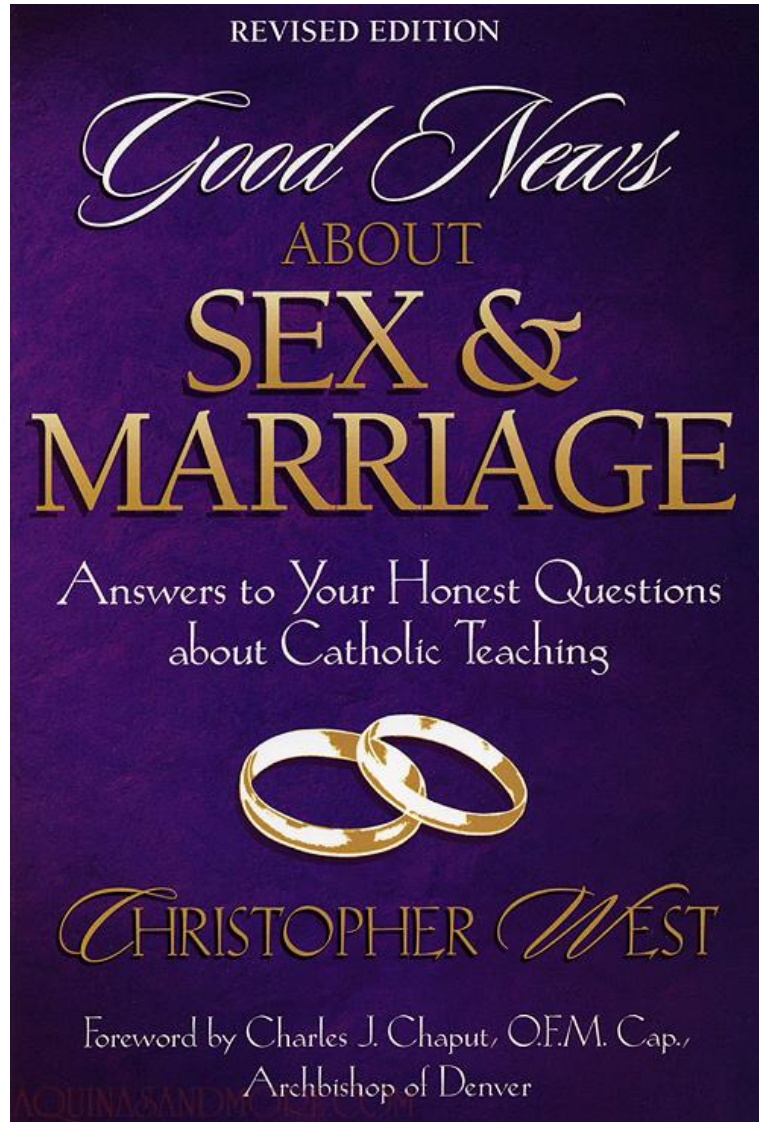


**A Summary of Good News about Sex and Marriage:
Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching
by Christopher West**



***Good News about Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest
Questions about Catholic Teaching, Christopher West***

Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Publications, 2000.

ISBN: 1-56955-214-2

Summary by Theresa English, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd.

[You can purchase the full text at Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

About the Author

Raised Catholic, Christopher West almost left the Church over the issue of contraception. But he discovered John Paul II's Theology of the Body and has since become a well-known promoter, educator, and speaker on this life-changing subject. He is a graduate of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. He has worked in the Archdiocese of Denver as the Director of the Office of Marriage and Family and is currently a member of several theological institutes. He has given talks all over the world and keeps up a busy speaking schedule. He, his wife, and three children live in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

General Overview

In *Good News about Sex and Marriage*, Christopher West has “gathered together questions and objections from single adults, engaged couples, newly married couples, couples who have been married ten, twenty, even forty or more years; from Catholics, Protestants, and unbelievers; from those who are happily and unhappily married, and from those who have suffered the pain of divorce” (15). Theological questions such as the Sacramentality of marriage and pastoral questions, such as how to cope with a lesbian in the family, are all answered in the light of John Paul II's work of the Theology of the Body.

Chapter One: The Great Mystery: *Laying the Foundation*

This book begins with the Book of Genesis, where we read that “God created humanity in his image and likeness specifically as male and female (Gn 1:27)” This means that men and women are to love each other as God, the Trinity, loves Himself, that is, in mutual self-giving love. “Thus sexual intercourse itself is meant to participate in the very life and love of God. Sexual intercourse reveals (i.e. makes visible) the invisible mystery of God.” (19)

A husband and wife “also image the love between God and all humanity... [Christian marriage is] a living sign that truly communicates and participates in the union of Christ and the Church” (20). West shows how Ephesians 5 applies to Christ and the Church and points out that we become “one flesh” (Eph 5:31) with Christ in the Eucharist. Marital love is thus a symbol of three realities: (1) the love of the Trinity, (2) the love between God and humanity and, (3) the love of Christ and the Church.

In the second creation account in Genesis, Adam realizes he is created for love. His call to love cannot be lived out with animals. This is what Adam discovers in naming the animals and this is why God then creates Eve. “How does Adam know that she's the one he can love? Remember that they were naked. It was their *bodies* that revealed the spiritual truth of their persons.” This ability of the physical person to express love as gift is what John Paul II calls the “nuptial meaning of the body” (22).

But enter Satan. He caused Adam and Eve to doubt the love of God, who, in His care, gave man limitations. After original sin, “Adam and Eve no longer saw in each other's bodies the revelation of God's plan of love. They each now saw the other's body as a thing to be used for their own selfish desires.” (24) The experience of lust and of shame entered the world. Now the relationship between men and women, as our experience can attest, is distorted.

“Christ came to restore God's original intention of love in the world. This is the good news of the Gospel,” (26) If we really believe in the power of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, “we can experience the redemption of our sexuality,” (26) we can live the Church's good but challenging teaching on human sexuality.

Chapter Two: Who Says? *Church Authority and Other Preliminary Questions*

The infallibility of the Church is a blessing. Since the Church cannot proclaim lies, we know we are following God's way if we follow her. "We *are* all free to make our own choices. The Church never *imposes* her teaching. But the Church does boldly and fiercely *propose* her teaching to the world as the truth." (37) We cannot do whatever we please, but must rather let the Church help form our consciences.

Other questions in this chapter deal more directly with the Church in regards to sex: What do celibate old men know about sex? And, *the Church should stay out of my bedroom*, are two further objections that West addresses. The question, "**Why is there such a widespread notion that the Church is down on sex?**" receives the lengthiest answer. In sum, "It seems that the misinterpretation of the esteem accorded the celibate vocation, as well as misinterpretation of the Church's strict moral code," are the two primary reasons (38).

Chapter Three: What are you Saying "I Do" to? *The Basics of Marriage in the Church*

This is an important chapter since "much confusion and resistance to the Church's teaching about sex stem from a misunderstanding of the meaning of marriage" (45).

"Marriage is the intimate, exclusive, indissoluble communion of life and love entered by man and woman at the design of the Creator for purposes of their own good and the procreation and education of children; this covenant between baptized persons has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament" (46).

Christopher West dissects this definition.

To understand marriage, we have to understand Sacraments. Sacraments embody the invisible. They are a sensual encounter with the divine. Sexual intercourse "symbolizes and reveals" (49) our call to share in the Trinitarian life of God. Moreover, "the love of a husband and wife is not merely a symbol of the love of Christ and the Church. For the baptized, it's a *real* participation in it!" (49)

Divorce, annulments, and questions regarding marriage validity are regarded.

In order for the marriage of Catholics to be validly established, spouses must:

(1) not have any impediments to marriage; (2) follow the proper form of the sacrament; (3) have the proper capacity to exchange consent and do so freely and unconditionally; and (4) consent to what the Church intends by marriage, that is: *fidelity, indissolubility, and openness to children*. (51)

The following question is an interesting one. "**Marriage is just as much a spiritual union as a physical one. So what if you can't have sex?**" (56) The answer lies in a refutation of the heresy of dualism. Catholicism teaches that the person is body and soul. This unity of body and soul is what allows Sacraments to exist.

Chapter Four: What to do Before "I Do": *Chastity Outside of Marriage*

Addressing the do's and don'ts as it does, West begins this chapter by asserting that chastity, rather than repressing us, leads us to appreciate the goodness of sexuality. We should seek to live love, not seek to push the line, though lines can be helpful. West gives some physical guidelines and, rephrasing John Paul II, also draws a line in the heart: love people and do not use them.

So, why not have sex before marriage? Sex is the expression of the irrevocable marriage bond. Unless sexual intercourse is a renewal of the marriage vows, it's a lie. Living together before marriage does not increase one's chances for a happy marriage; rather it roots in one a behavior and a mentality that is anti-marriage. After addressing masturbation and pornography, West brings one Beatitude into a different light: "We must pray for the virtue of purity, which John Paul II describes as the glory of God revealed through the body. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God'—in the body (see Mt. 5:8)" (85).

Chapter Five: "I Do"-ing It: *Chastity Within Marriage*

"One of the main points of this book so far has been to demonstrate that sex is only sex to the extent that it participates in the "I do" of wedding vows" (88). "For the married person... [a]ny type of behavior that would contradict the free, total, faithful, and potentially fruitful self-giving to which the spouses commit at the altar would be... a violation of chastity" (89). After explaining this, West goes on to answer technical questions about sexual intercourse, a question regarding a wife's submission, and the question, "Why does sex feel dirty?" Sex feels dirty, West responds, often because of our impure, real-life encounters with sex. The good news is that God can restore us if we let him.

Chapter Six: "I Do...Not": *Contraception*

In the introduction to this chapter, Christopher West tells about his straying from and his return to the Church and his struggle to come to grips with contraception. Contraception, he states, is also *the* point of departure between Catholicism and popular culture. While our culture teaches that using contraception is the *responsible* thing to do, the Catholic Church stands as the lone voice saying it's *always* wrong and terribly damaging to marriage and society. (106)

Either you accept the Catholic Church's teaching regarding contraception or you destroy the meaning of marriage and sex.

In an eye-opening paragraph, West points out that "*contraception was not invented to prevent pregnancy.*" (108) Pregnancy prevention is called abstinence. Contraception was invented so that people could have sex whenever they felt like it, and it "creates a culture of people unable to say no to their hormones" (108). To contracept is to withhold one's fertility, contradicting the totality of the wedding vows. Moreover, since marital intercourse is meant to image God's love, contracepted intercourse becomes an anti-symbol. The contracepting couple excludes the Holy Spirit who is "[t]he Lord and Giver of Life" (109).

Natural Family Planning (NFP), when used to avoid pregnancy for just reasons (and West does address what constitutes just reasons), is not the same as contraception. The former works with the *God-given* cycle of a woman's fertility and practices true love. The latter takes matters into its own hands in order to stifle fertility.

West addresses the issue of contraception and women's liberation. He talks about the link between contraception, abortion and other social ills. "Oriented *against* love and life, [contraception] builds a culture of utility and death" (121). On the other hand, "[F]ar from damaging marriage, practicing NFP is marriage insurance" (128).

Chapter Seven: "I Do," But Not As God Intends: *Reproductive Technologies*

The Church's basic moral principle concerning reproductive technologies is this: If a given medical intervention *assists* the marital embrace to achieve its natural end, it can be morally acceptable, even praiseworthy. But if it *replaces* the marital embrace as the means by which the child is conceived, it's not in keeping with God's intention for human life (132).

This definition helps us understand the difference between medicine and reproductive technology; one assists, the other replaces. The line between assistance and replacement is not always clear.

Reproductive technologies, the separating of babies and sex, leads to the destruction of unwanted lives; promotes a utilitarian mentality wherein children are viewed as products; offends the dignity of the child and of the spouses; denies humans their place as procreators and denies God the role of creator that is His. But regardless of how a child is conceived, every child is loved by God and must be loved by us.

Couples who believe they are infertile should learn NFP. “Many [couples]...realized after learning that it was simply a matter of timing” (140). Truly infertile couples may consider the wonderful choice of adoption. Their suffering is real, but “suffering is *spiritually* fertile” (141).

Chapter Eight: When Saying “I Do” Is Impossible: *Same-Sex Attraction*

Contraception and homosexuality are linked. After all, “[t]here’s little moral difference between a genital act that a married couple *renders* infertile...and homosexual behavior.” (149)

Millions of people are affected by the issue of homosexuality. While these people need to be treated with love and compassion, loving the sinner cannot justify the sin.

God created men as men and women as women. This means that “no one *is* gay. That is, no one is *ontologically* (in his or her very being) oriented towards the same sex.” (147) Because of the way our bodies were created to mirror the love and life of God, and because homosexuals *cannot* unite sexually, “we can conclude that every human person is ontologically oriented towards the *opposite* sex.” (147) Same-sex attraction is a disorder and generally involuntary, yet we must try to conquer even the attraction to things that are wrong. For those struggling to overcome homosexuality, becoming who they were created to be “*ain’t easy*... [Transformation] comes only if a person is willing to pick up his or her cross *every day*” (151). West offers some tips for those who struggle, such as taking Christ as the model of manhood and getting the help of a good spiritual director.

Chapter Nine: Saying “I Do” to God Alone: *Sex and the Celibate Vocation*

“Marriage, sex, and the celibate vocation are much more interrelated than we might first think. They’re also interdependent. When each is given proper esteem and respect, the delicate balance among them is maintained.” (159) Yes, the celibate vocation is higher than marriage, “in the sense that heaven is better or higher than earth” (161). Marriage is only a Sacrament, a sign of the life we are called to with God. Celibates skip the sign in favor of the destination. “Both vocations, then, in their own particular way, are a fulfillment of the call to ‘nuptial love’ revealed through our bodies” (161). All of us are called to be spouse and parent. Priests, for example, *are* fathers.

Men and women are equal, but with equality that does not mean sameness. The priestly vocation is not for women. The priest acts *in persona Christi*, especially, as John Paul II says, in the celebration of the Eucharist. “Priests efficaciously symbolize Christ’s giving up His body for His Bride so that she can conceive life ‘in the Holy Spirit.’ Only men can do this.” (164) “[A] woman is not an accurate symbol of the Bridegroom.” (165)

Christopher West closes his book with a look at the marriage of Mary and Joseph as “the union of earthly and heavenly marriage” (166) and with a prayer that “this book has been of service to you in your journey toward this eternal embrace” (167).