

## *A Sexual Ethic*

The human animal can direct their sexual energy wherever they want. Some choose to use this energy in life-giving, celebrating and enriching ways. Some choose to use this energy in abusive and negative ways. Others waste it and disperse it indiscriminately. There are many ways in which we can express sexual energy, both positively and negatively. Sex between people who do not love one another and are not willing to become uniquely responsible to and for one another assumes a split between body and spirit that does not exist. When we have sex, all of who we are is on the line. Any attempt to divide the body and the spirit does violence to both.

There is so much of that happening in our world today. One minute our culture is seeking to exploit sex, demean it and turn it into a sport. The next minute our society is trying to repress it, even vilify it. How do we find our own way through the

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confusing and contradictory messages of our time? How do we advise our children and others who struggle with questions of sexuality? Negotiating our sex lives can be incredibly difficult. In our encounters with desire, we might entrust ourselves to someone who is not careful with our bodies or our spirits. Bad sexual experience is so wounding, so difficult to recover from.

Hence, it is long overdue that we develop and live by a sexual ethic. Crafting a sexual ethic requires us to bring intentionality and discernment to our sexual decisions. We cannot create a sexual ethic in the heat of the moment. We need to take time to reflect on how we will be sexual beings in this world. We need to create a sexual ethic that takes seriously the desires, needs and pains of our bodies. So what are the elements of a sexual ethic?

A sexual ethic begins by insisting that mutual **consent** is imperative in each and every sexual interaction. Both people must have the option of

saying “yes” but also the opportunity to say “no,” and to do so without being punished. Consent is never the same as submitting, going along with or acquiescing. Authentic consent requires communication and agreement that no means no, yes means yes and maybe means maybe. “No” will not be punished by withdrawal or coercive tactics. “Maybe” requires waiting for “yes” without manipulation or pushing.

Certainly, any sexual encounter also requires a degree of spiritual and emotional **maturity**. Rather than prescribing to an arbitrary age of consent, an individual must be able to reasonably and honestly reflect upon their situation. Maturity brings with it a secure **self-identity**. The teenage years are especially rife with the angst of trying to discover who one is. Many of our sons and daughters are searching desperately for who they are. They will not find themselves in sex. We also have times of doubt and wonder when we question who we are. Likewise, we will not find ourselves in sex. However, when we begin our sexual encounters with a healthy grasp

of who we are, we can deepen and even evolve our understanding of our own identity.

The next part of a sexual ethic involves entering into sexual intimacy only when the power, and subsequently the vulnerability, of two people are **equal**. We will certainly experience sexual feelings toward persons who have more or less power than we possess, but whether we pursue those feelings is always a choice. To engage in a sexual relationship with someone in a position of power over us is to increase our risk of being taken advantage of. To pursue such a relationship with someone less powerful than us means we risk taking advantage of another.

A sexual ethic clearly requires taking **responsibility** for protecting oneself and one's partner from sexually transmitted disease and unplanned pregnancy. This cannot be accomplished effectively while in the act or the morning after. Instead, it requires the kind of respect and communication between two people that is borne out of care, both for one's own needs and for the well-being of one's partner.

Shared sexual expression requires **relational intimacy**, knowing someone over time and sharing a history in which trust has developed. It requires that one be faithful to their promises. Whatever the nature of commitment to a partner and whatever the duration of that commitment, it must be anchored in fidelity. Individuals may change in ways that change the commitment they are willing to make, but those changes need to be addressed through open and honest communication. People can only enter into those discussions if there is first and foremost a faithfulness rooted in truthfulness, dependability and promise-keeping.

Expressing our sexuality must be both **other-enriching** and **self-liberating**. Our sexual choices must demonstrate a generous interest and concern for the well-being of the other. Sacred sex is sensitive, considerate, thoughtful, compassionate, understanding and supportive. It forgives, heals and calls forth the best from the other. While sexuality is a gift we give, there must

also be an element of wholesome self-interest as we also receive the gifts of sexual expression.

Finally, a sexual ethic involves appreciation of the **joyous** gift of life and the mystery of love. We should never allow sex to become a mere passive duty of submission or a heartless conformity to expectation. The element of the erotic, instinctual desire for pleasure and gratification deserves to be affirmed and encouraged. Human sexual expression is meant to be enjoyed as a passionate celebration without feelings of guilt or remorse.

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