

*"knowledge stands at the basis of the new ethos"* that emerges from the words of the Sermon on the Mount.

Taking all of this into account, we conclude that, just as in the understanding of "adultery in the flesh" Christ criticizes the erroneous and one-sided interpretation of adultery that stems 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 state of life of the man and the woman in question. Christ makes the moral evaluation of "desire" depend above all *on the personal dignity of the man and the woman*; and this is important both in the case of unmarried persons and—perhaps even more so—in the case of spouses, husband and wife. From this point of view we should complete the analysis of the words from the Sermon on the Mount, and we shall do so next time.

### 43 *General Audience of October 8, 1980* (*Insegnamenti*, 3, no. 2 [1980]: 807–11)

1. TODAY I WANT TO COMPLETE the analysis of the words Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount about "adultery" and "concupiscence" and in particular the last part of the statement, in which the "concupiscence of the look" is specifically defined as "adultery committed in the heart."

We have already shown above that these words are usually understood in the sense of desire for another's wife (that is, according to the spirit of the Decalogue's ninth commandment). It seems, however, that this interpretation—a more restricted one—can and should be extended in the light of the overall context. It seems that the moral evaluation of concupiscence (of "looking to desire"), which Christ calls "adultery committed in the heart," depends above all on the personal dignity of the man and the woman. This holds for those who are not joined in marriage and—perhaps even more so—for those who are husband and wife.

#### A Second Reading

2. Our earlier analysis of the statement in Matthew 5:27–28, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you: Whoever looks at a woman to desire her [in a reductive way]

has already committed adultery with her in his heart," shows that we must extend and above all deepen the interpretation described earlier with respect to the ethical meaning contained in the statement. Let us take a close look at the situation described by the Teacher, in which the one who "commits adultery in the heart" by an interior act of concupiscence (expressed in a look) is the man. It is significant that Christ, when he speaks about the object of this act, does not stress that she is "another's wife," a woman who is not one's own wife, but says generically, a woman. Adultery committed "in the heart" is not circumscribed by the limits of the interpersonal relation that allows one to identify adultery committed "in the flesh." It is not these limits that exclusively and essentially decide the question of adultery committed "in the heart," but the very nature of concupiscence, expressed in this case by a look, that is, by the fact that this man whom Christ uses as an example "looks to desire." Adultery "in the heart" is not committed only because the man "looks" in this way at a woman who is not his wife, but *precisely because he looks in this way at a woman. Even if he were to look in this way at the woman who is his wife, he would commit the same adultery "in the heart."*

3. This interpretation takes into account more comprehensively what was said in our whole analyses about concupiscence, and in the first place about the concupiscence of the flesh as a permanent element of man's sinfulness (*status naturae lapsae* [the state of fallen nature]). The concupiscence that arises as an interior act on this foundation (as we have attempted to show in our analysis above) changes the very intentionality of the woman's existence "for" the man by reducing the wealth of the perennial call to the communion of persons, the wealth of the deep attraction of masculinity and femininity, to the mere satisfaction of the body's sexual "urge" (which is closely related to the concept of "instinct"). Such a reduction has the effect that the person (in this case the woman) becomes for the other person (the man) above all an object for the possible satisfaction of his own sexual "urge." *In this way, a deformation takes place in the reciprocal "for," which loses its character as a communion of persons in favor of the utilitarian function.* The man who "looks" in the way described in Matthew 5:27-28 "makes use" of the woman, of her femininity, to satisfy his own "instinct." Even if he does not use her in an external act, he has already taken such an attitude in his interior when he makes this deci-

sion about a particular woman. Adultery “committed in the heart” consists precisely in this. A man can commit such adultery “in the heart” even with his own wife, if he treats her only as an object for the satisfaction of instinct.\*

4. It is not possible to reach this second reading of the words of Matthew 5:27–28 if we limit ourselves to the purely psychological interpretation of concupiscence without taking into account what constitutes its specific theological character, namely, the organic relation between concupiscence (as an act) and the concupiscence of the flesh as, so to speak, a permanent disposition that derives from human sinfulness. It seems that the purely psychological (or “sexological”) interpretation of “concupiscence” is not a sufficient basis for understanding our text from the Sermon on the Mount. On the other hand, if we take the theological interpretation as a point of reference—*without undervaluing what remains unchangeable in the first (psychological) interpretation—the second (theological) interpretation* appears to us *more complete*. In fact, it clarifies the ethical meaning of the key statement from the Sermon on the Mount to which we owe the adequate dimension of the ethos of the Gospel.

### Purity of Heart as the Fulfillment of the Commandment

5. In delineating this dimension, Christ remains faithful to the law. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17). He consequently shows how deep down it is necessary to go, how the innermost recesses of the human heart must be thoroughly revealed, so that this heart might become a place in which the law is “fulfilled.” The statement of Matthew 5:27–28, which shows the inner perspective of adultery committed “in the heart”—and in this perspective points the right way toward fulfilling the commandment

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\* Translator’s note: When this statement by John Paul II was first quoted in the Italian press, it led to an uproar that was picked up also in the international press, including major U.S. papers and networks. Most reporters failed to grasp the difference between “desire” in the positive sense and reductive concupiscent “desire” (see Index at DESIRE and translator’s notes on TOB 24:1 and TOB 25:4). In the immediately following paragraph (TOB 43:4), John Paul II points out that a merely psychological or sexological understanding of sexuality (which is the dominant understanding in our culture) will not allow one to grasp this difference.

“You shall not commit adultery”—is a singular argument for this conclusion. This statement (Mt 5:27–28) refers in fact to the sphere in which the issue is “purity of heart” (see Mt 5:8) (an expression that has a broad meaning in the Bible). Elsewhere we will have further occasion to consider how the commandment “You shall not commit adultery”—whose mode of expression and contents are a clear and severe prohibition (like the commandment “You shall not desire your neighbor’s wife,” Ex 20:17)—is fulfilled precisely by purity of heart [see TOB 50–59]. The strictness and power of the prohibition is indirectly attested by a text later in the Sermon on the Mount in which Christ speaks figuratively about “tearing out your eye” and “cutting off your hand” in case these members are a cause of sin (see Mt 5:29–30). We have pointed out earlier that the legislation of the Old Testament, although it contained many harsh punishments, did not contribute toward “fulfilling the law,” because its casuistry was marked by many compromises with the concupiscence of the flesh [see TOB 35–36:4]. Christ by contrast teaches that *one fulfills the commandment by “purity of heart,”* in which human beings cannot share *without firmness in facing* everything that has its origin in *concupiscence of the flesh*. “Purity of heart” is gained by the one who knows *how to be consistently demanding* toward his “heart”: toward his “heart” and toward his “body.”

6. The commandment “You shall not commit adultery” finds its right motive in the indissolubility of marriage, in which man and woman unite with each other in virtue of the original plan of God so that “the two become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). By its essence, adultery conflicts with this unity inasmuch as this unity corresponds to the dignity of the persons. Christ not only confirms this essential ethical meaning of the commandment, but his aim is to anchor it firmly in the very depth of the human person. The new dimension of ethos is always linked with the revelation of the depth that is called “heart” and with the liberation of the heart from “concupiscence” *so that man can shine more fully in this heart*: male and female in all the inner truth of the reciprocal “for.” Freed from the constraint and disability of the spirit, which are the result of the concupiscence of the flesh, human beings, male and female, find themselves again in the freedom of the gift, which is the condition of all life together in the truth, and, more

particularly, in the freedom of reciprocal self-gift, because both, as husband and wife, must form the sacramental unity willed, as Genesis 2:24 says, by the Creator himself.

7. What Christ demands from all his actual and potential listeners in the Sermon on the Mount clearly belongs to that interior space in which *man*—precisely the one who listens—*must rediscover the lost fullness of his humanity and want to regain it*. This fullness in the reciprocal relation of persons, of man and woman, is what the Teacher demands in Matthew 5:27–28, having in mind above all the indissolubility of marriage but also every other form of shared life of men and women, the shared life that makes up the pure and simple guiding thread of existence. Human life is by its nature “co-educational” and its dignity as well as its balance depend at every moment of history and in every place of geographic longitude and latitude on “who” she shall be for him and he for her.

The words spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount have without any doubt such a universal and deep reach. Only in this way can they be understood on the lips of him who “knew” to its final depth “what was in every man” (Jn 2:25) and who at the same time carried within himself the mystery of the “redemption of the body,” as St. Paul put it. Should we *fear* the severity of these words or rather *have confidence* in their salvific content, in their power?

At any rate, this analysis of the words Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount opens the road for further reflections that are indispensable for reaching a full awareness of “historical” man and above all of contemporary man: of his consciousness and of his “heart.”

#### 4. *The “Heart”—Accused or Called?*

**44** *General Audience of October 15, 1980*  
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1. DURING OUR MANY WEDNESDAY MEETINGS, we analyzed in detail the words in the Sermon on the Mount in which Christ addresses the human “heart.” We now realize that his words are demanding. Christ says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’