

Text of Pontiff's Talk on Adultery

Following is the text of Pope John Paul's general audience address as it appeared in the Oct. 6 issue of the English language edition of "L'Osservatore Romano":

We arrive in our analysis at the third part of Christ's enunciation in the Sermon on the Mount. The first part was: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" The second: "But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully," is grammatically connected with the third part: "has already committed adultery with her in his heart."



The method applied here, which is that of dividing; of "splitting" Christ's enunciation into three parts which follow one another, may seem artificial. However, when we seek the ethical meaning in its totality, the division of the text used by us may, precisely, be useful, provided that it is applied not only in a disjunctive, but in a conjunctive way. And that is what we intend to do. Each of the distinct parts has its own specific content and connotations, and this is precisely what we wish to stress by dividing the text. But it must be pointed out at the same time that each of the parts is explained in direct relationship with the others. That refers in the first place to the principal semantic elements, by which the enunciation constitutes a whole. Here are these elements: to commit adultery; to desire, to commit adultery in the body; to commit adultery in the heart. It would be particularly difficult to establish the ethical sense of "desiring" without the element indicated here last, that is "adultery in the heart." The preceding analysis has already taken this element into consideration to a certain extent; however, a fuller understanding of the part: "to commit adultery in the heart" is possible only after a special analysis.

As we have already mentioned at the beginning, it is a question here of establishing the ethical sense. Christ's enunciation in Mt. 5:27-28 starts from the commandment: "do not commit adultery." In order to show how it must be understood and put into practice, so that the "justice" that God Yahweh wished as Legislator may abound in it: in order that it may abound to a greater extent than appeared from the interpretation and casuistry of the Old Testament doctors. If Christ's words in this sense aim at constructing the new ethos (and on the basis of the same commandments), as well as the prohibition, "do not commit adultery," also includes the prohibition, "do not covet your neighbor's wife." Christ does not nullify one prohibition with regard to the other. Although he speaks of "desire," he aims at a deeper clarification of "adultery." It is significant that after mentioning the prohibition, "do not commit adultery," as is well known to his listeners, subsequently in the course of his enunciation he changes his style and the logical structure from the normative to the narrative-affirmative. When he said: "every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart," he describes an interior fact, whose reality can easily be understood by his listeners. At the same time, through the fact thus described and qualified, he indicates how the commandment: "do not commit adultery" must be understood and put into practice, so that it will lead to the "justice" willed by the Legislator.

In this way we have reached the expression "has committed adultery in his heart," the key-expression, as it seems, to understand its correct ethical meaning. This expression is at the same time the principal source to reveal the essential values of the new ethos: the ethos of the Sermon on the Mount. As often happens in the Gospel, here, too, we come up against a certain paradox. How, in fact, can "adultery" take place without "committing adultery," that is, without the exterior act which makes it possible to identify the act forbidden by the Law? We have seen how much the

casuistry of the "doctors of the Law" devoted itself to defining this very problem. But even apart from this casuistry, it seems clear that adultery can be identified only "in the flesh," that is, when the two, the man and the woman who unite with each other in such a way as to become one flesh, are not legal spouses, husband and wife. What meaning, then, can "adultery in the heart" have? Is it not, perhaps, just a metaphorical expression, used by the Master to highlight the sinfulness of lust?

If we admitted this semantic reading of Christ's enunciation, it would be necessary to reflect deeply on the ethical consequences that would be derived from it, that is, on the conclusions about the ethical regularity of the behavior. Adultery takes place when the man and the woman who unite with each other so as to become one flesh, that is, in the way characteristic of spouses, are not legal spouses. The detecting of adultery as a sin committed "in the body" is closely and exclusively united with the "exterior" act, with living together in a conjugal way, which refers also to the status of the acting persons, recognized by society. In the case in question, this status is improper and does not authorize such an act (hence, precisely, the term, "adultery").

Going on to the second part of Christ's enunciation (that is, the one in which the new ethos begins to take shape) it would be necessary to understand the expression: "every one who looks lustfully," in exclusive reference to persons according to their civil status, that is, their status recognized by society, whether or not they are husband and wife. Here the questions begin to multiply. Since there can be no doubt about the fact that Christ indicates the sinfulness of the interior act of lust expressed through a way of looking at every woman who is not the wife of the one who so looks at her, therefore we can and even must ask ourselves if, with the same expression, Christ admits and approves such a look, such an interior act of lust, directed towards the woman who is the wife of the man who so looks at her.

The following logical premise seems to be in favor of the affirmative answer to such a question: (in the case in question) only the man who is the potential subject of "adultery in the flesh" can commit "adultery in the heart." Since this subject cannot be the man-husband with regard to his own legitimate wife, therefore "adultery in the heart" cannot refer to him, but any other man can be considered guilty of it. If he is the husband, he cannot commit it with regard to his own wife. He alone has the exclusive right to "desire," to "look lustfully" at the woman who is his wife — and never can it be said that due to such an interior act he deserves to be accused of "adultery committed adultery in the heart." If by virtue of marriage he has the right to "unite with his wife," so this act can never be called "adultery." Similarly the interior act of "desire," dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount, cannot be defined "adultery in the heart."

This interpretation of Christ's words in Mt. 5: 27-28 seems to correspond to the logic of the Ten Commandments, in which, in addition to the commandment "do not commit adultery," there is also the commandment "do not covet your neighbor's wife." Furthermore, the reasoning that has been made in support of it has all the characteristics of objective

correctness and accuracy. Nevertheless, there remain good grounds for doubt whether this reasoning takes into account all the aspects of revelation as well as of the theology of the body which must be considered, especially when we wish to understand Christ's words. We have already seen previously what is the "specific weight" of this expression, how rich are the anthropological and logical implications of the one sentence in which Christ refers "to the beginning." The anthropological and theological implications of the enunciation in the Sermon on the Mount in which Christ refers to the human heart confer on the enunciation itself also a "specific weight" of its own, and at the same time determine its consistency with evangelical teaching as a whole. And therefore, we must admit that the interpretation presented above, with all its objective correctness and logical precision, requires a certain amplification and, above all, a deepening. We must remember that the reference to the human heart, expressed perhaps in a paradoxical way, comes from him who "knew what was in man." And if his words confirm the Decalogue (not only the sixth but also the ninth), at the same time they express that knowledge of man, which — as we have pointed out elsewhere — enables us to unite awareness of human sinfulness with the perspective of the "redemption of the body." This very knowledge lies at the basis of the new ethos which emerges from the words of the Sermon on the Mount.

Taking all that into consideration, we conclude that, as in understanding "adultery in the flesh" Christ criticizes the erroneous and one-sided interpretation of adultery that is derived from the failure to observe monogamy (that is marriage understood as the indefectible covenant of persons), so also in understanding "adultery in the heart" Christ takes into consideration not only the real juridical status of the man and woman in question. Christ makes the moral evaluation of the "desire" depend above all on the personal dignity itself of the man and the woman; and this has its importance both when it is a question of persons who are not married, and — perhaps even more — when they are spouses, wife and husband. From this point of view it will be useful for us to complete the analysis of the words of the Sermon on the Mount, and we will do so the next time.

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