



# Men, Women, and Tenderness

by Edward P. Sri



Edward P. Sri is an Assistant Professor of Theology at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas. He is the author of or contributor to several Emmaus Road books, including *Mystery of the Kingdom* and *Catholic for a Reason I, II, and III*. His latest book, *Queen Mother*, is based on his doctoral dissertation and is now available.

All references in this column to Pope John Paul II's *Love and Responsibility* are taken from the 1993 edition, published by Ignatius Press.

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**H**olding hands, sharing an embrace or a kiss—these can be innocent expressions of love. But without great vigilance and virtue, these outward expressions can easily become a form of utilitarianism that actually ends up driving two people farther apart from each other and preventing love from fully developing.

John Paul II—then Karol Wojtyła—makes this point when he addresses the topic of “tenderness” in his book *Love and Responsibility*.

Wojtyła explains that the essence of tenderness is found “in the tendency to make one’s own the feelings and mental states of another person” (p. 201). This is a common experience in romantic relationships, as men and women feel closely involved with the inner life of their beloved, entering into the other person’s feelings and state of mind.

Tenderness also seeks outward expression. It’s not enough to have an awareness of what is going on inside the other person. One also tends to seek to communicate that sense of closeness to his beloved. “I feel the need to let the other ‘I’ know that I take his feelings and his state of mind to heart, to make this other human being feel that I am sharing it all, that I am feeling what he feels” (pp. 201–2). We thus express this tenderness through various outward actions: holding a person to one’s chest, putting one’s arms around the other, kissing the other person.

## Premature Tenderness

Tenderness may be quite selfless and innocent when it is based on concern for another person and what that person is going through interiorly. However, Wojtyła warns that outward gestures such as an embrace or a kiss can lose their altruistic character and quickly fall into utilitarianism once they are used primarily as a means to one’s own pleasure. Once “the need to gratify one’s own feelings” begins to overshadow genuine selfless concern for the other, expressions of tenderness have crossed over into egoism and will prevent love from fully developing (p. 203).

And crossing that line into egoism is something we can easily fall into, for two reasons. First, as Wojtyła reminds us, the love between men and women is driven in large part by sensuality and sentimentality, which are never fully satisfied and which are constantly demanding ever greater amounts of pleasure. Given our fallen human nature, therefore, outward expressions of tenderness may be sought more for the emotional or sensual pleasure we receive than out of a selfless desire to enter into the inner life of the other person. As Wojtyła explains, “Various forms of tenderness can easily diverge from love of the person, and stray in the direction of sensual, or at any rate, emotional egoism” (p. 205).

Second, the subjective aspects of love (the powerful emotions or sensual pleasure we experience) develop much more quickly than the objective

aspects (virtue, friendship, self-giving, responsibility). Since the emotion of love is often experienced as “a sudden and powerful explosion,” many are tempted to give or receive outward expressions of tenderness before those objective aspects of love have had a chance to develop (p. 205). And, as we’ve seen in previous reflections, those objective aspects are crucial to ensure that the relationship remains at the level of self-giving love and does not fall into utilitarianism. That’s why premature acts of tenderness are very harmful to love, for they create only “an illusion of love, a love which in reality does not exist” (p. 205).

Indeed, when we give or receive an embrace, a kiss or some other expression of tenderness prematurely—before the objective elements of love have matured—we are actually putting up roadblocks to love. Wojtyla explains: “There undoubtedly exists a tendency . . . to seek to enjoy [acts of tenderness] prematurely when both are only at the stage of the arousal of sentiment, and with it of sensuality, while the objective aspect of love, and the union of persons, are still missing. Such premature tenderness in the association of a man and a woman quite often destroys love, or at least prevents it from developing fully, of ripening both internally and objectively into a genuine love” (pp. 105–6).

### Going Too Far?

The experience of many young people bears this out. In the beginning stages of a relationship, a man and woman may begin to develop a good friendship. They may spend a lot of time going for walks, going out for coffee, socializing in larger groups of people—always in good conversation with each other, getting to know each other. But once the relationship becomes physical, those physical forms of intimacy increasingly become more central to the relationship, while real communication, working through problems, and growing in virtue together gradually takes a back seat.

And that should not surprise us. If we prematurely experience the

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powerful feelings associated with sensual pleasure, we are less likely to cultivate the objective aspects of love (virtue, friendship, commitment, self-giving), since those aspects require much more time, work, and sacrifice to develop. Why go through all that effort when the sensual pleasure of love can be so easily and immediately obtained? Yet in reality, the giving or receiving of tenderness, apart from the objective aspect of love, creates only the appearance of love, and it often covers up the real underlying attitude driving a relationship: an egoism that is the very opposite of love.

That’s why we must be extremely careful in giving or receiving acts of tenderness. Wojtyla says expressions of tenderness should always be accompanied by an even greater sense of responsibility for the other person. “There can be no genuine tenderness without a perfected habit of continence, which has its origin in a will always ready to show loving kindness, and so overcome the temptation merely to enjoy. . . . Without such continence, the natural energies of sensuality, and the energies of sentiment drawn into their orbit, will become merely the ‘raw material’ of sensual or at best emotional egoism” (p. 207).

### The Tremors of Marriage

After treating the dangers of premature tenderness, which apply especially to dating and courtship relationships, Wojtyla goes on to discuss the crucial role tenderness must play in a marriage. Here he discusses not just the outward manifestations of tenderness, but more fundamentally, tenderness itself. In marriage, tenderness should involve “the steady participation of emotion, of a durable commitment to love, for it is this that brings a man and a woman close together, creates an interior climate of ‘communicative-

ness” (p. 206). He then says that “a great deal” of this kind of tenderness is needed in a marriage.

In this context, Wojtyla offers a second, even fuller definition of tenderness, in light of how it applies to the spousal relationship: “*Tenderness is the ability to feel with and for the whole person*, to feel even the most deeply hidden spiritual tremors, and always to have in mind the true good of that person” (p. 207). What a powerful description! To feel “the most deeply hidden spiritual tremors.” Do you feel what is going on most deeply in the soul of your spouse? Her hopes, her fears, her burdens, her wounds? Wojtyla challenges spouses to have hearts that are truly united, truly able to enter into the inner lives of one another. He writes, “Tenderness creates a feeling of not being alone, a feeling that her or his whole life is equally the content of another and very dear person’s life. This conviction very greatly facilitates and reinforces their sense of unity” (p. 207).

### Women and Tenderness

Wojtyla says women not only expect this type of tenderness from their husbands, but that they actually have a special right to it in marriage. He gives three reasons for why husbands need to enter deeply into the emotional lives of their wives.

First, at the most basic level, the woman’s emotional life is generally deeper than the man’s. Therefore, the woman has a greater need for tenderness, in a way that men may have a difficult time understanding since they don’t share that need as much.

Second, the woman *gives herself* to the man. When a woman gets married, she typically leaves her home and her mother and father in order to join herself to her husband. Since women generally have a much richer emotional life, they may feel this breakaway from home more acutely than men,

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especially if they come from a close-knit family and a strong relationship with their parents. While most men look forward to leaving home and starting the new adventure of married life, some women, while experiencing this excitement, also experience a sense of loss as they leave the people they have been most emotionally invested in throughout their lives to join themselves to their husbands. Therefore, the woman has an even greater need for her husband to enter into her feelings and state of mind as she goes through this transition and surrenders herself in marriage.


Third, the woman goes through extremely important and difficult experiences in her life (e.g., pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, caring for a newborn, leaving a job, staying at home). Some women feel very alone in the midst of these new experiences. Therefore, they have a special need for tenderness from their husbands as they go through these transitions.

### The Challenge to Men

Wojtyla challenges men to do much more than provide for their wives financially or take care of things around the house. He challenges husbands to enter deeply into their wives' emotional lives—"to feel with and for the whole person." Men who get so caught up in work, sports, the nightly news, or projects at home while remaining emotionally distant from their own wives fail to provide the kind of tenderness Wojtyla is describing—the kind of tenderness that women have a special right to in marriage.

This challenge to men is especially important when their wives become mothers, for that is perhaps when women need the tenderness of their husbands the most. Our culture does not fully recognize the dignity and value of motherhood. Men in the workplace constantly earn praise, respect, and recognition for their professional accomplishments, but mothers who choose to stay at home and dedicate their lives full-time to raising children rarely receive such affirmation from the world. In fact, many times they are looked down upon.

An example from my own life: People often thank me for my books, articles, and teaching. But few people in the world go out of their way to thank my wife for giving her life to our children, whether it be for spiritual matters such as teaching them about Jesus and forming them in virtue, or for the more mundane things like changing diapers, filling sippy cups, and reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* five times a day. Doing the Catholic apostolic work of writing and teaching can be a good thing, but it pales in comparison to what my wife does at home with our children.

However, our culture constantly affirms people for their productivity and accomplishments outside of the home, but looks puzzlingly down on a woman who would choose to stay at home to raise children. It's no wonder many mothers feel very alone and begin to second-guess their state in life as they transition from the workplace to motherhood. Therefore, especially in a culture like ours, men, more than ever before, need to go out of their way to support their wives and enter into the many "spiritual tremors" they encounter through these important events in their lives. 

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