Church’s sexual teaching in order to make additions and effect a re-emphasis.

### A.2. Contrasting experiences in the Church’s sexual teaching

**A.2.1.** If one takes a look at the Church’s sexual teaching today, one of its fundamental problems becomes unmistakably apparent: the discrepancy vis-à-vis the lives of the faithful. There are undeniably still faithful who affirm many aspects of the Church’s sexual teaching out of an inner conviction. They perceive it neither as a demanding idealisation, nor as prohibitive morality, but as a helpful orientation which, when accepted on the basis of an active faith, can lead to joyful, liberating relationships, and can be lived successfully.

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<sup>1</sup> MHG Study, version 13 August 2019, Summary p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ebd. p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ebd.

Too many faithful and couples, on the other hand, feel that there is an irreparable disconnect between the interpretations and norms of the Church's sexual teaching, on the one hand, and their own sexual experiences, on the other. They too experience how the Christian faith enables joyful, liberating relationships - even in constellations that the Magisterium currently still describes as illegitimate. They measure successful relationships and moral integrity by the dignity of the other person, and by the standard of non-violence. The discrepancy that they experience here has come to light and been demonstrated again and again in terms of its content and extent - most recently in the course of the surveys before the Family Synods that were held in 2014 and 2015. It especially relates to sexuality being reduced to genital sexuality, as well as to the primacy of biological fertility. Connected to this is the absolute condemnation of so-called artificial methods of contraception, as well as of masturbation, sexuality between same-sex or unmarried persons, or persons who have had a divorce and civil remarriage, and as well as the acknowledgement of the existence of gender identities beyond the binary nature of "male" and "female"<sup>4</sup>. The logic of this condemnation regards such sexual conduct as sinful and potentially entailing a threat to the Christian promise of salvation and of a state of grace. This logic currently manifests itself in systemic discrimination, especially towards sexual and gender minorities and people who have divorced and remarried. It causes much suffering for the couples, families and individuals concerned: from exclusion from the family or other social groups (e.g. church communities), through to dismissal from employment. Last but not least, there are the life-threatening criminalisation processes which force people to seek refuge elsewhere.

**A.2.2.** The causes of this profound discrepancy vary widely. Many faithful today consider some norms from the Church's tradition to lack the necessary affinity to people's concrete experience of life. Moreover, the Magisterial norms also arose against the contemporary historical background of an evaluation of sexuality which people today no longer share in this form. In this respect, they are no longer understandable today for very many (or most) faithful. Value convictions presuppose approval. Such approval is enhanced by the plausibility and comprehensibility of the justifications. Moral judgments are usually 'mixed judgments': a factual insight is combined with a normative evaluation. This can only succeed in sexuality if the knowledge offered by the human and social sciences sufficiently substantiates people's sexuality. It is only on this basis that each normative assessment - including one based on faith - gains a sufficient foundation. The normative assessment also includes a critical reflection on those normative presuppositions that play a part in the factual insights, whether consciously or unconsciously. Where the comprehensibility of the reasons does not seem attainable despite one's best knowledge and belief, trust in those who are responsible for the authentic interpretation of faith is ultimately also eroded: "We also need to be humble and realistic,

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<sup>4</sup> These controversial norms are recorded in the corresponding articles of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: No. 2337 (the attribution of all sexuality to "complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman"); No. 2351 (unchastity through the inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure, in particular in cases where it is "isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes"); No. 2352 (categorical prohibition of masturbation unless age- or development-related circumstances extenuate the moral responsibility of the person concerned); Nos. 2357 and 2359 (homosexuality and strict abstinence); Nos. 2366 and 2368-2370 (fecundity of marriage entailing a loving union coupled with an openness to the transmission of life; prohibition of so-called artificial methods of contraception).

acknowledging that at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation." (AL 36)

**A.2.3.** The divide that has occurred is being reinforced today: Leading lives self-responsibly today corresponds to people's attitude to life and aspirations, and it is their right. In doing so, they know that they are in conformity with the Biblical tradition and with the Church's teaching, both of which emphasise the great importance of living a self-determined, self-responsible life. The first Creation story for example calls every human being, as having been made in God's image, to engage in the task of shaping the Creation entrusted to him or her by God, including his or her own life, in a manner that is independent and conducive to life, in freedom that is responsible before God. Accordingly, humankind's own destiny culminates in the "interior qualities" of his or her heart, where he or she "discerns his proper destiny beneath the eyes of God" (GS 14). This also includes self-determination in the area of his or her sexuality. In this respect, people find it inexplicable when they are rejected by their faith community because of their life plan, their sexual orientation and their gender identity that are at odds with the usual notions of normality ("queer"), or their lack of adherence to the norms of their faith community, or are at least seen as constituting an incomplete variant of a fully-valid Christian life. They cannot explain to themselves that the abundance of the Good News should only be given to those who live in conformity with the Magisterium. This makes it seem absolutely impossible to integrate experiences of happiness and love from non-conforming relationships into the experiences of their own faith. All in all, this obscures the fact that no person is excluded from the path of following Christ because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

**A.2.4.** At the same time, discrepancy and loss of trust obscure those values of the Church's sexual morals and sex education that should form indispensable elements of a sexual relationship lived in dignity and love, and serve to protect relationships: committed friendship, fidelity, respect, mutual tender affirmation and the assumption of responsibility in the event of parenthood.

The boundaries that the Church's teaching describes, such as the rejection and prohibition of exploitative and violent sexuality, must also be taken into account. These include forced prostitution, rape, and degrading practices of pornography. These and all other forms of sexualised violence constitute behaviour that impairs or harms a person's self-determination and sexual integrity. In the context of the Synodal Path (see A.1), we recall in particular the strict prohibition of sexual abuse perpetrated by adults on persons entrusted to their care (No. 2389 CCC).

**A.2.5.** Many faithful feel that the Church's sexual morals are used as a tool to be able to exert subtle or overt power over the way people lead their lives. Subtle power is exercised when, for example, She exerts considerable pressure on the penitent by focussing confession on the sex life, and stylises a sex life that conforms to the Magisterium as the key to the experience of sacramental forgiveness and reconciliation. Confessional practice exercised in this manner has shamed, humiliated, and even traumatised people in not a few cases. It has become a gateway for sexualised violence time and time again.

Overt power is exercised when the Church's ministers regard adherence to sexual morals as a litmus test for their loyalty to the church employer, and violations of them which have become public are punished with severe sanctions up to and including termination of employment. Such exercise of power is increasingly rejected by many faithful as unjustified, and even more than that, as obscuring the message of Jesus Himself. This rejection is intensified when church employers know of deviations and tacitly tolerate them, but then exert pressure to render employees submissive with regard to official matters or in case of conflict. The Church's sexual teaching thus proves to be an instrument for the abusive exercise of power. Moreover, such juridification and power-forming of sexual morals fundamentally harms the authority of the Church's moral teachings. In contrast to legal norms, the binding nature of moral norms owes much to their inner discernment, and not to their coercive enforcement.

### **A.3. Judging in the light of the Bible's promises**

**A.3.1.** We find fundamental texts in the Holy Scripture that tell of God's loving and caring relationship with His Creation. God created people in His image and for one another. The differentness of the genders reflects the divine idea of diversity, complementarity, assistance and mutual joy in one another. Successful human relationships and their partaking of God's love pave the way to happiness and to God Himself. God therefore blesses people, gives them the gift of fertility, and provides for a partner against loneliness. People take pleasure in one another without shame, and as equal partners (cf. Gen 1:28; 2:18-24 et seq.).

The writers of the Bible in Antiquity naturally also knew that this ideal, even paradisiacal state no longer corresponds to the reality that they experienced. Their explanation for the brokenness of all our manifold relationships of love, friendship, family and others, for all the hurt, debasement and violent acts, is brought together in the narrative of the so-called "Fall of Man" (from Gen 3:1 onwards). The authors of the Bible describe the imperfections in our relationships with one another and the world as consequences of eating from the tree of knowledge. Their message is that every relationship in our post-paradisiacal world is exposed to the risk of failure. At the same time, they point to paths to success.

The entire Biblical tradition testifies to only love constituting the path "back to paradise" and to successful relationships. When the fullness of time has come (cf. Gal 4:4), God sends His Son, who Himself takes the redemptive path of love, going as far as giving His own life for people, enabling them through the working of the Holy Spirit to fully realise love in following Him. The Church therefore reads the Song of Songs on the one hand as an erotic love poem, but on the other hand at the same time as God's declaration of love to his creatures, and interprets the Bride and Bridegroom as signifying Christ's love for His Church. Entirely in this tradition, Christ speaks of himself as a Bridegroom (cf. Mt 9:15) whose love becomes the feast of a final wedding of God and humankind. Thus, in the promise of the Biblical revelation (cf. Revelation 21:9 - 22:5), we finally encounter the image of a definitive union of the different which people presage in their own historical existence in their love and sexuality, and may hope to receive from God.

**A.3.2.** What the Bible has to say about human sexuality is essentially embedded in statements about interpersonal relationships, and not least in the particular esteem in which the institu-

tion of marriage is held. Marriage was and remains an institution in human history that is essential for survival: It defined membership of a family, and thus elementary rights to receive care, but also obligations to give care. Therein lay and lies the significance of children who are clearly attributable to their parents. Breaking down such elementary relationships of solidarity through procreation out of wedlock had major consequences. For this reason alone, the strict prohibition of adultery had to be a fundamental norm of a community that wishes to secure a decent, reliable livelihood for its members. In this sense, not only the fundamental prohibition of adultery in the Decalogue (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18), but also the countless condemnations of fornication and the like which are contained in the Bible, are directly understandable given the special significance attaching to marriage. This significance is again underlined by Jesus' pronouncement on divorce (Mk 10:2-12parr): The possibility of irresponsibly and unilaterally ending a marriage by issuing a bill of divorce fosters a perception that the wife is merely her husband's property. This is in contradiction to the personal depth dimension of this relationship, and thus its dependability and commitment, which essentially transcend the historical thinking in terms of vested interests.

**A.3.3.** Thus it becomes understandable that the Biblical tradition only contains a small number of explicit statements about concrete sexual acts. This is also especially true for Jesus Christ. He sees Himself as completely rooted in the tradition of His Jewish faith community, which clearly sets itself apart from other ancient Oriental fertility cults with their partial deification of sexuality. The sexual is neither sacred worship, in which people express the divine nature of Creation as proxies, nor does people's own divinity find expression in personal fertility. Procreation and the procreated offspring were to serve the survival of the community, and not the perpetuation of the individual.

#### **A.4. The human being in the image of God, and his or her dignity as the central point of orientation of Christian sexual teaching**

**A.4.1.** Being made in God's image, each human being has an inalienable dignity. This dignity places all people on the same level, regardless of their sexual or gender identity, their age, or their relationship status. Each human being exists for his or her own sake, and is loved by God for his or her own sake. By his or her nature as a creature, he or she has full *personhood*: Each individual lives out of relationships with others. In the abundance of relationships, he or she is called to live a responsible life. The dignity of each human being lies in the very fact of not being understood as a mere consuming organ of inner processes or external needs. A person's dignity therefore also includes engaging in fully personal self-expression, including within sexual communication, and being able to receive the expression of the other person. It is never only bodies or souls that meet. But an 'I' consisting of body and soul, and a 'you' equally consisting of body and soul, show one another how much they want to be there with and for one another.

**A.4.2.** Consensuality in sexuality and partnership is a *sine qua non*, in just the same way as taking responsibility for themselves and for the other person, this also applying emotionally as well as with regard to the consequences. The dignity of each human person includes the right to consent freely to all personal forms of sexual relations, and not least to the choice of part-

ner, as well as the right to say no to forced or coerced sexual acts. For this reason alone, all sexual relationships and practices, such as forced prostitution, sexual abuse, sexualised violence and other types of exploitation of dependence and power asymmetries, must be condemned. The standard of human dignity prohibits rendering oneself or another person a mere instrument with which to satisfy one's own desires or third-party interests. Degrading practices of pornography, sexualised violence, abuse and the exploitation of dependences and power asymmetries fundamentally violate the right to sexual self-determination. The dignity of each human individual includes the right of free self-determination regarding all personal forms of sexual relations, and not lastly as to the choice of partner, as well as the right to say no to forced or coerced sexual acts.

#### **A.5. Love as the central formative principle**

**A.5.1.** Mutual consent is accompanied by the Christian primacy of love. Only love enables people to experience that they are accepted in physical touches and tenderness, and affirmed for their own sake. Love wishes to communicate and share with others. In addition to the components of *eros* (desire) and *agape* (unconditional love), it also possesses *philia* - dialogical love or love of a friend, which is interested in exploring and experiencing what people have in common. All three components allow for the reciprocal experience of attentiveness and affection, even though they are expressed in different ways. Whilst *agape*, love of one's neighbour, seeks only to serve the well-being of the other person, *eros* also has an egocentric component: Coming close to another person, the person giving love seeks his or her own fulfilment and happiness. But one's own fulfilment and happiness also has a shared component. The more abundant life promised by Jesus Christ is experienced in all loving relationships - be it in the love of a friend (*caritas*), in the aesthetic experience of love through the tenderness of encouraging and attentive glances, or through love in the shape of shared happiness. "The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven." (AL 129). God is at work in all the components of love described above. The experiences of a loving relationship can therefore be experienced and interpreted as experiences of God. For "God is love." (1 John 4:16).

**A.5.2.** These different emphases of love reveal different motivations and facets of love which are to be approved or disapproved of, depending on the circumstances. Appropriate love for children is for example *agape* love, which focuses on others. Children cannot consent to sexual acts. Sexual acts before, with and on children are to be evaluated without exception as violence. This constitutes the exploitation of an asymmetry of power which has nothing to do with love given voluntarily. Sexually-desiring love always bears the risk of exploiting the other in an abusive manner. It therefore requires the consent of the respectively other party; it must seek the well-being of the other and give attentive, altruistic love.

**A.5.3.** From a Christian point of view, love takes on its strongest power from a combination of divine love and altruistic love. Divine love is first and foremost God's unconditional love for humankind. God lends shape to this divine love for humankind in the person and fate of His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus brings together the unconditional promise of the acknowledgement and support of every single person - prior to any achievement, and in spite of any guilt. God's



salvific promise thus given through Jesus Christ renders each individual free, in a manner permeated by the broad spectrum of love, to repeatedly engage anew in life-giving relationships with his or her neighbour, for the sake of the other person as another, for the sake of one's neighbour as a neighbour. This divine love liberates us from all forms of selfishness and accumulation of greater power, something which a lonely ego continually thinks it has to use in order to assert itself.

**A.5.4.** The fact that people living in celibacy consciously forego partnership and parenthood must not be allowed to lead to a loss of their relational skills. Where they place their way of life at the service of the Kingdom of God, they seek to give their own testimony of God's ability to love. At the same time, however, this presents them with the constant challenge of developing a way of dealing with their own sexuality that integrates them in a positive manner, and does not deny or stunt their own intimacy.

It is therefore important that people living in celibacy also responsibly and respectfully develop the precious gifts of life which are expressed vibrantly in the ability to communicate, in friendship and in love, joy and well-being, pleasure and sensuality (cf. 2 Cor 6:17, 19 et seq.).

## Part B: Necessary further developments (motions)

### B.1. Sexuality as a gift and as a creative mandate

**B.1.1.** The whole way in which we live life as people is under the promise of God's salvific and liberating nearness. It unreservedly *affirms* our own existence and its wholeness as a created being: No element of a person's life is exempt from this; body and soul form a unit which can only be torn apart by losing 'true' humanity. Therefore, the confession of the *physical* resurrection of the dead belongs to the heart of the hope lying in the Jewish and Christian faith. This unconditional promise at the same time entails taking responsibility. Already in the first act of Creation, God entrusts us who are made in His image with the responsibility to cultivate and care for His Creation, the world, in short: to shape it in a way that is conducive to life. God *affirms* the uniqueness of each individual whom God has called by name and who is important to him, as is each and every individual (Is 43:7) - a uniqueness "making it really worthwhile that this uniqueness exists as such in eternity" (*Karl Rahner*), and can shape and live out its distinctive identity. God *affirms* all individuals before they have achieved anything at all, and forgives unconditionally in spite of all their weaknesses and imperfections (AL 296). This unreserved *affirmation* goes to the root of human existence, even if it is deeply marked by an inner brokenness that introduces sinfulness into the entire way in which each individual human being lives, and repeatedly threatens his or her ability to live a successful life; God's affirmation is not an "even though", but a "precisely because". God's salvific and liberating promise does not permit this inner brokenness of the human being to be forgotten. But it interrupts its effectiveness. God's grace opens up again and again for each and every person the opportunity to start afresh and to grow quietly in the care of His heartening encouragement.

**B.1.2.** God's salvific and liberating nearness repeatedly calls us anew, before our fellow human beings, the whole of Creation, and therein before Him, to take responsibility for our own

way of life. Responsible living presupposes freedom; otherwise people would be mere puppets of a God of dominion, who could ultimately only make Himself responsible. Human freedom contrasts sharply with the random nature of an arbitrary decision or unreflective, immature obedience. The dignity of human beings made in the image of God proves itself in the freedom of conscious and morally-responsible decisions regarding the options for action in one's own life. In its Pastoral Constitution, the Second Vatican Council once again integrated this human freedom into the reality of Creation, and distinguished it as an essential component of human dignity: "For its part", writes the Council, "authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that man remain "under the control of his own decisions," (Sir 15:14), so that he can seek his Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when, emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skilful action, apt helps to that end." (GS 17)

**B.1.3.** Pope Francis also refers explicitly to this fundamental statement of the Second Vatican Council when he describes freedom as "something great", but always in danger of being lost. Therefore he states: "Moral education has to do with cultivating freedom through ideas, incentives, practical applications, stimuli, rewards, examples, models, symbols, reflections, encouragement, dialogue and a constant rethinking of our way of doing things; all these can help develop those stable interior principles that lead us spontaneously to do good." (AL 267) Freedom is neither arbitrary nor uncommitted. It requires constant reassurance of what is good and right. But it is a freedom that always points the way to a deeply-personal insight. God's commandments are not arbitrary - not for any area of life -, also not for the life-serving shaping of human sexuality. Acknowledging this in concrete terms in each case, and translating it into the requirements of a personal lifestyle, however requires a personal insight. As the First Vatican Council found 150 years ago in a remarkable statement on the 'natural knowledge of God', this is in principle open to people's ability to reason (DH 3026). The faculty of human reason can in principle unfold in all of the faithful. This lends expression to the 'sense of faith' of all believers in Christ, and enables them to participate in the threefold ministry of Christ, which also includes the prophetic ministry.

**B.1.4.** True human freedom to live as we see fit constitutes a "responsible use of freedom", and as such is a "great gift" (AL 262). The emphasis regarding what this responsible freedom of Christians actually consists of is however set in different ways in our Church. Two approaches can for example be identified with regard to responsible human sexuality:

Some understand Christian freedom primarily as consisting in the establishment of a new existence, which stems primarily from the forgiveness of sins. Sin then consists first and foremost in removal from a life with God. God's forgiving love in Christ however leads back into this community. Living with the Church as the reliable place where Christ is present, in a personal and communal relationship with him, then leads to an experience of being able to reaffirm oneself and one's neighbour. Also the possibility to be able to accept the Church's teaching follows from this renewed existence, and constitutes an act of freedom. Liberated to love,

and enabled by the commandment to have love for one another (cf. John 13:35), following and imitating Jesus is indisputably the central calling of every Christian. The sexual teaching of the Church must then be authentically represented and understood against this background in particular.

True, others also emphasise the major importance attaching to Christian freedom as freedom from the law and freedom to love (cf. B. 10.3). They nonetheless stress more emphatically the aspect of the 'responsible use of freedom' in the conscientious judgment of each individual person. Conscience is guided and accompanied by the common search and struggle with others, and not least by the teachings of the Church. In this approach, it is "natural law" that is significant above all else. This can be understood - in brief - as knowledge present in the heart of each person and made intelligible by true reason, which makes it possible to distinguish between good and evil, truth and lies. Having an insight into natural law forms the basis for establishing moral rules, and is indispensable for co-existence in human community: It "expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties" (CCC 1956). Natural law<sup>5</sup> does not however impose a set of rules *a priori* on people as their moral subject, but "it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions" (AL 305)<sup>6</sup>. This aspect underlines the dynamic, developmental nature of all factual knowledge about human beings - including the factual frameworks of their sexuality. Deliberation and instruction regarding sexuality, in both theology and the Church, is also subject to these developmental processes of morally-relevant knowledge.

**B.1.5.** Each individual is charged with living his or her life responsibly, and thus also his or her sexuality - over the entire lifespan and in all circumstances. This may mean different things, depending on the stage and phase of life. Just one thing remains true: Living responsibly is an expression of human freedom and an important part of personal identity. It draws the conclusion that sexuality is a gift and a mandate from God.

## Principle 1

We understand human sexuality as a fundamentally positive life force given by God. It is an essential part of the personal identity of each person and of his or her way of life. God's Gospel embraces humanness in its entirety, including sexuality. We therefore want to encourage everyone who is baptised and confirmed to live their sexuality out of the new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). This may mean different things, depending on the stage and phase of life: People living in celibacy or alone will legitimately shape their sexuality differently than juveniles, homosexual couples or married couples. Living life responsibly is an expression of human freedom and an important part of a person's identity. It reduces the danger of abuse and violence, which the manifestation of human sexuality also particularly faces. One thing

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<sup>5</sup> Natural law is knowledge that is present in the heart of all people and is insightful by virtue of true reason, which makes it possible to distinguish between good and evil, truth and lies. An understanding of natural law forms the basis for establishing moral rules. Thus it is indispensable for living together in a human community: it "expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties" (CCC 1956). (Cf. CCC 1954-60).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from: Internationale Theologische Kommission, *Auf der Suche nach einer universalen Ethik. Ein neuer Blick auf das natürliche Sittengesetz* (2009), 59.

applies to all sexuality: It must always respect the dignity of the persons concerned as an expression of their being made in God's image. Dignity includes the right to sexual self-determination. Supporting this self-determination, and strengthening it in its commitment to abide by what is morally good, is just as much part of the fundamental mission of the Church as is respecting sexual identity - regardless of age or sexual orientation.

## **B.2. Honouring sexual identity in its diversity across a person's entire lifespan**

**B.2.1.** The personal identity of any individual is in a state of development throughout their entire life span. The goal is for a mature personality to be formed which reveals in its uniqueness an inner unity and consistency for living its life and life story. It portrays itself in its authenticity, that is in the way it is able to live and how it wants to live. Personal identity arises in the continuous subjective interaction of a person with his or her social environment in which they experience recognition, confirmation or indeed correction. Starting with sex education in the family, formal and informal sex education and sexual literacy programmes support this developmental process, and at the same time empower people against the damaging influences constituted by threats to their sexual integrity. By turning towards God, believing people always also include God's subjectivity in this interaction. The development of identity is not a purely internal, automatic process. It is also not influenced by external factors alone, but can also be consciously shaped by each individual. Identity is however not infinitely malleable. It is continually shaped within those physical, biopsychical and sociocultural prefigurations within which each person can and must lead his or her life.

**B.2.2.** Along with sexual orientation, sexuality also includes gender identity. This too develops as part of a complicated biopsychosocial process. Even what is usually referred to as biological gender identity, which is customarily determined 'at first sight' by the external gender characteristics of a person as 'female' or 'male', is owed to a complex process in which genetic as well as epigenetic factors already interact, and at the same time produce variants of biological gender identity. They thus lay the foundation for a multifaceted biopsychosocial gender identity the potential spectrum of which goes beyond the interpretative variants "male" and "female". Biological gender cannot be clearly determined in binary terms in some cases: Sometimes the external gender characteristics do not 'fit' the internal ones; at other times all the sexual organs are ambiguous with regard to the usual *binary* classification. A gender variant that defies a binary gender classification is intersex, also known as inter\* ('in between'). The possible variants of such 'in-between' ('intersex') gendering are manifold from a sexual medicine perspective. Besides chromosomal mosaicism - the chromosomal gender XX (female) or XY (male) is not identical in all the cells in this case - this ambiguity may be caused by idiosyncrasies of the gonads (testes, ovaries), or by hormonal imbalances - when measured in terms of the binary code of female/male. The situation differs in turn for transsexual persons, as well as transidentity, or trans\*: As a rule, they have unambiguous external as well as internal sexual organs. Their biopsychosocial development has however led to a profound gender perception that does not correspond to the gender that was assigned at birth. The physical gender characteristics may therefore be adapted in the biography of trans people. Self-assurance about one's sexual identity is an indispensable prerequisite for anyone to enjoy a

happy life. As a Church, we must respect the individual self-perception of the sexual identity of any person as an inviolable part of their uniqueness as made in God's image (Is 43:7).

**B.2.3.** Sexuality also develops over an individual's entire life span. Up to a certain point in time, this also affects their sexual orientation and preferences, in addition to gender identity. Sexual science documents as gender orientations above all heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality. These are the result of a complex developmental process in which both somatic as well as biopsychic and sociocultural factors develop their formative power. The individual manifestations of sexual orientation must be understood as a sexual-erotic orientation, defining an individual on a life-long basis and dominating their way of life, towards members of their own and/or other genders. They become consolidated and perpetuated during a lifetime. The Church's Magisterium has also acknowledged that homosexuality is an orientation that is not chosen. There is an urgent need to recognise the equivalence and legitimacy of non-heterosexual orientations, their practices and relationship, and in connection with this to eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation. Sexual preferences are to be distinguished from sexual orientation. Whilst these have also come into being, their practice is to be evaluated differently, namely in the light of the criteria that have been advanced. This results for example in a categorical ban on paedosexual practice.

**B.2.4.** The Bible sees people as male and female. It does not however follow from this that intersexual and transsexual persons may be disparaged. They are of course part of the Biblical Creation; they are not a - possibly pathological - incomplete variant which should be corrected through therapy. In fact, intersexual persons are still being pushed towards either female or male through surgery or pharmacological therapies - often with a severe physical and psychological impact on the individual. The findings of sexology and sexual medicine have meanwhile led to the members of this group no longer being described as having "disorders of sex development", but "differences of sex development". This was accompanied by a shift in the perception of a uniform normality that acknowledges large numbers of deviations to a normality that is open to different facets of sexual identities and keeps intrinsic potentials of human development open to all identities. Seen in this light, it is not only normal to be different, but also different to be normal.

**B.2.5.** Similar changes are to be found in the scientific perception of the different sexual orientations. The biopsychosocial becoming or development of a person's sexual orientation must be respected as the result of a deeply-personal growth process, and in its personal identity. This also applies to the different developmental steps and phases that people go through from youth, through adulthood, to old age - developmental steps that each person has to shape in an orientation towards human dignity, personal dignity, as well as the dignity of the other person.

## **Principle 2**

Each personal identity is in a state of development. Sexuality too develops over the life span. An indispensable principle of sexuality is mutual, loving respect for the dignity of the other person, as well as of one's own dignity. Such respect must also be shown to each form of gender identity and sexual orientation. Both sexual orientation and gender identity are the result

of a personal growth process. All forms of discrimination and demands for it to be manipulated in a manner not medically indicated, such as via conversion therapies, are therefore prohibited.

### **B.3. Taking the multidimensionality of human sexuality seriously**

**B.3.1.** Human sexuality is polyvalent in nature: It is an expression of the identity of each person, mediates experience of lust, enables physical experience and a deepening of interpersonal relationships and communication, and can serve the purpose of procreation as well as transcendental experience. In phylogenetic terms (evolution of humanity), procreation is the oldest dimension of human sexuality. Ontogenetically (development of the individual person), the lust dimension in conjunction with the experience of human nearness usually forms the first step of a person's sex life. The relationship dimension of human sexuality fulfils basic biopsychosocial needs for acceptance, security, nearness and safety. Sexuality knows many languages of physical communication. It includes, besides genital arousal, besides any erotic dimensions, all forms of expression of the physical and the spiritual which can be attributed to stimulating sensuality, tenderness and eroticism. The Joint Synod of the Dioceses of (West) Germany was able to state in this vein almost 50 years ago, still anchored in binary ideas of gender: "Sexuality is one of the forces that determine the human existence. It shapes a person's being a man or a woman. (...) The forms of this relationship are manifold. They already begin with the relationship between mother and son, between father and daughter. Other forms too are shaped by sexuality."<sup>7</sup> This forms the necessary foundation for the differentiation that is common today.

**B.3.2.** This realisation is highly significant. The interplay of the dimensions varies greatly in these forms of expression. The dimension of procreation (generative function) can initially only be realised in the form of expression of genital sexuality. Other forms of expression (such as tenderness) can play an important role in physical communication in very many relationships. Others in turn are reserved for specific forms of relationship because they convey a degree of intimacy that is for example only appropriate in an emotionally-close relationship.

One need have no profound knowledge of the human sciences or of sexual medicine in order to know that no one dimension of human sexuality must be realised in each expressive sexual act in order to enable the other dimensions to be realised. The actual moral or normative questions cannot however be answered on this foundation of everyday evidence and in-depth knowledge of the human sciences.

This is already evident in the inner configuration of the individual dimensions of meaning themselves. For each of the dimensions of sexuality is itself ambivalent: The experience of sexual lust targets the positive experience of one's own self as well as of the other; but it can also tip over into a narcissistic self-isolation that instrumentalises another person as a mere object of lust. Procreation can give a child life in order to delight in the happiness of life of this new person and to give God the glory in it, but it can also be motivated by a sense of possession and entitlement on the part of the parents. Sexuality can convey gentle attentiveness

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<sup>7</sup> Gemeinsame Synode: *Beschluss Christlich gelebte Ehe und Familie*. 2.1.1.

and sympathy in interpersonal relationships in a physical language. It can however also be used as a means for selfish possessiveness and violent subjugation. All dimensions and forms of human sexuality therefore require a moral orientation in order to ensure that they are shaped in a humane way.

**B.3.3.** These realisations are anything but new. The Biblical traditions already impart this fundamental ambivalence of human sexuality. Human sexuality is part of God's good Creation. God's affirmation of the abundance of a happy life includes an affirmation of the "joy of love" (AL) precisely also in its physically-mediated sensuality. Biblical texts however also relentlessly tell of sexualised violence and destructive relationships. Wherever the personal vitality, the social existence and the trust of people (in God) are destroyed, the perpetrators are condemned in the texts, and their offences are judged as a "sin against God" and a perversion of Creation. But it is not the sexuality and the desire itself which are condemned, but the violent, humiliating and destructive act in each case. The equal sexual union between couples is judged to be so existential that even Paul advises couples to deprive one another for a time at most (1 Cor 7:5). In this sense, all forms of (genital) sexual acts are condemned which could destroy the life-giving bond of mature, reliable relationships of a marriage - such as the different forms of "fornication" (cf. e.g. Mt 15:19; Acts 15:20; Rom 1:27; 13:13; 1 Cor 5:11; Gal 5:19; Col 3:5) and of adultery. Sexual practices are not evaluated per se, but in terms of their potential to endanger marriage. The Biblical tradition thus corresponds with what was customary at the time when it was written. Paul therefore already integrated norms and rules from the pagan environment in his teachings to the faithful.

**B.3.4.** All in all, the Biblical tradition emphasises the confidence "that God loves the enjoyment felt by human beings: he created us and "richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy"" (cf. 1 Tim 6:17)"(AL 149)<sup>8</sup>. It conveys the assurance that we as people are involved in God's creative and redemptive power through the awakening of new life, but also through our care for others. And it conveys unequivocally that the loving physical touches bring God's loving, caring power to the fore and make it the source of communal life. In all their efforts to limit the dangers of human sexuality, the Church and theology clearly paid insufficient attention to God's fundamental affirmation of human sexuality in all its dimensions. The Magisterium and the theological disciplines, as well as the Church's proclamation as a whole, must remember all the more today that "special care should always be shown to emphasize and encourage the highest and most central values of the Gospel, particularly the primacy of charity as a response to the completely gratuitous offer of God's love." (AL 311).

**B.3.5.** The primacy of love is the central normative assessment criterion for shaping and combining the different sensual dimensions of human sexuality. Where love is missing, human sexuality also lacks its specifically human profile. In what concrete form it is present - for example in the form of self-love, relationship-orientated neighbourly love, or generative-reproductive love for one's descendants - still needs to be determined. The indispensability of a sensual dimension of human sexuality is also not measured in abstract terms. It is indispensable when it is essential for the meaning of the type of love in question.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. also 1 Tim 4:4: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving".

### **Principle 3**

Sexuality is one of the physical and spiritual human languages. It makes love and affection fully tangible, with their different forms of physical touching and sensual feeling, and often points beyond itself to the transcendent and divine of human existence. It is polyphonic: It encompasses one's own pleasurable experience as well as that of the other person; it is a source of new life and an expression of trusting relationships, the joy of the other and conveying security. Genital sexuality is a very important form of sexual contact, but by no means the only one. Embracing, kissing, caressing, snuggling or the arousing tenderness of pleasant touches are important forms of expression of human sexuality. All expressions and dimensions help to shape the identity of each individual.

#### **B.4. Fertility has a variety of dimensions**

**B.4.1.** Fertility was and is a core moment in interpersonal relationships, and of sexuality in particular. This is usually underpinned by the normative idea that interpersonal relationships - including in marriage - should not lose themselves in mere self-sufficiency, but should fundamentally open up to others. Everyday experience also points to the fact that one frequently experiences love growing beyond itself. This being-there-for-others is the consequence of the Biblical image of a person who essentially lives in and through his or her connections to others in caring for one another. Such care for the well-being of another is at the core of the moment of neighbourly love.

**B.4.2.** Within the context of sexuality, fertility stands especially for the biological transmission of new life. As neighbourly love, fertility is therefore directed beyond the well-being of the immediate partner, and towards other individuals as well. This refers first and foremost to those who as biological children owe their very existence to the sexual union of two people from whose abundance of life they draw their own life-force. Neighbourly love is thus the special expression of love between parents and children. Beyond its biological fertility, neighbourly love, mediated in the flesh, assumes a social responsibility for the human community as a whole. This assumption of social responsibility can also be based on a conscious decision to use contraception in a certain situation, or in an option against further biological children. In this sense, fertility (generativity) has not only a biological but also a social significance, and can be understood analogously in this regard. Also couples who cannot become parents of their own biological children have the potential to develop social generativity - in the same way as single people and people living in celibacy. Their physically-transmitted love becomes the source of a commitment to others. In this way, it fruitfully transcends the boundaries of their relationships with themselves or as a couple. The loving affirmation of a God to whose undue and unlimited love for individuals everything is owed proves itself in the affirmation of these facets of interpersonal self-love, neighbourly love and love for others. Affirming thus, we discover that relationships have an everyday sacramental quality: They become signs and instruments of the salvific and liberating love of God for people, and thus signs and instruments of the reciprocal responsibility of people for one another (LG 1).



**B.4.3.** In this sense, ‘fertility’ is essential for all interpersonal love. It is however disputed whether biological fertility is also essential in terms of openness for the transmission of human life, and that in each genital-sexual act. A great deal is at stake in this controversy: above all the questions of whether genital sexuality - usually referred to as a “sexual act” - has a legitimate place exclusively in marriage, and whether the deliberate exclusion of biological fertility is morally legitimate even in marriage.

It is undisputed that conjugal love and sexuality are closely interrelated. Conjugal love includes physical contact and tenderness (cf. GS 51, AL 298). “[...] [A]n affection of the will [...] is directed from one person to another” (GS 49), authentically and physically - in the whole spectrum of sexual expression. Conversely, marriage offers a commitment and unconditionality that can protect the sexual act in its vulnerability as the most intimate articulation of sexuality, and ensure a secure foundation for the transmission of life. It is also indisputable that the partners bear responsibility for any life that may be created through their sexual act. With regard to their mutual responsibility and to the responsibility towards a child that might be brought into being, they are charged with conscientiously deciding about contraception and about the number of children, in “responsible parenthood” (HV 10).<sup>9</sup> Couples must always bear in mind that sexual intercourse can lead to the creation of new life, and that responsibility arises from this. Children are creatures who are unconditionally loved by God at all times and in all instances; abortion contradicts this understanding of humanity. Abortion could therefore never be a legitimate means of birth control. And it is undisputed, not lastly, that each sexual act respects personal dignity and is characterised by the gift of mutual love and grace, and may of course be performed together with full pleasure and joy. This also includes a continuous dialogue between both spouses about whether and how birth control should be practised. Only such a dialogue appropriately takes into account the dignity of each and every individual, as well as their responsibility for one another.

**B.4.4.** What is disputed, however, is whether openness to biological fertility is essential for each sexual act, and what methods are permitted to avoid the transmission of new life. With reference to the Church’s Magisterium, it is argued that only the fundamental openness of each act to procreation guarantees the humanity of conjugal and sexual love. To shape responsible parenthood, the spouses have at their disposal, with the method of natural family planning, a proven instrument to gently shape the transmission of new life in their conjugal life. It is said to be a good and proven path with which many couples also have very positive experiences, including for their relationship as a couple. At the same time, it is said to respect the fact that the conscientious decision on the concrete path of family planning should

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<sup>9</sup> “The unambivalent teaching of the Second Vatican Council still holds: [The couple] will make decisions by common counsel and effort. Let them thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which the future may bring. For this accounting they need to reckon with both the material and the spiritual conditions of the times as well as of their state in life. Finally, they should consult the interests of the family group, of temporal society and of the Church herself. The parents themselves and no one else should ultimately make this judgment in the sight of God”. Moreover, “the use of methods based on the ‘laws of nature and the incidence of fertility’ (*Humanae Vitae*, 11) are to be promoted, since ‘these methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them and favour the education of an authentic freedom’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2370). Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the fact that children are a wonderful gift from God and a joy for parents and the Church. Through them, the Lord renews the world”. (AL 222).

“neither violate the dignity of the human person nor endanger marriage as a community of fruitful love” (*Königstein Declaration* 13). Moreover, severance of the biological fertility of the individual acts of sexual encounter is said to destroy the dignity and sacredness of this encounter itself, and to all the more expose the sexual act to disintegration. Countless consequences of such a disintegration, and the self-evident separation of these dimensions, could be observed in society, such as the reduction of sexuality to a commodity and of women to objects of desire, and much more.

It is countered there that sexualisation could hardly be said to have contributed to the decoupling of fertility and the sexual act in some parts of society. Rather, they say, this has its roots in a socio-economic aberration that itself turns people into commodities. Especially the obligation to use so-called natural methods of contraception could dramatically increase the number of unwanted pregnancies, and thus the risk of killing human life through abortion. Moreover, the normative core of the method of “natural family planning” is said to be no different than so-called artificial methods. The selection of so-called infertile times by the woman is said to be carried out with the same intention, namely to avoid the procreation of children. The intentionality of an act is however an essential aspect of any moral judgment on it. In this respect, the method of choosing a time is said to only obscure the underlying problem, and to represent - despite all the importance for questions of mutual respect - only a well-intentioned, yet unconvincing compromise with regard to the fundamental problem. Moreover, the unconditional linking of each sexual act to biological fertility is said to constitute an impermissible absolutisation of the reproductive aspect which threatens to level out the qualitative difference between human sexuality and that of animal reproductive behaviour. In this way, it falls short of the actual human aspect which particularly also places the sexual in the comprehensive service of a successful life, and thus allows the richness of loving relationships to be shaped consciously and responsibly. And the latter is said not to be exhausted in the transmission of new life. If the main purpose of human sexuality were to consist in the creation of new life, there would be a danger that the (married) couples would be stylised as mere instruments for the transmission of human life and the maintenance of the human species, thus disrespecting their dignity (‘being for their own sake’).

**B.4.5.** The principle of inseparability asserted itself in the teaching of the Catholic Church for the first time in the Encyclical letter *Humanae vitae* (1968), where it was referred to as “the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.” (HV 12). This doctrine was not uncontested within the Catholic Church at any time - either at its origin or in its reception. This certainly does not make it untrue. At the very least, this fact however makes it clear that its meaning is neither theologically nor practically compelling. Especially within moral theology, the critical reception of this principle of inseparability has led to considerable attempts at restraint and discipline on the part of the Roman Magisterium, culminating among other things in the Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*.

In any case, the consequences of such a principle are severe: debasement, even delegitimation of all sexual acts which by themselves cannot beget children. This not only concerns sexuality between homosexual individuals, it also concerns people with (physical) impairments or all married couples whose age has long since exceeded the limit of their biological fertility,

and who cannot perform each of their sexual acts with an awareness that it still provides a prospect of parenthood. In this respect, precisely because of its severity, this principle of inseparability is rejected by the majority as a failure to recognise the human significance of human sexuality for each individual, and as an imposition that lacks plausibility. The fundamental openness of gender to the transmission of new life is admittedly by no means ruled out. The other aspects of the fertility of human sexuality are nevertheless also appropriately brought to bear and integrated into the framework of love that itself takes place in committed relationships, but always already transcends the boundaries of such relationships towards others.

#### **Principle 4**

Sexuality is a life-giving force in many respects. A special aspect of this fertility is the transmission of new life. The fertility of human sexuality always also possesses a social dimension. It substantiates its openness for new life in the assumption of personal responsibility for the upbringing of and support for growing young people. There is no doubt that same-sex couples and other couples who cannot procreate new life, but do raise children, have the potential for a life that is also fertile in this respect. People living in celibacy, or single persons, also have this potential in principle. A marriage lived by Christians is an appropriate, indeed preferred, place in which to integrate all dimensions of fertility. It draws on openness to this fertility. This does not however mean that each sexual union without exception must biologically realise this openness. The spouses themselves face the task of conscientiously integrating such fundamental openness into their responsible parenthood.

#### **B.5. The fertility of homosexual partnerships**

**B.5.1.** The reflections on the comprehensive fertility of interpersonal relationships and sexual love also cast a new light on the fertility of homosexual partnerships. They too are covered by the principles of Christian sexual morals. It is however debatable within the Catholic Church whether they only apply in a derived form because homosexuality is denied full recognition, or whether they also unrestrictedly apply to same-sex relationships, which also (wish to) employ the relationship-promoting language of human sexuality. It should be noted here that the reality and diversity of non-heterosexual relationships often goes unnoticed, is truncated or misrepresented in the discussion due to a lack of vocabulary on sexual and gender diversity in the Catholic Church.

**B.5.2.** The acceptance of homosexual orientation as an equal variant of human sexuality was controversial in society for a long time, and still is in the Church to this day. The Church's Magisterium first dealt explicitly with the evaluation of homosexuality in 1975 in the Instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Persona humanae*. Since the 'natural finality' of human sexuality - namely the transmission of new life - could not be achieved, homosexuality was said to constitute an abuse of sexual power, and was therefore

objectively disordered and to be avoided by means of sexual abstinence<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, it is argued that the ‘natural finality’ of human sexuality is not limited to the biological transmission of new life, but consists precisely in the physical expression of personal love. Moreover, the question is said to arise as to what forms of sexual expression of homosexual love fall under the verdict of the ‘objectively disordered’ (only genital or also all other forms of speech), and whether one can seriously demand that a core feature of a person’s identity be frozen, only because it does not fulfil specific normative expectations, without thereby harming that person or another person. All forms of discrimination are forbidden here too.

**B.5.3.** Homosexual orientation - just like any other sexual orientation - is not an arbitrary decision. It is the result of a process of biopsychosocial maturation in which the individual develops his or her sexual identity, and in which the sexual preference of an individual is formed up to about the age of puberty. Homosexual orientation is not an anomaly that should be treated as a disease. In human science and medicine, it is a variant of the norm of human sexuality.

Already in biological terms, cerebral variances form ontogenetically (in the interplay of genetic and epigenetic processes) in prenatal development which prefigure patterns of (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) sexual attraction, and condense along biopsychosocial development processes into dominant sexual orientations (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual).<sup>11</sup>

**B.5.4.** There is no doubt as to the equal dignity of homosexual people, since all people are created in God’s image. This forms the basis for the Church’s prohibition of any discrimination. Controversy however persists within the Catholic Church as to the evaluation of homosexual acts and relationships. Some argue in favour of the position taken up in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which was enacted at universal Church level in 1992. This distinguishes between homosexual predisposition, for which homosexual people are not responsible, and homosexual acts. The latter were said to violate the order of nature due to their lack of fertility, and should therefore be refrained from. In this respect, it is said to be forbidden to unconditionally recognise homosexual acts and put them on an equal footing with heterosexual couples (cf. CCC 2357-2359).

Others, on the other hand, see a distinction between disposition and action as an impermissible division of the person concerned, and point to the great significance attaching to active sexuality for most people, which may not be discredited and forbidden per se. In this respect, same-sex relationships should always be unconditionally recognised if they - like any form of sexual relationship - respect the dignity of the individuals concerned and are characterised by heartfelt, enduring love and grace. Even though biological reproduction is not possible in same-sex relationships as a rule, children also live in these relationships. That homosexual people are by themselves only capable of an unbalanced relationship with persons of the respective other gender is just as unsubstantiated as the reverse assertion that heterosexual people have a broken relationship with their own gender.

**B.5.5.** Respect for the equal dignity of homosexual people also includes the rejection of so-called conversion therapies. These aim to change same-sex desires, and to “cure” homosexu-

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons (1986), No. 3, also Nos. 7, 8 and 10.

<sup>11</sup> Possible bracket in note.

ality. They fundamentally presume that homosexuality is a disease. In doing so, they ignore the acknowledgement in the human sciences of homosexuality as a disposition, which is also advocated by the Magisterium.

People who have same-sex feelings, but who at the same time want to live according to the Church's teachings, and also wish to receive guidance from the Church, are to receive such guidance. It does not aim to carry out therapeutic conversion, but at bringing about acceptance of a self-determined life decision of the individual receiving spiritual guidance. The pastoral guidance of homosexual faithful should fundamentally aim to positively integrate the sexual orientation into the individual, and not to promote the repression or suppression of the sexual orientation. The renunciation of (specific) forms of sexual practice can be an expression of a consciously-chosen celibate way of life for people of all sexual orientations - independently of the different motives that lead to this decision or make it necessary. As a Christian life plan, abstinence necessarily implies the energy of freedom.

### **Principle 5**

The principles and criteria of sexuality lived out in Christianity - respect for self-determination and responsible sexuality, as well as fidelity, permanence, exclusivity and responsibility for one another in relationships - also apply to homosexual people. Same-sex sexuality - also expressed in sexual acts - is therefore not a sin that causes separation from God, and it is not to be judged as intrinsically bad. Homosexuality is not an exclusion criterion for access to ordained ministry. A fundamental exclusion is evidence of a deficit orientation which has no factual justification. So-called conversion treatments and similar offers which aim to disintegrate personal identity in relation to sexual identity or sexual orientation, and thus endanger the health and faith of homosexual and transgender people, are to be strictly rejected and put a stop to.

### **B.6. Making sexual lust life-giving in its beauty**

**B.6.1.** Lust can be understood as a sensual driving force of human life which on the one hand stimulates a motivating and therefore vital sense of well-being. On the other hand, it can only be consciously shaped to a limited extent and restricted in its inherent, exuberant potential. A highly-sceptical attitude towards sexual lust prevailed for a long time which made human sexuality as a whole appear to be an ultimately dangerous, explosive and thus quickly invasive energy that had to be contained and tamed by means of strict moral and legal norms.

Lust, and with it sexuality, are understood less as drive-bound arousal, the exuberant potential of which would have to be relieved by the satisfaction of drives, but as the consummation of a physically-experienceable energy which owes itself to the attraction of *eros*, which goes hand-in-hand with sensual desire, and thus lends expression to the sense of well-being of physically-perceived nearness. The productive aspects of human lust - also and especially in the area of sexuality - are now being perceived and taken seriously.

**B.6.2.** Like all expressions of human sexuality, sexual lust is also not devoid of ambivalence. It can convey acknowledgement and security through the stimulated erotic feeling of well-being.

It can be instrumentalised to become the mere object of one's own experience of lust, for instance through the unbridled consumption of pornography, or behaviour that violates boundaries - whether it be on the part of adults or of young people among themselves. Since sexual lust, as a sensual dimension of human sexuality, can also be consciously shaped, life-affirming sex education also includes the ability to grow in a life-serving approach to sexual lust.

## **Principle 6**

The life-giving power of sexuality also includes experiencing sexual lust. It allows the physical acceptance of oneself and the other person to be felt in a particularly intense and pleasing way. It conveys *eros*: attraction through the beautiful and desirable. Believing people can connect this directly with God: For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:4). Sexual lust can however be sought and satisfied in a way that wounds and degrades one's own dignity or that of the other person. It is the task of sex education, as of Christian education and upbringing as a whole, to promote the life-serving and thus mindful and dignified formation of sexual lust over the whole span of human life, to sensitise it for its moments of pleasing, and thus to protect it from trivialising degeneration.

### **B.7. Sexuality as a relationship with oneself as well as with others**

**B.7.1.** Sexuality is a force for a relational life which physically conveys vital experiences of acknowledgement and security. In a similar way, Pope John Paul II also emphasised the fundamental significance of sexuality as a language of the physical for the life of each person, even though he refers it to people with disabilities in particular: "Instead, the sexual dimension is a constitutive dimension of the human being as such, created in the image of the God of Love and called from the outset to find fulfilment in the encounter with others and in communion. The premise for the emotional-sexual education of disabled persons is inherent in the conviction that their need for love is at least as great as anyone else's. They too need to love and to be loved, they need tenderness, closeness and intimacy."<sup>12</sup> All individuals seek authentic relationships in which they can find appreciation and recognition as persons. Sexuality can show itself here as the language of physically-mediated appreciation and recognition.

**B.7.2.** Like any form of sexual relationship and practice, self-stimulating sexuality (masturbation) is also ambivalent. On the one hand, it opens up the possibility of discovering and experiencing oneself in physicality, and of experiencing the dimensions of the sexuality of lust, identity and transcendence. This experiential space is significant over the whole lifespan. It is an important gradual development for the psychosexual maturation process in almost every person. Self-stimulating sexuality is not a form of pure self-love, but another important form of human sexuality besides interpersonal relationships. It is each person's task never to make the pleasurable self-referentiality of human sexuality absolute. It is however an expression of human sexuality on this side of relationships between couples.

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<sup>12</sup> John Paul II (2004): Message to the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person.

## Principle 7

Sexuality lives in and from relationships. Conversely, many interpersonal relationships live from their sexuality because they allow emotional nearness and affection to be experienced ‘up close’ in the silent gestures of physical touch. As a matter of principle, such relationships also include people’s relationship with themselves. Experiencing one’s own body through self-stimulation in a pleasurable way can be an important building block of self-acceptance for everyone. This does not deny the danger inherent in the self-stimulated sexuality of each person: to become encapsulated within oneself, and thus to dry up the richness of relationships with other people as a source of one’s own life.

### B.8. Forming Christian marriage and committed partnerships out of God’s promise

It should be noted at the outset that there are very different forms of living committed relationships, and integrating one’s own sexuality as a formative element of one’s own way of life. This applies to marriage as well as to the communal way of life of celibate religious. Each such way of life has its own inner meaning, and thus dignity. Religious do not live in celibate communities because they wish to distinguish themselves from other ways of life that are supposedly less worthy in Christian terms. And married people do not marry because they wish to separate or distinguish themselves from others. Both religious and married people, or those who are deliberately single, live their way of life because they consider it to be appropriate in their own particular lives. In it they seek to realise their own purpose. Their own worthiness never results from the fact that other ways of life are (supposedly) more or less meaningful.

**B.8.1.** Sexuality and the married way of life are closely related: As an important form of expression of human sexuality, children benefit from a relationship that is designed to last and be lived in commitment, and they enrich that relationship. From a Christian perspective, this relationship is under the sign and promise of God. Conversely, marriage also lives in the medium and from the life-force of sexuality between spouses. Nevertheless, sexuality and marriage do not merge into one.

Marriage is much more than merely a legitimate place for interpersonal sexuality. It is a covenant for life whose reliability and commitment, emotional nearness and trusting openness to mutual growth, form an important foundation for the success of life lived in a partnership.

**B.8.2.** It would therefore be regrettable if the theology of marriage were developed solely in the context of sacramental law or sexual ethics. This would risk diminishing the character of sacramental marriage as a confidence-building fellowship under God’s affirming promise. There are good reasons why it is not the sacramental celebration of the wedding, as the beginning of marriage, but marriage itself, throughout its entire lifespan, that is a sacramental event - a theologically-significant fact that occasionally allows the Christian marriage to be described as a *sacrament in the making* (cf. Josef Ratzinger). This significance is however quite decisive if one wishes to lead a life together in serious calmness and Christian confidence, in the midst of joy and hope as well as sorrow and fear. For many married couples have also experienced difficult times when marriage is “real work”, and in which a mutual

promise can be a relief, especially when it has been placed under God's blessing. Marriages are again and again impositions in a twofold sense: Spouses are entrusted with performing occasionally uncomfortably strenuous work on their relationships, but also with lending one another innovative courage and mutually-strengthening encouragement. This trust is based on confidence in God's power (Gr. "*dynamis*"), which spouses do not have to take care of themselves, but which is granted to them - as to all people - by God.

**B.8.3.** It is precisely the sacramentality of marriage that opens up a realm in which human sexuality can be lived in mutually-respected dignity and mutually-granted love and grace. Sacraments are "signs and instruments" in which the healing nearness of God can be experienced - whether in a solemn liturgy or in everyday life in the world. The sacrament of marriage stands out among the sacraments to a certain degree: For it is not the wedding ceremony that is the sacrament, but marriage as a lifelong process of the coming and going of ups and downs, of seized chances and missed opportunities of shared joy in life. This also applies to sexuality that is experienced in marriage, which as a physical language of love opens up a path of growth and graduality.

In this sense, spouses continuously administer the sacrament of marriage to one another in their daily lives. Conjugal sexuality is interwoven with ups and downs in the same way as conjugal love as a whole. The expectations that one has of oneself and of the other person certainly do not always harmonise together. This can mar a marital community in all situations and areas of life - sometimes taking it to its limits. The mystery of sacramentality especially reveals its liberating character here: Spouses regard God's salvific, strengthening nearness not as a promise for the future which they themselves must first earn, but as an assurance which has already been given, and on which they can build. This unconditional promise of God opens up an open-ended space in which to entrust oneself completely to another, without having to fear for oneself; to be able to open oneself to this other person also in the vulnerability of one's own sexuality without having to fear that one's own tenderness might be shamelessly exploited.

**B.8.4.** God's promise does not protect even Christian marriages from exhaustion and failure. Some such exhausted marriages remain in place as a formal bond even when they have long since broken down as a covenant. The civil significance of marriage as an institutional safeguard for the social situation of partnerships and families has been increasingly eclipsed in modern societies by social security systems of all kinds. This is one reason why an increasing number of marriages are dissolved by civil law. A divorce dissolves the civil bond, and also terminates the partnership (covenant) outwardly. It goes far beyond the termination of a sexual partnership.

**B.8.5.** Not a few of those affected enter into a new covenant for life with a new partner. Such life partnerships between persons who have had a civil divorce and remarried are only a question of sexual morals to a very limited extent, even if their evaluation by the Church's Magisterium focuses solely on this aspect. For the Church's Magisterium regards partnerships in a second civil marriage as being in contradiction with the doctrine of the indissolubility of the (first) marriage, where the latter has been validly concluded and sexually consummated, and genital sexuality is practiced in the second (civil) marriage. The second civil marriage sparks a new covenant for life for the persons concerned. The dissolution of the first marriage does not



automatically mean that this new covenant is only entered into for a limited period of time from the outset. On the contrary, the new covenant often also draws on a deep longing for commitment and solidity. Although, according to current doctrine, this second marriage cannot constitute a sacramental marriage because of the indissolubility of the first, the question nonetheless arises for the Christian faith community as to whether and how the persons concerned can participate in the life of the Church if they so wish. Many focus on participation in the fellowship of the Eucharistic table because, according to the Church's teaching, it forms the heart of the Church's sacramental life, and like no other makes it possible to experience the bond with God and with the community of the faithful in a way that is tangible to the senses. Pope Francis has taken important steps in this regard towards recognition in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* - according to the pastoral maxims of "accompanying, discerning, integrating".

**B.8.6.** There can be no doubt that each situation is to be assessed individually. The vital aspect here is "the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement ... The way of the Church is not to condemn anyone for ever; it is to pour out the balm of God's mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart... For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional and gratuitous" (AL 296). The way of Jesus thus indicates that we can trust that full participation in the fellowship of the Eucharistic table is requested with sincerity and honesty. The couples concerned, indeed the faithful as a whole, will experience this carefully-developed trust as a sign of God's responsive love. The question remains as to how the Church can enable people in such new partnerships, many of whom experience a longing in terms of their faith, to experience God's merciful care through His blessing.

**B.8.7.** The situation of persons who have had a civil divorce and remarried extends far beyond the question of admission to the fellowship of the Eucharistic table. It relentlessly confronts the Church with the experience that validly-concluded, sexually-consummated marriages, and above all marriages that have often even been exceptionally happy for years and decades, nevertheless fail and break down. After all, the average duration of marital partnerships has almost tripled in the last century. In addition, the 'intimacy of marriage', its romantic exaggeration, and the 'miniaturisation of families', not only offer opportunities for the partners to personally experience one another, but also pose a risk of a considerable increase in emotional tension and conflict. It may be beneficial to the partners concerned in such cases to separate in terms of marital cohabitation. Consideration is even given on occasion to enabling a second church marriage in some instances, and thus a real new beginning, as is the case for instance in the Orthodox Christian Churches.

**B.8.8.** God's sustaining strength is promised not only to married couples, but to all people who seek caring, committed relationships in life and love. In this respect, they seek to consciously and explicitly place their community under God's promise, and therefore ask for the blessing of the Church. Some consider this very request, which occasionally even leads to a request for a formal marriage, to express esteem for the 'institution' of marriage as a covenant for life that is made binding by a formally-concluded bond.

**B.8.9.** Acts of blessing for same-sex couples are controversial in the Church. Separate rituals and acts of blessing therefore can and must be found for other ways of life than marriage - despite the unfavourable judgment of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of

15 March 2021. This will support not only loving couples, but also all those relatives and friends who accompany them on their journey through life.

On the one hand, it is argued that a formal blessing affirms a relationship in which a form of sexuality is practised that is still fundamentally considered a “grave sin” by the Magisterium of the Church. In addition, blessing same-sex couples is said to constitute too close a parallel to the act of blessing a marriage, and thus to pose a risk of confusion. The argument goes that it must always be made clear that marriage between a man and a woman is the only legitimate place for mutual sexuality. The recognition of the value of same-sex relationships that is called for could not be derived from marriage. For this is said to be reserved for the sacramentally-founded covenant between a man and a woman for life.

On the other hand, it is emphasised that the Church should not and may not deny to committed partnerships God’s succour as promised in the blessing. God’s succour is said to encompass all relationships - in particular those which, in addition to loving affection and reliable support, are also lived in exclusivity and faithfulness. It is true that a marriage established in the sacramental celebration of a wedding, and marriage becoming a sacramental reality existing over the whole lifespan, should be reserved for a covenant between a woman and a man. However, this should not lead to all symbolic acknowledgement of other ways of life being withheld. Such acknowledgement is due to same-sex partnerships not as a derived (partial) mode of marriage, but on an intrinsic basis. Independent rituals and acts of blessing therefore could and must be found for other ways of life than marriage.

## **Principle 8**

Marriage remains the most frequently chosen form of relationship in our society. Especially in the shape of Christian marriage, it is much more than a sexual partnership. As a covenant for life between two Christians, its orientation towards exclusivity and unconditionality opens up a reliable sense of security because it is not subject to any arbitrary time limits. It can thus foster confidence in a future in which joy and hope can occur just as sorrow and fear. Trust in God’s salvific acts does not rule out painful failures. But it does encompass trust in the presence of a God who accompanies the lives of all people through life with His goodness and care, and who surprisingly reveals new chances of success, especially in seemingly hopeless situations. Same-sex partnerships seeking to take the risk of a permanent, commitment-based life together also draw on such trust. Therefore, they too should be able to see themselves as placed under the blessing of God, expressly granted by the Church, and live from it. This also applies to people who enter into a new partnership after a marriage has failed.

## **B.9. Conscientiously shaping one’s own sexuality in the midst of the community of the faithful**

**B.9.1.** In the follow-up to the Encyclical letter *Humanae vitae*, the “*Königstein Declaration*” already referred to the conscientious personal decision of spouses to use “artificial methods of birth control”. It thus follows the tradition of both the Bible and of the Church, which assigns to the conscience of each person the central position of a responsible way of life, and which

was again brought to bear by the Second Vatican Council: As the Pastoral Constitution of the most recent Council summarises the doctrinal tradition of the Church, “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.” (GS 16)

**B.9.2.** The fact that a personal, conscience-based judgment always binds each person in terms of his or her conduct in life - irrespective of any possible error - is undisputed. What is occasionally disputed is what contribution the Church’s Magisterium makes to the formation of conscience. On the one hand, it is pointed out that the Church’s Magisterium basically trusts people to make a free judgment guided by their conscience. The task of the Magisterium is said to lie in supporting the discerning process of conscience. It needs “outside help, so to speak”<sup>13</sup> so that it may rightly recognise what is morally true. In this respect, the Pope does not lay down any external commandments, but only acts as a mediator in the birth of the true knowledge of conscience. On the other hand, it is pointed out that the Second Vatican Council remains within the doctrinal tradition of the Church when it holds to another path of the discerning of conscience: The Council considers the ‘voice of God’ to be audible in conscience: “In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.”. And adds: “In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.” (GS 16)

**B.9.3.** The invocation of the unconditional binding nature of a deeply-personal judgment of conscience however absolves no one of the duty to provide, again and again, factual justifications that are based on good reasons. Conscience is not a bastion behind which a person can hide away from all questioning and critical comments. The same also applies to human sexuality - in particular when one’s judgment of conscience leads to actions which affect others and may wound their dignity. There is a need for constant formation of conscience, for which not least the Church’s community and professional-pedagogical support (sex education, etc.) bear a great responsibility. Last but not least, the significance of spiritual guidance should also be mentioned here. In case of doubt, the Church recommends to all faithful the experience of the liberating and reconciling power of the Sacrament of Penance. Catechetical instruction, or the constant reminder of the fundamental orientation points and values of sexual morals, also have a role to play here: first and foremost, the primacy of love, which allows human sexuality to mature into a physical language of love. Derived from this is in particular for example the insistence on the fidelity and exclusivity of genital sexuality and on the consensual nature of sexual contacts between adults; disapproval of any exploitation of one-sided dependences - here in particular between minors and adults -, or the unequivocal condemnation of sexual violence, invasive behaviour and all forms of humiliation<sup>14</sup>.

**B.9.4.** In this sense, the Magisterium also guides the faithful in their formation of conscience, but it cannot take its place: “We [the Magisterium] have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.” (AL 37) The Magisterium may rightly expect from all the faithful the Christian obedience owed to the traditions and teachings of the Church - also in questions of moral conduct (cf. can. 212 CIC). But it is never blind obedience that dispenses with its own respon-

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<sup>13</sup> Josef Ratzinger, *Conscience and Truth*. (1990).

<sup>14</sup> References to relevant passages of the CCC.

sibility for the knowledge of what is morally right and true, and takes refuge in the exculpatory arms of an authority. According to the Church's teaching and to canon law, it is in fact always an obedience "conscious of their own responsibility" (ebd.). This responsibility consists of "freedom which is obedient to a person's own insight and conscience"<sup>15</sup>.

## Principle 9

We see sexuality as a task for all individuals. In the Christian perspective, it is under the salvific promise of God: His grace also enables us to grow to exercise our sexuality in a responsible way. We have to answer for it to ourselves, to our fellow human beings, and to God. In this we define ourselves as conscientious Christians and empathetic, relationally-rich fellow human beings. It is the task of the Church, of the Church's Magisterium, as well as of the community of all faithful, to accompany one another in this conscientiousness and in living responsible lives as a whole. Large numbers of aspects of the Church's sexual teaching are therefore indispensable as points of orientation for Christian life and relationships: in particular the commandment of love, which we always owe to one another (cf. Rom 13:8); the insistence on fidelity and commitment in sexuality shared with one another, and on the consensual nature of sexual contacts between adults; disapproval of any exploitation of one-sided dependences - here in particular between minors and adults -, or the unequivocal condemnation of sexual violence, invasive behaviour and all forms of humiliation.

### B.10. Free to dare to love unconditionally

**B.10.1.** A central message of a 'New Life' in Jesus Christ has been handed down to us by the Apostle Paul: For freedom Christ set us free (Gal 5.1). It is a freedom that liberates us from fearing for ourselves; a freedom that sets us free for others; a freedom in which we experience God's unconditional love and let it shine through our love for others; a freedom that transforms our hearts and sets us free for others. The 'transformed heart' which is always allowed to experience anew the unconditional love of God can itself become the source of love for others - a love that addresses the other(s) as *other(s)* and not as a mere extension of its own ego, desire for power or will to satisfy its own or others' self-centred interests. This means sin as a condition: bent over, turned away from what is 'other', and thus from the One who is completely 'other', that is from God. The freedom for which Christ has set us free is thus freedom from this 'sin as a condition' of our life which itself inevitably manifests itself repeatedly in culpable ('sinful') acts and deeds. God's incarnate love kindles a power (*'dynamis'*) in people who become immersed in this salvific and liberating reality which unites and lends concrete form. This power unfolds a dynamic that permits people to mature authentically and holistically, and sanctifies them in it. Human sexuality is not unaffected by this. It is integrated into God's love, which communicates itself in and through individuals' love for other people. From this perspective, human sexuality reveals itself as a magnificent life-giving force which attracts people pleurably and encourages them to enter into relationships with

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<sup>15</sup> Gerhard L. Müller: *Was ist kirchlicher Gehorsam? Zur Ausübung von Autorität in der Kirche*. In: *Cath* 44 (1990), 26-48. 28.

one another - in the broad spectrum of its linguistic forms: in the fleetingness of a loving gaze (AL 128), as well as in the profound intimacy of sexual union. In all this, the creatively loving interaction of interpersonal sexuality becomes participation in God's life-giving, creative love, and thus in God's salvific and liberating presence.

**B.10.2.** Of course, this profound conviction of faith must not lead to idealisations of interpersonal ways of life. The reality of God forms our ideal; what is real, on the other hand, is the reality that we encounter in our lives - always also permeated by weaknesses and inadequacies. What is real is the permanently fragmentary nature of our lives. That is why idealisations of specific forms of human relationship are not infrequently experienced as a burden because they obscure the prospect of possibilities for growth. The danger of idealisation exists for all forms of co-habitation, including for the way of life that is highly valued in the Church, namely marriage. This is why *Amoris laetitia* warns against an "excessive idealisation" of marriage (AL 36). It can also blind us to all the dangers and pathologies that can occur in the intimate setting of marriage and family. Countless children and adults experience sexual, physical and/or psychological violence, also and particularly in a supposedly ideal way of life.

**B.10.3.** In the interpretation of the Apostle Paul, the freedom for which Christ has set us free includes this: 'freedom from the law'. This does *not* mean that people who are *in Christ* could detach themselves from all normative obligations and live in uninhibited freedom ('libertinage') - in an awareness that God's promise of His salvific and liberating presence applies unconditionally. This 'only' means that one cannot earn or does not have to earn God's nearness by living a life that is as sober as possible, and thus abiding by the rules. The Pauline freedom from the law implies the promise that, with the assurance of God's salvific and liberating nearness, it is possible, again and again, to take the risk of life-embracing love without having to despair of one's own weaknesses and mistakes or those of others. And that is indeed directly liberating: accepting the reality of one's own existence - including its potential for salvific change - without being crushed by the romanticisation of an ideality.

**B.10.4.** Our life is subject to the proviso of the fragmentary - but also with the promise of God's unconditional love. The outflow of this love is His all-preceding goodness and His unlimited mercy. God's mercy wishes to take shape in the actions of all people, and especially also of the Church. But here it comes up against man-made barriers again and again: "We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel. It is true, for example, that mercy does not exclude justice and truth, but first and foremost we have to say that mercy is the fullness of justice and the most radiant manifestation of God's truth." (AL 311). Mercy not only reflects God's goodness, which forgives human mistakes and inadequacies and makes new beginnings possible, again and again. Christian mercy stands above all for a sphere of carefully-nurtured growth. It is about growing to live life responsibly, including its physical sexuality. This is a process which requires patience, and it is the only path to gradual developments; it initiates as well as guides and promotes them<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> This is what John Paul II meant when he said with a view to the sexuality of people with mental disabilities: "Instead, the sexual dimension is a constitutive dimension of the human being as such, created in the image of the God of Love and called from the outset to find fulfilment in the encounter with others and in communion. The premise for the emotional-sexual education of disabled persons

## Principle 10

All people are called to holiness. Holiness and perfection are part of a common growth process, initiated by God Himself (cf. Eph 5:27). Holiness stands for the promise of growing steadily in a successful life, with God's salvific presence, until it reaches flawless heavenly perfection through the mercy of God's choosing and redeeming. The freedom for which Christ has set us free (Gal 5:1) is freedom from the compulsion to assert ourselves towards others through egoistic self-centredness, or to justify ourselves before God through a seemingly flawless, outwardly law-abiding lifestyle. It is freedom to be able to engage in the ventures of love and committed partnerships, as well as in responsibly shaping our sexuality. It is also freedom to be able to really enter into a partnership of marriage that is borne out of mutual love, meant to last and to involve commitment without fear of losing oneself, and to develop this covenant for life in a spirit of curiosity. Christian freedom is always also the freedom to be able to truly dedicate oneself, because we are freed from the constraints of an ideal and perfect humanity. Therefore we must *and can* refrain from all instances of idealisation. Instead, we can *and must* carefully respect the realities of people's lives today and hold out to them, in the midst of their concrete circumstances, the promise of a successful and abundant life - including sexuality that takes as its standard the God-given dignity and uniqueness of each individual person.

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is inherent in the conviction that their need for love is at least as great as anyone else's. They too need to love and to be loved, they need tenderness, closeness and intimacy. (...) Despite the damage to the mind and the interpersonal dimension, disabled people seek authentic relationships in which they can find appreciation and recognition as persons. The experience of certain Christian communities has shown that an intense and stimulating community life, continuous and discreet educational support, the fostering of friendly contacts with properly trained people, the habit of channelling instincts and developing a healthy sense of modesty as respect for their own personal privacy, often succeeds in restoring the emotional balance of persons with mental disabilities and can lead them to live enriching, fruitful and satisfying interpersonal relationships." John Paul II (2004): Message to the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person.