



Introduction

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Introduction

It is with great joy that - in the name of the International Scientific Committee - I greet you here today in this beautiful setting, for what we hope shall be a difficult but exciting debate on the true meanings of the single most significant act that two human beings can perform together: the act of beginning a new life.

I am absolutely convinced that believers and non-believers alike should be united in defending and preserving the natural course of this act. This is why I am convinced that - no matter how different and sometimes opposite the views of those present in this room might be - a constructive dialogue is not only possible but mandatory.

And this is why we are here today!

This meeting was conceived some three years ago, during discussions with Professor Georgeanna Seegar-Jones. At that time we wrote to several people trying to identify both topics and experts.

I must admit that it was not too easy to arrive at a definition of the Agenda for the Meeting, an Agenda that could be agreed upon by all participants as being respectful of everyone's beliefs and ideas, and yet that could allow a frank and open discussion. As a matter of fact we kept modifying the Agenda until very recently.

I also have to admit that it was even more difficult to find someone to agree to provide the funds to make such a discussion possible.

This is why it took us almost three years to convene the workshop: we were looking for sponsors!

As you know, we have obtained a generous grant from the Ford Foundation and I want here to thank with gratitude Mrs. Susan Berresford, the Foundation Vice-President and Dr. José Barzelatto, the Director of the Foundation's Population Programme for having so generously made this meeting possible.

The Italian Government, through the Honorable Claudio Martelli, the Minister of

Justice, is also sponsoring the Meeting and has put at our disposal the beautiful setting of Caprarola. The Honorable Martelli will join us at the end of the meeting, together with Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini, to close our discussions.

I am supposed to briefly outline for you the scope of our meeting and I shall try to do so.

Central to our debate are the scientific discoveries of the twentieth century which revealed fundamental differences in sexual behaviour between most higher animals, including non-human primates, and the human species. With very few exceptions other female animals only permit mating at the time of ovulation, when they show associated anatomical and behavioural changes.

By contrast, women will permit intercourse throughout the menstrual cycle, as well as through pregnancy, lactation, and after the menopause. Ovulation in the human is not only not associated with any external signs, but it is so well hidden that it was only in the 1930s that scientists first discovered when, in the menstrual cycle, a woman ovulates.

It is therefore obvious that, for humans, intercourse is much more than simply the act of reproduction, and I believe that it is fair to state that the bonding power of sex within the couple has now been widely recognized by most religious and philosophical schools.

There is however a new aspect to this problem: Recent scientific advances have made it possible for couples to have sex without reproducing, or to reproduce without having had sex.

Our new-found ability to separate the "bonding" from the "reproductive" aspects of sex challenges age old ideas. For this reason some have been reluctant to even discuss this topic in the fear that it may have disruptive consequences. Scientists, it has been argued, can easily go too far in their zealous manipulation of nature. Let me therefore reassure everyone here that we are not about to steer the meeting in any definite direction, or towards adopting any definite final position.

What I hope we will engage in here during the next two and a half days is the search for truth. As a scientist I am only too (and painfully) aware of Claude Bernard's alleged definition of "scientific truth" as "an imaginary line dividing the error into two parts", the one containing already discovered errors and the one where errors still to be discovered lady hidden! In spite of this, I believe that we must proceed with our search for truth and this, I hope, is what we will be doing.

Before mentioning the issue of the continuously changing shape of scientific truth, let me address openly the always present accusation that debating certain arguments means seeding doubt and that - in turn - may have "dangerous consequencess". I take strong exception to this idea: it is the honest and public search for truth that must be the basis for every discussion.

Personally, I advocate a fundamental role for scientific research in the construc-

tion of bioethical concepts; at the same time, I also strongly believe that it is not up to the scientist as such to draw ethical conclusions from the biological facts he investigates.

A harmonious complementarity of roles requires that science provide data as objective as possible that philosophers and ethicists must accept (although certainly not acritically), even when they contradict - as in the case of Galileo - traditional certainties and beliefs, while at the same time it is the task of ethicists to enunciate moral judgements. Their duty is to place the physical facts in a more global perspective, which takes the totality of problems into consideration.

This is not always easy because often we speak different languages, and the difference in language is a continuous source of misunderstanding and friction, when it is not a cause of frank hostility. It is in the nature of this meeting to be open to the danger of failing to communicate because words do mean different things to people involved in different disciplines. We must guard against this trap and patiently look for definitions we can all accept.

Bearing all of this in mind, I hope that we will be able to discuss the true significance of the unique features that the act of intercourse takes in the human. And here comes again the problem of scientific truth. During the course of this meeting our Biologist and Anthropologist friends will point out the many differences in the process of ovulation and its consequences in the human female, when compared to practically all other animal females. This leads to a different pattern of intercourse for the human species.

Our friends will also tell us of recent discoveries which - to a certain extent - may at least in part destroy the clear-cut line we have drawn in the past between humans and non-humans.

Even given a certain degree of uncertainty, the question remains unaltered: what is the significance of these differences? Do they imply that the meaning of the act of intercourse is fundamentally different in the human? Does it therefore mean that, in the human, intercourse can be ethically acceptable even when it is stripped of its reproductive meaning, or - on the contrary - no such extrapolation can be drawn and - if so - why?

These and many others are - in my view - the questions that we shall pose to one another and then try to - at least begin - to provide answers.

To make the questions possible we have decided to start the meeting with an overview of the most recent bio-anthropological information.

This will be followed by a review of the evolution of the meaning of the sexual act in the main cultures of our planet. When it comes to culture we tend to be very egocentric, in the sense of often ignoring, or almost, the views of other - equally important - cultural groups.

The meeting has - by force - to focus on the act of intercourse, if we want to carry

it to some form of conclusion. We therefore have on purpose left out important topics such as homosexuality.

This does not mean that - whenever you feel that it is necessary - you may not introduce other aspects of the problem.

I hope that proceeding in this way we will be able to at least define the areas of broad agreement, those where some agreement is possible and those where opposite and irreconcilable positions will continue to exist.

My dream and my hope is to generate enough data and enough interest, so that others will enter this field and carry on the search for the true meanings of the act of sexual love.

Before ending, let me thank on your behalf the Members of the International Scientific Committee who worked hard to define the boundaries for this debate and all the Members of the Organizing Committee who have spent endless hours trying to make this meeting the success that we all hope it will be.

One final word of thanks to the Associazione per l'Alta Formazione, Forum, of which the University la Sapienza of Rome is a member: they are the ones who brought us here in this incredibly beautiful and peaceful setting.

Enjoy the meeting, the discussions and - above all - speak freely: this is why we are here.

Good work!

Giuseppe Benagiano

Chairman

Professor of Gynecology and Obstetrics

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