

Avoiding Fatal Attractions

A MAN, EATING LUNCH AT A RESTAURANT, NOTICES AN ATTRACTIVE woman at another table and is immediately drawn to her beauty. His heart stirs, and he finds himself wanting to see her again.

This is not the first time she has caught his eye, and his attraction to her is more than physical. She works for the same large company, and he has been drawn to her warm personality, her cheerful smile and her kindness toward others. He is taken in by her personality as much as by her natural beauty.

Basic attractions like this happen all the time between men and women. Sometimes we feel them very quickly. A man standing in line at a store may immediately be attracted to a woman walking by. A woman at church may notice a man praying after Mass and wonder about him the rest of the day. Sometimes, deeply felt attractions take longer to develop. A man and a woman who were friends or colleagues for several months may find themselves increasingly attracted to one another, emotionally and physically, over time.

In his book *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II analyzes the anatomy of an attraction. What is really happening when men and women find themselves attracted to one another?

The Anatomy of an Attraction

Let's begin by explaining a few of John Paul II's terms. At the most basic level, to attract someone means to be regarded by that person as a good (74). In turn, to be attracted to someone else means to perceive some value in that person, such as beauty, virtue or personality, and to respond to that value. This attraction involves the senses, the mind, the will, the emotions and desires.

The reason men and women are so easily attracted to each other is because of the sexual urge. Recall that the sexual urge is the tendency to seek the opposite sex. With the sexual urge, we are particularly oriented toward the physiological and psychological qualities of a person of the opposite sex—their body and their masculinity or femininity. John Paul II calls these physical and psychological qualities the *sexual values* of a person.

Therefore, a person is easily attracted to someone of the opposite sex in two ways: physically and emotionally. First, a man is attracted physically to the body of a woman, and a woman is attracted to the body of a man. The pope calls this attraction to the body *sensuality*.

Second, a man is also attracted emotionally to the femininity of a woman, and the woman is emotionally attracted to the masculinity of a man. John Paul II calls this emotional attraction *sentimentality*.

In the next chapter, we will consider the role of the emotions and sentimentality. Here, we will focus on the sensual attraction men and women experience for one another.

Sense and Sensuality

As we have seen, sensuality is concerned with the sexual value connected to the body of a person of the opposite sex. Such an attraction is not bad in itself because the sexual urge is meant to draw us not simply toward the body, but the body of a person. Hence, an initial sensual reaction is meant to orient us toward personal communion, not just bodily union. It can serve as an ingredient of authentic love if it is integrated with the higher, nobler aspects of love such as good will, friendship, virtue or self-giving commitment (108).

Nevertheless, the pope says that sensual attractions, on their own, can lead to great dangers. First, "...sensuality by itself is not love, and may very easily become its opposite" (108). The reason sensuality can be so dangerous is that, on its own, it can easily fall into utilitarianism. When only sensuality is stirred, we experience the body of the other person as a potential object of enjoyment. We reduce the person to their physical qualities—their good looks, their body—and view the person primarily in terms of the pleasure we can experience from those qualities.

What is most tragic here is that sensual desire, which is meant to orient us toward communion with the person of the opposite sex, can actually keep us from loving

that person. A man, for example, may sensuously ponder in his mind or actively seek the body of a woman as a means for sexual gratification. And he may do this without any real interest in her as a person. This focus on her sexual values keeps him from responding to her value as a person. This is why John Paul II says sensuality by itself is blind to the person. "Sensuality in itself has a 'consumer orientation'—it is directed primarily and immediately towards a 'body': it touches the person only indirectly, and tends to avoid direct contact" (105).

Love Chocolate?

Second, the pope says sensuality on its own not only misses the person, it even fails to grasp the true beauty of the body. He explains how beauty is experienced through contemplation, not the stirring desire to exploit. When contemplating the splendor of a landscape, a sunset, a piece of music or a work of art, we are taken in by the beauty. This contemplation of beauty brings peace and joy. This is very different from a consumer attitude to exploit an object for pleasure—an attitude that brings unrest, impatience and an intense desire for satisfaction.

Perhaps an analogy will be helpful here. I once had the opportunity to see the work of a "chocolate artist." The artist had on display dozens of elaborate sculptures of ships, flowers, birds, towers and buildings. What made these large sculptures so impressive is that they were all made of black, brown and white chocolate.

There are two different attitudes I could have toward these chocolate sculptures. On one hand, I could gaze

upon them as works of art, admiring their beauty and allowing myself to be taken in by their immensity, their perfect proportions, the intricate details and the workmanship, marveling that these delicate masterpieces were made out of sugar and cocoa.

On the other hand, I could ignore the fact that these sculptures are beautiful pieces of art to be contemplated, and view them primarily as candies to be devoured—delicious chocolates that would satisfy my cravings. This latter approach, however, would be a degradation of the confectioner's masterpieces, reducing them to mere objects to be exploited for my tasting pleasure.

Similarly, sensuality on its own fails to see the human body as a beautiful masterpiece of God's creation, for it reduces the body to being an object to be exploited to satisfy one's own sensuous cravings. "Thus, sensuality really interferes with apprehension of the beautiful, even of bodily, sensual beauty, for it introduces a consumer attitude to the object: 'the body' is then regarded as a potential object of exploitation" (105-106).

Michelangelo and *Playboy*

This also helps explain one big difference between pornography and good classical art that depicts the nakedness of a person. Both *Playboy* magazine and art in the Vatican Museum, for example, may present the sexual organs of the human body. In fact, some in the pornography industry say their pictures are just another form of art, portraying the beauty of the body. Some

defenders of pornography have even asked why the Church condemns pornography but allows nakedness depicted in its some of its own museums!

The pornography of *Playboy*, however, does not draw attention to the *beauty* of the human body. It draws attention to the body as an object to be used for one's own sexual satisfaction. In the end, it is a reduction of the human person to the sexual value of the body. On the contrary, good art depicting the body as beautiful is not a reduction of the person, but an enlarging of the person, leading us to contemplate the mystery of the human person as a masterpiece in God's creation.

Good art leads us to a peaceful contemplation of the true, the good and the beautiful, including the truth, goodness and beauty of the human body. Pornography, on the other hand, does not lead us to such contemplation, but instead stirs in us a sensuous craving for the body of another person as an object to be exploited for our own pleasure. Put simply, there probably aren't many people who have fallen into sin by gazing upon Michelangelo's famous portrayals of Adam and Eve in the Sistine chapel. But there probably aren't many who have *not* fallen into lustful thoughts when looking at pornographic pictures.¹

Enslaved to Sensuality

A third reason John Paul II is concerned about sensuality is that if we leave this area of our lives unchecked, we will become enslaved to everything that stimulates our sensual desire. For example, a man given in to sensuality

finds his will so weakened that he is led around by whatever sexual values appear most immediately to his senses. Whenever he encounters a woman dressed a certain way, he cannot help but glance at her with impure thoughts. Whenever he sees images of women on TV, on the Internet or in magazines, he cannot resist looking at them, as he hankers after the sexual value of the woman and wants to enjoy the pleasure he can derive from his glances.

Especially in a highly sexualized culture like ours, we are constantly bombarded with sexual images exploiting our sensuality, getting us to focus on the bodies of members of the opposite sex. Indeed, we can easily find ourselves enslaved, bouncing from one sexual value to the next. As John Paul II points out, sensuality on its own "...is characteristically fickle, turning wherever it finds that value, whenever a 'possible object of enjoyment' appears" (108).

"I Can Look But Can't Touch"

Furthermore, in one of his most profound points in this section, the pope warns that we can use a person's body even when that person is not physically present. We do not need to see, hear or touch another to exploit the other's body for our own sensuous pleasure. Through memory and imagination, we "...can make contact even with the 'body' of a person not physically present, experiencing the value of that body to the extent that it constitutes a 'possible object of enjoyment'" (108-109).

We live in a culture where many people say to themselves, "What's wrong with having lustful thoughts about someone else? I'm not hurting anyone when I do that!" Even some married people may think, "I'm not committing adultery when I look at another person this way. I'm still faithful to my spouse. I can look; I just can't touch." However, we must remember Christ's strong words about this matter: "Every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

John Paul II's insights help explain what is really happening when men and women look lustfully at each other, and why consenting to impure thoughts and sexual fantasies is always morally wrong and so degrading to the other person. In the end, the one who is looked at lustfully is not treated as a person, but as a body to be exploited for someone else's pleasure.

Yet, as we have seen, sensuality alone is not love. It can be raw material for the development of true love but this yearning for the sexual value of the body must be supplemented by other nobler elements of love, such as good will, friendship, virtue, total commitment and self-giving love (themes we will consider in subsequent chapters). If sensuality is not carefully integrated with these higher elements of love, sensual desire will be harmful for a relationship. In fact, it can destroy love between a man and woman, and it can even prevent love from ever developing in the first place.