

A pope's love

By [Bromleigh McCleneghan](#)

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The day after Valentine's Day, the [BBC offered the world](#) an unexpected and unusual love story. Nearly 40 years ago, two Polish-born philosophers began a correspondence, one that continued for more than 30 years and ended with a visit the day before one of them died.

He was Karol Wojtyła, who became Pope John Paul II. His correspondent was Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, a Polish-American scholar, wife, and mother. After his death, she sold his letters to the National Library of Poland; they've been kept from the public eye since her death in 2014.

The library [released a statement](#) suggesting that the letters reveal nothing interesting about the two or their feelings about each other:

John Paul II was surrounded by a circle of friends – including clergymen, nuns and laypeople – with whom he stayed in close contact. Anna-Teresa was within this circle of friends – John Paul II's friendship with her was neither secret nor extraordinary.

The Vatican dismissed claims of a relationship as “more smoke than fire.”

Much of the official talk felt just the teensiest bit defensive, though neither the BBC nor anyone else has suggested that the late pope ever engaged in any impropriety. But there was definitely something between them, something dear. John Paul called Tymieniecka a “gift from God” and [wrote](#), “If I did not have this conviction, some moral certainty of Grace, and of acting in obedience to it, I would not dare act like this.”

James Martin, who seems to take the story at face value, offers [some clarifying discussion](#): there is no evidence that John Paul broke his vow of celibacy. Still, what do we make of a pope who falls in love?

As Martin notes, everyone does:

including men and women who have made a vow of chastity in a religious order, and priests who have made a promise of celibacy. It's part of the human experience.

The challenge for those who have made such vows is how to live into that love faithfully.

John Paul appears to have wrestled with this question. While we tend to think of intimate relationships as sexual ones, this one was intimate but not sexual. It's telling (and marvelous) that it unfolded in letters, that it began in the exchange of ideas. "A true friendship has become more and more a lost art," [writes Madeleine L'Engle](#),

in a society which feels that in order for a relationship to be fulfilled it must end in bed. A true friendship is always amoureuse; it is part of my human sexuality; each encounter with a friend is a time of creation... My relationship with my editor has got to be amorous. This doesn't mean sexual indulgence... It does mean something is happening on that non-empirical level, in the mediating band between nightside and sunside.... Many editors are qualified... But with only a few is the spark set off in me, so that I know what must be done to make a manuscript come alive.

L'Engle was happily and famously married for decades. She noted that a friendship that was creative and amorous could only rightly be pursued if she could trust it not to "thrust itself between" her husband and herself. While some have suggested that the BBC's revelation makes John Paul more likable, I find myself wondering about Tymieniecka's husband, the late Harvard economist Hendrik Houthakker. I hope he knew about this friendship, this love, and that it was not fraught for him. I can handle a pope in love, but the maintenance of his celibacy is less important than knowing he did nothing to compromise the fidelity of Tymieniecka's marriage.

Most of us need multiple intimate relationships in our lives, with family and spouses and friends. Healthy intimacy is necessary, even holy—when it entails mutual vulnerability and care. Intimacy—love—is an experience of grace. It is powerful and life-giving to be seen and known clearly, as we are, and loved. It is an act of courage and faith to open oneself to being seen in that way. It is a delight to see and be seen through the eyes of love.

So I'm glad to know of this relationship. These two people with such seemingly singular experiences: Polish survivors of the Holocaust who grew up to be philosophers, teachers, and writers. That they should have found each other and shared their thoughts and passions in care and compassion for so many years—it's almost miraculous.

Culturally, we're not good at making sense of complicated relationships. The church universal is not often very helpful either, given our desire to categorize and legislate. Karol and Anna-Therese had something special. I hope their unusual story will help us all to think more deeply about the nature and mystery of human love and the ways it reflects the divine.