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SEXUALITY AND MORALITY



ANSWERS FOR
MODERN CATHOLICS

CHARLES E. BOUCHARD, OP



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CHAPTER 2

Sexual Practices in Today's Culture

In the United States during the first half of the twentieth century, sexual morality was clear and consistent for most people, and especially for Catholics. There was a general consensus that premarital and extramarital sex, homosexual activity, and out-of-wedlock children were morally unacceptable. By the mid-1960s, however, two events changed everything.

The first was the appearance of the pill, oral contraceptives that made it possible for women to avoid pregnancy easily and secretly. The second thing was the commission convened by Pope Paul VI in 1963 to reexamine the Church's long-standing ban on artificial contraceptives. He did this after the Anglican Church had considered a similar policy and decided to reverse it.

Ultimately Pope Paul decided to uphold the Church's tradition and not allow the use of the pill or other artificial contraceptives. However, for many Catholics the very fact that the issue had been raised seemed to give permission to start giving other points of view about contraception the same weight as Church teaching.

These ecclesial events were just the tip of the cultural iceberg. Around the globe, the 1960s were years of intense and rapid cultural change of the kind that occurs in regular cycles through history. It is hard to know exactly what caused the sexual revolution of the sixties, but no doubt the Kinsey Reports on human sexuality, the availability and effectiveness of the pill and of antibiotics that could treat sexually transmitted diseases, and the prosperity and mobility that followed World War II and women's "liberation" from the prevailing model of domestic life had something to do with it. Whatever the causes, the effects of this revolution changed sexual attitudes dramatically. Our knowledge of human sexuality and sexual practices expanded exponentially, and we

became much more comfortable talking about sex. Many of the questions we will address would never have been asked, let alone answered, in a Catholic book prior to the 1960s!

Is it possible to cultivate strong moral values in a culture saturated with media images of marital infidelity and sex outside of marriage?

The debate about whether TV violence causes violent behavior has raged for years, but according to the American Psychiatric Association, “the debate is over.” In a web statement, “Psychiatric Effects of Media Violence,” the APA says, “Over the last three decades, the one overriding finding in research on the mass media is that exposure to media portrayals of violence increases aggressive behavior in children.”

Sex is at least as prevalent on TV as violence, and sex is often presented as a casual activity without risk or consequences. Evidence is mounting that it also affects the behavior of young people. Two studies by the Rand Corporation⁶ found that:

- Teens who watch a lot of television with sexual content are twice as likely to initiate intercourse in the following year.
- Television shows in which characters *talk* about sex affect teens just as much as programs that actually show sexual activity.

This means first of all that parents should be aware of what their children, especially preteens, are watching. This might mean watching the shows your kids watch with *their* eyes. Parents might ask themselves, “What conclusions would I draw from the behavior portrayed in this show if I were thirteen?”

Second, parents should be sure that their children have adequate doctrinal and spiritual formation so they are able to exercise some critical judgment about the behavior they see portrayed

on television. Some Catholics resist explicit sexual education for fear that it would introduce children to the possibility of sexual activity too early. Yet unless your children watch no television at all, they are likely being introduced to detailed information about sexual behavior at an early age. Parents should assume that children are seeing and absorbing information about sex, and that their consciences are probably not formed adequately.

The good news from the Rand study is that even though children are affected by the sex they see on TV, they can also learn from shows that realistically portray the risk of casual sex. “The researchers concluded that entertainment shows that include portrayal of sexual risks and consequences can potentially have two beneficial effects: They can teach accurate messages about sexual risks and they can stimulate a conversation with adults that can reinforce those messages.”

The Rand study was mostly concerned about health risks associated with sexual activity, and that is a start. But there are also significant moral risks that accompany casual sex. Even if they send their children to Catholic schools, parents still have the first responsibility for the moral formation of their children. Sexually explicit TV shows can provide a perfect opportunity for parents to begin an informal catechetical session with their children on sexual morality by asking, “Well, what did you think of that?” Parents might also think about making up a list of moral values (such as fidelity, truthfulness, respect, and wholeness) and referring to them whenever the occasion presents itself. This might help children see that morality is not just obeying rules but finding creative ways to realize moral values and become better persons in the decisions they make.

What does it mean to go “too far?”

First of all, let’s make it clear that we are talking here about pre-marital sex. Presumably married couples can make their own decisions about how far is too far.

Our moral tradition rests on the principle that any “directly willed sexual pleasure outside of marriage” is a mortal sin. There are two reasons why we say this. The first is that, as we all know, “one thing leads to another.” Emotions being what they are, we can easily get in over our heads and say with our bodies far more than we mean to. Another way to talk about this is to say that affection should be proportionate in intensity to the level and depth of the relationship. This means that intense and intimate sexual sharing should be reserved to marriage because it is only in a committed relationship that we can risk exposing ourselves in all our vulnerability to another person. Since emotions and sexual arousal are spontaneous and often not directly willed or intended, we must also be sure that we are *deciding* to express our affection in this way rather than being dragged into it by unruly emotions.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says we are all called to be chaste. How can I be chaste if I am married?

The *Catechism* does indeed say that all the baptized—not just celibates—are called to chastity (see CCC2337). It describes chastity as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of [a person] in his bodily and spiritual being.” This does not mean the same thing for everyone. For married persons, chastity does not mean no sex; rather, it means using your sexual ability generously and in a way that makes you and your spouse more whole. Marriage marked by abusive sex, cheating, sexual fantasies, and/or masturbation lacks chastity.

Chastity is a virtue, a moral skill that is marked by the ability to relate to another person as a whole person, without deceit, manipulation, and self-will. Chaste persons live integrated lives

so that their will, their desire, their knowledge all work together toward the good of the person. Chastity resists fragmentation and compartmentalization. This is how the *Catechism* further describes it:

Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman (*CCC* 2337).

For celibates, chastity involves a renunciation of sexual activity—not because it is bad or sinful, but because they have chosen to direct their sexual energies to a kind of generativeness that does not involve exclusive relationships, genital sex, or childbearing. Celibacy and chastity do not necessarily go together, however. A man who has been perfectly celibate his whole life could still lack the virtue of chastity if he is continually conflicted, plagued with sexual temptations, and resentful of having given up the possibility of sexual satisfaction. As a virtue, chastity must be marked not only by purity of mind and body but of heart, through willingness and joy.

No one acquires the virtue of chastity entirely on his own. To a large extent, chastity depends on the quality of our friendships. Author Paul J. Wadell once said that friendships are “schools for virtue.” He cites a number of reasons why friendship is essential to the moral life:

First, good friendships form important virtues and qualities of character such as caring, generosity, patience, thoughtfulness, kindness, sympathy and forgiveness. It is through good and lasting friendships that we grow morally, develop our characters and acquire essential virtues....Second, friendships...draw us out of ourselves and teach us to care

for others for their own sake. A fundamental activity of every friendship is seeking the good of the friend....Friendships call us out of ourselves and challenge us to see beyond the pinched horizons of self-concern and self-interest...the life of any true friendship works against this narrowing by summoning us to invest in another's good and to remain devoted to her best interest even when doing so requires sacrifice from us.⁷

This is particularly true for chastity. Whether in celibacy or in marriage, the virtue of chastity is nurtured by friendships that are marked by honesty, reciprocity, and challenge. In marriage, this “virtue friend” will usually be our spouse; but even celibates need close friendships that draw the best out of them and keep them honest and whole.

Is sexuality an expression of love or a tool for procreation?

In a word, it's both. There was a time when the Church spoke about the “primacy of the procreative intent,” meaning that every sexual act had to be primarily for the purpose of procreation. In recent years, however, procreation and mutual love have been established as equally important. Sexual acts must be open to the possibility of procreation *and* they must also be authentic expressions of committed love between two persons. It is not quite accurate to say that procreation is only a tool, since that implies that it is a just a means to an end, like a mechanic would use various tools in order to fix my car. In marriage, the sexual act is not just a means to an end; it is both the love itself and possibility of new life. It is a beautiful, valuable thing in itself, *and* it is an occasion for procreation.

One way of describing marital sexuality is to say that sex is a language, an intimate self-speaking to another person. We acquire our sexual language gradually, from the time we are children, just like we acquire verbal and written language. Initially our vocabulary is limited, and our attempts to speak are full of errors

and partial sentences. As we mature, we learn to speak in full, grammatically correct, and even elegant sentences. With sex, we start with a small sexual vocabulary and gradually learn to speak more fully and effectively.

Like any other language, sex can be used to say many things. It can be used manipulatively, deceitfully, or vengefully. It can also be used to speak love, care, and trust. Because this sexual language develops gradually, it can also become distorted or impeded. Traumatic events in childhood can lead to stilted or pathological sexuality. This is why adults who have been sexually abused as children may find it difficult to establish long-term and rewarding relationships in marriage. It also explains how children who were punished or abused for having sexual thoughts or playing sexually with other children may develop deviant sexual practices in adulthood. Experts say that the violence of abuse trespasses into their sexual development and takes root. It also explains why sexual abuse often passes from one generation to another. It is partly the result of learned behavior by children at a time when their own sexuality is malleable and open to outside influences. This is why sex education for children has to take place in an environment of trust, honesty, candor, and compassion.

Is masturbation still a sin?

While Woody Allen once said that masturbation was “sex with someone I love,” it should be clear from what we have said already that sex is essentially a social activity; it is inherently addressed to a person to whom we have made a commitment in marriage.

Solitary sexual activity is devoid of procreative potential and lacks the mutuality that God intended. It has no value as a sign of love or commitment. Also, the sexual fantasies that accompany solitary sex are based upon objectifying a person, making the idea of a person merely instrumental to my own satisfaction. While it might be argued that these persons are indeed only fantasies, not real persons, in some cases there are connections between

habitual, compulsive masturbation and the inability to establish normal relationships.

So yes, masturbation is still a sin because it falls far short of the goodness that we can achieve through our sexuality. However it is important to emphasize that not all instances of solitary sex are equally serious. The use of solitary sex to avoid marital relations or to punish a spouse is probably the most serious; sexual experimentation by teenagers when it is part of a transition to adulthood may lack full freedom and understanding and therefore would be judged far less harshly.

If we have oral sex, are we still technically virgins?

There is a lot of chatter online about the morality of oral sex. I have the distinct impression that today there is a new casuistry that allows sexual gratification as long as it doesn't involve both sets of genitals. (I came across a website that asked, "Is oral sex the new good-night kiss?") In some cases, I fear that oral sex is allowed as sort of a down payment on a committed relationship, to keep a partner interested without really making a commitment. It is used to indicate serious attraction but not real self-giving. Oral sex outside of marriage is a compartmentalized, inhuman kind of sexual sharing. It leads to giving one organ of your body, but not yourself.

If you engage in oral sex, you may be a virgin technically, but you are not a virgin in any meaningful moral sense. Sexual intimacy that leads to climax is sex, no matter what you call it.

In our society, is virginity still a desirable thing?

The important thing about virginity is integrity. "Holiness" is in many ways equivalent to "wholeness," and being whole is really the goal of the moral life. This means I should strive for that wholeness as much as possible. If I engage in sex, at least physically, I am offering myself entirely to another person. Integrity demands that the rest of my personality—my heart, my soul, my emotions—go

with my body. When I do otherwise, when I engage in sex with someone I do not really love, then I am essentially sacrificing my wholeness and integrity for immediate gratification.

If I choose to do this, I pay a heavy price: I either fragment myself more and more, or I have to protect parts of myself I do not want to share, compartmentalizing them and giving one part of myself to this person, one part to another person, and so on. It is easy to see how this can lead to a “dis-integrated person.” So while physical virginity may be no big deal in *itself*, it is a powerful symbol of my wholeness and integrity as a person. I keep myself “intact” so that I can offer my *entire* self to the person I really love.

It may not have occurred to the person who wrote this question, but virginity can also be a vocation. There are persons, both male and female, who have made a very conscious decision to forego sex permanently in order to offer themselves as fully as possible to God. Some women choose consecrated virginity and live in convents with others who have made the same choice. They profess their vow of virginity publicly in a special rite that resembles the rite of ordination to the priesthood. Others live in the world as single, celibate adults. They do so as a personal act of faith, in imitation of Christ, and also as a sign to the world of singleness of purpose and integrity of life. Persons who make these courageous choices remind us that even in a sex-saturated culture, human fulfillment can be found in abstinence.

Is the phenomenon of “hooking up” as a replacement for dating here to stay?

Until recently, I thought “hooking up” was something you hired a plumber to do. Fortunately, columnist Charles Blow of *The New York Times* set me straight. As a service to those of us over thirty, he defines it as follows: “Hooking up is a casual sexual encounter with no expectation of future emotional commitment. Think of it as a one-night stand with someone you know.” Before writing a column on the topic, Mr. Blow called Kathleen Bogle, author

of *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating and Relationships on Campus*. What he found out was that for some young people today, everything seemed to be exactly the opposite of what he remembered. “Under the old model, you dated a few times and, if you really liked the person, you might consider having sex. Under the new model, you hook up a few times and, if you really like the person, you might consider going on a date.”⁸

Bogle’s study was focused on what is actually happening on our campuses today. She wasn’t interested in making any moral judgments. Others, including Laurie Fendrich, don’t think it matters whether we make moral judgments about it or not. “I don’t see any value in agonizing over the morality of hooking up,” she says. “Once sexual morals have experienced a sea change the likes of hooking up, indignation is rather pointless. Besides, in some ways the demise of dating (and its predecessor, courtship) is a good thing. In a post-romantic age, where deep yearning is almost always the subject of irony, romantic courtship of any kind is almost quaint.”⁹

We might hope that the climate on Catholic college campuses is better, but there is evidence that it is not. College theology professor Vigen Guroian recently suggested that his daughter’s Catholic dormitory was not much better than a brothel. Colleges no longer stand *in loco parentis*, preferring instead to stand by while the lives and integrity of their students are ruined. Guroian writes of one Catholic college: “It fosters not growth into wholeness but the dissolution of personality, not the integration of learning and everyday living but their radical bifurcation. It most certainly does not support the Church’s values of marriage and family.”¹⁰

Hooking up presents a serious challenge to Catholic sexual ethics. It is the antithesis of an ethic based on commitment and permanence. It is based on the premise that the physical can be separated from the psychological, emotional, and spiritual. Its prevalence suggests a dramatic shift in our vision of sex and of

the human person. Still, I am not quite ready to throw in the towel. The sexual revolution has continued to roll along since even before I was in college, but our ethic is not just an arbitrary set of rules. It is based on values like integrity, wholeness, and belief in the unity of body and soul that are real and tangible. I am confident that with help, young people will be able to experience these values—or at least the absence of them—and make appropriate changes in their beliefs and behavior.

Is it always wrong to use pornography, even if you're married?

There are two problems with pornography. One is that it objectifies people. The other is that it objectifies people. I mean this to be emphatic, but I also say this because pornography is objectifying in at least two ways.

First, regardless of how or where it is used, pornography by its nature is making a person a means to an end: This photograph or movie is only instrumental to my own satisfaction. The damage is less, I suppose, when the person willingly submits to being photographed, but as an occupation it still seems to have very limited potential for enhancing personal dignity. When I buy or view pornography, I am cooperating with the process of human diminishment that produced it. In his book *Refusing to be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice*, John Stoltenberg describes how the use of pornography makes us complicit in this objectification:

Each consumer, each purchaser of a reproduced documentation of the original sexual objectification is complicitous in the commerce, a link in the chain of profit and hence he bears some responsibility, however widely shared by others, for the act of sexual objectification that took place in front of the camera to begin with....The act was not done *by* him, but as soon as he buys a documentation of it he becomes someone it was done *for*, someone whose intent—along

with that of many others—was collectively expressed and acted out in the original, particular act.¹¹

Second, within marriage the problem is compounded because there is always a risk that in using pornography to improve marital sex, the pornography becomes an end rather than a means. It can become a substitute for the person I've married. Is the primary object of my love the person to whom I am married, or am I really making love to my fantasy, with a little help from my spouse? It is also possible that the pornography is important to one partner and unimportant or even repulsive to the other. Married couples who regularly use pornography need to have a long and candid talk about what this actually means to their relationship.

The objectification that characterizes pornography appears to be a greater problem for men than for women. In fact, John Stoltenberg says that this objectified view of sex is “considered the norm of male sexuality...and [as] a ‘natural’ and ‘healthy’ way of looking at other people.” He raises disturbing questions about this male experience:

What does it mean that a man's most routine, most repeated, most reliable, perhaps even most intensely “personal” erotic experiences are those that happen in relation to things, to bodies perceived and regarded as things, to images depicting bodies as things, to memories of images of bodies as things? What does it mean that he responds sexually to bodies as things and images of bodies as things in a way that is more or less constant, no matter whether another human being is actually with him?¹²

Stoltenberg's analysis makes it clear why pornography (and the solitary sex that often accompanies it) is both an injustice and a violation of our own human dignity.

Is it wrong to call “800” sex numbers or to go to websites that promote sexual fantasy?

“800” numbers and sexually oriented websites are just technically enhanced versions of old-fashioned pornography. Like visual pornography, it debases those who offer it and those who use it. All pornography—including the aural telephone variety—is designed to maximize gratification and minimize personal relationship. This is why pornographers often disguise their identities. For pornography to work, it has to create a distance between real persons. This is completely at odds with the meaning of Christian sex, which God gave us in order to create unity between two persons.

It is also important to note the highly addictive nature of some kinds of pornography. Occasional and experimental use of pornography by adolescents is the stuff of “B” movies and can be a normal part of growing up. For adults, however, even occasional use of pornography can be a symptom of marital problems. Repeated and habitual use of pornography—in print, over the phone, or on the screen—can signal serious psychological problems that need professional attention.

What is the Church’s position on sex aids?

There are aids to marital sex, such as certain kinds of clothing that serve to enhance us and make us look attractive and appealing. This is how Victoria’s Secret makes its money—by making women look beautiful and sexy in a dignified and elegant way. There is nothing wrong with this. We all want to look our best. Even those who ordinarily don’t care much about how they look or what they wear are going to make an effort to look their best on that special date. The same is true for spouses who want to give their very best selves in the act of marital lovemaking. God obviously intended the sexual act to involve pleasure, and there is no shame in “setting the stage” so the pleasure and enjoyment of this most intimate experience is all that it can be.

Other kinds of marital aids—things used during foreplay or intercourse—have risks. They can intrude upon or even replace the affection and mutuality that is essential to sexual love. Because the particular things that cause sexual arousal vary greatly from one person to another, an object or a device that is exciting to one person may be repulsive to his or her spouse. Certain objects or practices can cause pain, injury, or even disease, and their use can lead to violence or abuse. Clearly this is at odds with our understanding of marital sex as holy and sacramental.

It takes time for spouses to learn each other's sexual language. One partner may prefer certain caresses and touches, the other may prefer words or language. But sexual experience must always be centered on affirmation, sensitivity, and mutual love. If you do not find marital sex interesting unless it includes a blindfold, a whistle, and hot wax, you probably need to see a therapist and a priest, in that order.

The rule of thumb here is that the more a particular sexual activity excludes mutuality, the more suspect it is.

Is it wrong to use Viagra or other things that enhance sexual performance?

Not necessarily. As television ads relentlessly instruct us, E.D. (erectile dysfunction or male impotency) is a real medical condition that may be the result of vascular problems, diabetes, or neurological disease. It is appropriate to treat this just as we would any other illness that impedes our normal enjoyment of life. As long as the medication does not have any risky side effects, it is perfectly licit.

There is a danger of becoming fixated on this problem so we lose all perspective and spend large sums of money, time, and energy trying to achieve the perfect sexual experience. One woman told me that she wished Viagra had never been invented. "All my husband does now is obsess about his performance," she said. "Doesn't he know I love him just the way he is?"

All men lose their sexual potency with age. While in some instances it may be advisable to address that diminishment with medications, it is important to remember there are many ways to express marital love. Above all, remember that married love is about persons, not performance.

Is it wrong to have sexual fantasies?
Sometimes I can't seem to control them.

Sexual fantasies, like many other things that float into consciousness, are often not willed nor even desired. Saint Augustine struggled with impure thoughts, and even St. Paul said he often failed to do what he wanted to do, and did exactly what he didn't want to do!

We often associate bad thoughts solely with sex, but we can have equally sinful thoughts about other things, too. Think, for example, of the intemperance that gives rise to road rage, or the prejudice that gives rise to racism, or the envy or jealousy that lead us to think uncharitable things about (or even do uncharitable things to) another person. Surely wishing harm for someone or fantasizing about how they might suffer misfortune is no worse than entertaining a bad sexual thought. In some kinds of fantasies we are tempted to hurt, repay, or offend someone. In our sexual fantasies, we are tempted to possess someone as an instrument of self-satisfaction.

From a moral point of view, however, it is not just *having* these thoughts—since they often arise involuntarily before we are even aware of them. The big problem is what we *do* with them once they occur. Do we dismiss them and think about something else, or do we invite them in and entertain them for a while? There is a big moral difference between the unbidden thoughts that sometimes possess us and willingly indulging them in order to arouse some passion, whether that passion is unchaste, unjust, or uncharitable.

I once asked a wise retreat director what to do about unwanted bad thoughts. He said his rule was, “Don’t even go there.” As soon

as we're aware of these uncharitable or unchaste thoughts, we should change the topic and leave no room for them.

A friend of mine belongs to a sexual-addiction group.

How can a person be addicted to sex?

We have already noted that St. Thomas Aquinas and other early theologians were well aware of the power of the basic human desire for pleasure of taste (food and drink) and touch (sex). Desires for these pleasures seem to be more deeply rooted in us than desires for other things, and many of the capital sins (lust, gluttony, drunkenness) relate directly to these desires.

In recent years, we have learned a great deal about chemical addictions. We know that addiction to alcohol or drugs is not entirely free behavior; substance dependency is probably the result of genetic predisposition and can never be controlled. This is why Bill W., the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, told his fellow alcoholics that the first step in recovery was to admit powerlessness. He said that while addictions were never cured, discipline and support from other people could result in a state of ongoing recovery. His twelve-step program enjoys great success and is very similar to the process that all of us go through as we acquire other virtues in our lives.

Psychiatrists realize that there is sexual behavior that exhibits characteristics very similar to substance abuse. For reasons that are not fully understood, some people become addicted to a compulsive sexual activity. Researcher John Money said this occurs when some inappropriate object or activity “trespasses” onto someone’s “love map” during a critical period of sexual development and becomes imprinted there, like a footprint in wet concrete. The resulting desires are permanent and addictive. These addictive behaviors may include pornography, anonymous sex, marital infidelity, pedophilia, voyeurism, frotteurism (rubbing against strangers in public places), or exhibitionism. The consequences—guilt and remorse, missed work, ruined marriages,

arrest, and disease—are every bit as destructive as alcoholism or drug addiction. A number of twelve-step programs have been developed to help persons who suffer from this kind of compulsive behavior to regain control of their lives and, like recovering substance abusers, live sober.

Is rape about sex or anger?

Like any human action, rape can have many different motives. Sometimes it is about sex, especially so-called “date rapes.” These often start out as ordinary encounters that become violent, sometimes because of misinterpreted signals, often because of drugs or alcohol. Men who commit these rapes simply lose control and allow their lust to take over.

In other cases, rape has little or nothing to do with sexual pleasure. Especially in serial crimes, rape is usually the result of warped sexual development that causes a man to find satisfaction in victimizing or humiliating women.

Sometimes therapists are able to trace this violence back to traumatic incidents involving women in early childhood, sometimes not. Anger rape can even occur in marriage, however, and it often goes unreported. Men with anger-management problems—especially if they are exacerbated by their own failures, by unemployment, or intoxication—often take out their own frustrations on the people they love. Unlike the criminal sociopath, this kind of sexual violence can sometimes be treated psychologically.

Sometimes rape is the result of deeply ingrained cultural attitudes. In December 2012, a shocking gang rape of a young woman in India that resulted in her death raised painful questions about attitudes toward women. A *Wall Street Journal* poll taken in January 2013 found that Indian men felt the prevalence of rape in India was the result of attitudes toward women, Western influence, and gaps in law enforcement, but there are many unanswered questions about the connection between social attitudes and rape.