



# Formation in Human Sexuality, Marriage, and Family Life

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An effective catechesis on the mystery of human sexuality requires an appreciation of its diverse facets as a gift inscribed within the very being of humanity, a visible manifestation of the human and Christian call to love, and a treasure to be lived and developed.

## **Human Sexuality as a Gift of Creation**

Unlike the view of many of its neighbors, ancient Israel was very clear in its understanding that sexuality is a human—not divine—reality. God created the universe not through sexual reproduction but through his all-powerful Word, which the New Testament would later identify with the Second Person of the Trinity (see Jn 1:1-14, Heb 1:1-5, and Col 1:15-20). Still, although not divine, within the panorama of created reality, the human person has a privileged place, being made in the “image” and “likeness” of God (see Gn 1:26). Integral to this image is sexuality, because it is “male and female” together that are the image of God (Gn 1:27). This does not mean

that men and women resemble God in some way, but rather that they enjoy a unique dignity in their capacity to relate to their Creator, that they exercise dominion over the rest of creation, and that they share the blessing of fertility through their life-giving union (see Gn 1:28). This potential to conceive new human life and its ability to unite a man and woman in the “one flesh” unity of the marriage covenant (see Gn 2:24-25) have come to be seen as the two basic meanings of sexual activity within the Christian tradition.

But prior to this blessing’s enactment in sexual union, sexuality is clearly first about something that human beings *are* before it is something that they *do*. Sex, maleness and femaleness, is part of the human person’s very being. As creatures composed of both body and soul, humans are affected by sex not only physically but psychologically and spiritually as well, and this leaves its imprint on the way in which we love others. As Pope John Paul II frequently insisted in his catecheses on the theology of the body, the body is the outward

expression and revelation of the person's interior thought and freedom. Within this interior of the human being echoes the voice of the Creator, which declares that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gn 2:18b). This declaration applies equally to both sexes (the Hebrew word "*adam*" or "the man" can also be translated "humankind"). The human person is fulfilled not in isolation but only in communion with others. Sexuality is a visible sign of the call to communion inscribed within our very flesh.

### **Sexuality and Vocation**

Every human being is created by the God who is love and is called to respond to this love and in turn share it with others. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls this "the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being."<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine wrote famously at the beginning of his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in You."<sup>2</sup> Yet this restless heart beats within persons who are inescapably male and female. And so our response to the love of God or the love of others is expressed in and through our sexuality. We learn to relate to others in love as sexual persons composed of body and soul.<sup>3</sup> It is for this reason that the basic forms of Christian vocation or states

in life build on rather than erase the gift of our sexuality. We receive and respond to God's call to us in the sacraments and in the faith commitments we undertake as Christians. In Baptism, we become adopted sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Christ, who is Son of God by nature (see Rom 8:15, 29). In marriage, we are covenanted to another person as a husband or wife. In profession to religious life, we take on a new identity as a brother or sister within a religious community. The Sacrament of Holy Orders confers a type of spiritual fatherhood on those who receive it. The sex-specific nature of these graced relations, which build on and transform many of our natural blood relations, is not accidental. Even Christian friendship between mature single Christians exists between men and women who are brothers and sisters in Christ by virtue of their Baptism.<sup>4</sup>

### **Sexuality as a Task to Be Undertaken**

Like any gift of God entrusted to humanity, sexuality requires cultivation or development. This is where formation in human sexuality plays its most important role. Catechesis in human sexuality not only aims to create an appreciation of the gift of sexuality and the way in which it is a fundamental part of a person's Christian vocation; it also

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2000), no. 1604.

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions* 1, 1.

<sup>3</sup> On the unity of body and soul in love between the sexes, see Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), nos. 2 and 5.

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to suggest that the single life is a vocation in the same sense that marriage, consecrated religious life, or priesthood are vocations, but it is a state in which a larger number of adult Christians spend a significant portion of their lives.

helps prepare a person to take up and live this vocation. However, such catechesis must take different forms depending on the maturity and state in life of those receiving it and must aim to form not just the intellect, but also the whole person.

When discussing preparation for the vocation of marriage, Pope John Paul II divided this preparation into *remote*, *proximate*, and *immediate*.<sup>5</sup> Formation in human sexuality follows a similar trajectory, although to this we might add the additional category of *ongoing* formation.

*Remote formation* in human sexuality begins in childhood through the teaching and example of parents. Both because they know their children best and because of the reinforcement provided by their own witness of love as men and women, parents make a unique and irreplaceable contribution in this regard.<sup>6</sup> In their children's early years, parents express this role by, for example, teaching their children their irreplaceable value and uniqueness as created in the image of God and the ways in which their bodies reflect this goodness. It is also helpful to teach children the correct names of their body parts and gently discourage autoerotic activity as they grow. When children move into school age, they need a more complete understanding of sexual growth and

development as part of their overall physical health, and parents must also give them the means to protect themselves from sexual abuse by others.

As they progress into adolescence and further into the sacramental life of the Church, young people enter the stage of *proximate formation* in sexuality. Adolescents need a clearer presentation of Christian vocations (marriage, consecrated religious life, and the priesthood) and the role of sexuality within each. In particular, they need a clearer presentation of Christian sexual morality, the reasons why sex is ordered to the union of spouses in marriage and the gift of children, and the challenges posed to this understanding by the culture that surrounds them. Many parents seek help from persons outside their family, such as pastors, religious educators, and trusted teachers, to meet the challenges of forming their children in an authentic vision of human sexuality during this crucial period. However, in doing so, they do not relinquish their role as the primary educators of their children in the faith or in the gift of their sexuality.

As young people pass into adulthood, they begin the stage of *immediate formation* in human sexuality. In this stage, they need not only a mature grasp of sexuality and its place within the states of life in which they live and the vocations they discern, but also a comprehensive understanding of the way this gift ought to be lived in these vocations. That is, they need a clear understanding of the shape that chastity takes for single, celibate, and married Christians and a detailed

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<sup>5</sup> See Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *On the Family (Familiaris Consortio)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982), no. 66.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed overview of the stages of age-appropriate formation in sexuality and the role of parents within it, see the helpful document of the Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (1995), nos. 77-111, at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

understanding of the nature of obstacles to chastity in the forms of lust, pornography, masturbation, extramarital sex, sexual abuse or violence, contraception, and the challenges faced by Christians called to chastity who have a homosexual orientation. However, here and throughout this process, it is important to remember that forming persons in chastity (the task of an authentic catechesis in sexuality) involves more than imparting information. It means providing a vision that can challenge shallow cultural views of sex as a commodity or a mere outlet for undirected freedom for pleasure.<sup>7</sup> It also means creating a church community graced by specific practices that shape the character of its members to make them capable of giving themselves in love through practices such as personal and liturgical prayer, outreach to the poor, and care for human life in its most vulnerable stages, for example, when it is unborn, disabled, or elderly.

Sometimes it is wrongly assumed that the task of formation ends with the choice of a vocation such as marriage. This is not the case. It is here that we might introduce the concept of *ongoing formation* in sexuality. This can take the form of ongoing educational opportunities, ministries, or support groups aimed at those persons who are already married. The focus of such outreach could be particular challenges faced by couples during the course of a marriage—ways to deepen intimacy through improved communication and conflict resolution; the challenges facing couples dealing with infertility, substance abuse, or a failing marriage; or the impact of aging on a couple's sexual relationship. This is perhaps one of the most underdeveloped areas of formation in human sexuality in the Church at the present moment. Just as the gift of sexuality embraces the whole of a person's life, so must the effort to appreciate, form, and live it.

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<sup>7</sup> On these shallow views of the body and sex, see *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 5.

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