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# What Your Students Need to Know

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**Edward Sri**, *Men, Women and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II's Love and Responsibility* (St. Anthony Messenger Press, Servant Books, 2011).

In various ways John Paul II has challenged us in a beautiful fashion to realize that love is a task to be lived up to. Unpacking for young adults the meaning behind our late pope's ground-breaking teachings on marriage and family is also a challenging task which only few have taken up—and Edward Sri, in his book *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II's Love and Responsibility*, offers us an example of what it looks like to successfully take up the challenge. His book should prove especially useful to anyone leading discussions with young adults related to either *Love and Responsibility* or *Theology of the Body*. Let us explore three reasons why Sri's book succeeds at unpacking the pope's complex teachings. First he clearly explains his practical insights from *Love and Responsibility* by using examples that young adults readily understand. Secondly, he does not reduce John Paul's teachings on love to a "chastity talk." And finally, the testimony of numerous teens spontaneously offering their appreciation of his book is a clear indication of the superior quality of Sri's work.

Asking older teens who have been skillfully taught the art of reading and thinking from an early age to read *Love and Responsibility* might not be unreasonable. The question most teachers of this text face however is how to make the pope's teachings accessible to students who have never been taught the art of fishing for truth. As indicated by the subtitle, Sri's book offers students practical insights from *Love and Responsibility*. These practical insights are illuminated through clear examples that provide rich opportunities for teachers and students alike to ponder and dialogue about the pope's challenging vision of the nature of love between a man and a woman.

Quite helpfully, Sri provides a chart outlining the differences between mature and immature love based on descriptions found in *Love and Responsibility*. In this chart Sri highlights for the students what it means to say that mature love has the nature of being a gift. Just for students to hear that the experience of mature love must include total self-giving and mutual responsibility for the good of your beloved exposes them to a vision of love and life that goes well beyond the immature portrayal of love that they have likely grown accustomed to. Self-giving love is not usually difficult for students to imagine, but they do have difficulty in understanding that receiving love involves more than just being passive. However, earlier in this same chapter Sri illustrates what is meant by receptivity by breaking open what John Paul II meant by the word "responsibility." Here he quotes what he calls one of the pope's most countercultural insights: "The greater the feeling of responsibility for the person the more true love there is" (70). Love is so wondrously complex that totally giving oneself to one's beloved is not the fullest expression of love: rather, the truest measure of love lies in totally receiving him or her and

taking responsibility for their good. Sri leads the students well beyond the shallow belief that love only includes what is experienced by me physically and emotionally.

As society unravels due to the absence of mothers and fathers who are able to inculcate the ability to love in the souls of their children, books like *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* serve as a beacon for young people for what they long for. Another way in which Sri's book succeeds is that he does not reduce the complex nature of what it takes to be in a loving relationship to one simple solution, namely, being chaste. All too often the Pope's teachings are transformed into a morality tale about how to overcome lust. It has always to be remembered that chastity is for the sake of love: therefore the greatest emphasis has to be placed on the question of what it means to love. As Sri himself acknowledges, John Paul II taught that chastity is resented more than any of the other virtues, meaning that the majority of young people refuse to allow this virtue into their soul, will, and heart. Sri faithfully follows John Paul II's prescription for overcoming this resentment by striving to elevate young people's view of love.

Love has to be woven into the soul in a way that corresponds to all of the complexities of the interior life. A great strength of *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* is that Sri follows the same logical progression that John Paul II uses in *Love and Responsibility*. The first question addressed in both texts is what is meant by the value of the person. Knowing who the person is enables one to have an adequate understanding of how the person ought to be treated. That one's beloved ought to be treated with tenderness is an example of a new practical insight for most young people. Notably, Sri's chapter on tenderness should be considered one of the most important chapters in the book. The danger in emphasizing the value of chastity whilst neglecting a value such as tenderness is that students fail to perceive that to live according to one value, they must also strive for the other value. People are often frustrated when they are shown an ideal but are not given all the tools necessary to better achieve this ideal.

Some teachers have wisely pointed out that the best way to kill a student's interest in a book is to make it required reading for class. This is perhaps why I was so surprised when student after student commented on how much they were getting out of reading and discussing *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love*. Students from various backgrounds even offered anecdotes for how the book was having a positive influence on the relationships they were in with members of the opposite sex. No greater evidence than this could be offered for why this book should be used by anyone engaged in teaching young people about their call to love.

The reader of this essay may be wondering whether there are important ideas from *Love and Responsibility* that Sri does not discuss. The answer is yes, of course, but as Sri states in the introduction, his goal was not to offer an academic analysis or comprehensive treatment of the text. What a teacher using *Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* has to consider is which of the most essential teachings on the mystery of love offered by the pope is not developed by Sri. Then it needs to be decided whether or not these should be included in the learning experience of one's students. If a teacher decides to offer his or her own practical insights from *Love and Responsibility* then he or she should follow Dr. Sri's example by offering clear examples that young adults can easily understand. In my opinion, teachers should provide students with a deeper analysis of the receptive nature of love as a gift. Sri focuses much more attention on the giving aspect of love as a gift than on the receiving aspect. John Paul II taught that the quality of one's love must be based on affirming the person's value. To affirm the person's value, one must receive this value into the depths of one's soul. What example can be provided to elucidate students' understanding of the receptive nature of love? It is here that the teacher would be better served not to point to the philosophy found in the pope's book but rather the

witness found in his life through his deep devotion to Mary. Mary is the perfect embodiment of the receptive nature of love which she expresses in her response: “Let it be done unto me according to thy word.”

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