

## **SEXUALITY AND THE RELIGIOUS LIFE**

### **Sexuality**

Every religious is a sexual being. This simply means that each one is either male or female, has feelings associated with sexual attraction and the psychological and social meanings of sex. Sexuality is a God-given energy for creating life and experiencing selfless joy in the life of another.

We have a strong tendency to think of sexuality as emanating from the sex organs or from our physical bodies. Sexuality is rooted in a deep human need for others and is the source of compassion and friendship. Sexuality is that natural and human force that overcomes separation and brings people together to enhance and create life. It is premised on the experience of separation and need. Immediately after birth, the human being begins to feel a painful sense of separation and loss. It is from this moment that the search for union and completion begins and this will accompany each one of us until we die. Sexuality is the great force that enables us to seek the other who will complement and complete us. It is the energy that enables us to keep going and to overcome the pain of separation and aloneness.

Sexuality is a powerful energy that can bring ecstatic joy but it can also be the source of great human suffering. For this reason, a mature sexuality is central to a healthy Christian spirituality.

Sexuality is the drive for love, communion, friendship, family, affection wholeness, consummation, creativity, self-perpetuation, immortality, joy, delight, humor and self-transcendence. It is present in every aspect of human striving. Sexuality is the energy that enables us to look beyond ourselves to see and appreciate the other.

Sexuality is something good and essential for human life. It is in every cell of our being and is the irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move out towards unity and consummation with that which is beyond us.

Genitality is just one aspect of sexuality. It is focused on the encounter with one other person and the physical expression of sexual desire and love. Having sex or making love with another is the

God-designed way of sharing in God's creativity and offers human beings the greatest opportunity for human intimacy. The great mystics and spiritual writers have used the image of sexual encounter to describe our ultimate union with God.

## **Celibacy**

When God created the heavens and the earth, he saw that everything was very good. But then he looked closer and said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." The only thing that was not good was to be alone. In that case, what can we say about celibacy?

Celibacy does not claim that it is good to be alone. It does not pretend to be a better or higher way of life than marriage. Celibacy is not a rejection or denial of our sexuality. It is a way of living our sexuality. The celibate still longs for union with another and ultimately with God. Celibacy is the choice to remain unmarried for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It includes a commitment to forego sexual pleasure associated with intimacy and any exclusive relationship with another person. Celibacy is a non-genital way of being a sexual being.

Celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of God is one way of becoming a fully alive human being. It is not a rejection of human nature or the human body. Celibacy does not exclude the experience of friendship and intimacy with another person. Development towards human maturity includes achieving the delicate balance between the need for autonomy and dependence on others. Human intimacy includes closeness and the ability to bond with another person in a warm and affectionate way. Intimate friendships are between mature adults who show mutuality is sharing and support.

The capacity for intimacy is an important measure of a person's human and emotional maturity. Celibate intimacy is a blessing and implies sharing in a deep friendship without being married and without violating chastity physically or psychologically. It includes the ability and the freedom to share one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences with another person. Experience has taught us that religious who manifest sexual misconduct or transgress boundaries are impoverished as far as intimacy with self, others, and God is concerned.

In pseudo-intimacy, an intense sexual feeling typically substitutes for genuine intimacy. The nature of the relationship is usually kept secret and the negative aspects are often denied. Intimacy is not possible between adults and minors. The age difference leads to a lack of mutuality and a disparity of power. These relationships can easily become manipulative and abusive. Priests are deluding themselves when they claim to have healthy intimate friendships with minors or others who are dependent on them for pastoral care.

Healthy celibate intimacy is a blessing that depends on many supporting factors in a person's personality. It requires a capacity to believe in the honesty and integrity of others and a readiness to trust the other and to share one's experiences. This implies healthy self-esteem and a capacity for empathy. A person with an exaggerated sense of self-importance or entitlement will have difficulties with intimacy.

Religious take a vow of chastity. Chastity is wider than celibacy and is close to the "purity of heart" mentioned by Jesus in the beatitudes. The vow embraces celibacy but goes beyond it to affect one's entire attitude to life. Chastity is similar to reverence and respect. To be chaste is to experience people, places, entertainment, the phases of our lives and sex in a way that respects them and does not violate them or ourselves. To be chaste is to approach the world with reverence, in such a way that the experience enhances both the world and ourselves and leaves us more integrated.

The celibate religious, like all human beings, has a restless heart. He experiences separation and loneliness. He is looking for completion. The core of his religious experience is the conviction that his restless heart is leading him to God in whom he will find rest. Often the restlessness of our searching drives us outward to satisfy our incompleteness by yet more activity, friendship, work, entertainment, or distraction. When we become aware of this, we can also hear the call to solitude where our loneliness is transformed into a peaceful and trusting waiting on the Lord.

## **Sexuality and Formation**

A good formation process helps the person to grow in self-awareness and self-knowledge. He accepts his strengths and weaknesses, knows his needs for companionship, acceptance, affection etc. and is able to integrate these into a peaceful religious commitment. He is not anxious about sexual feelings of attraction and desire. He develops healthy ways of attending to these needs. He is open and able to talk about these areas of his life.

Formation will include an honest and realistic treatment of all aspects of sexuality and celibacy. The recent revelations of sexual abuse of minors and other sexual transgressions by religious and clergy will be examined and lessons learned. Students will be helped to have a full understanding of the importance of safeguarding procedures and policies, and to know and respect the congregation's norms regarding boundaries.

### **Some Challenges in Formation**

Every human being experiences sexual desire and impulses. Formation for celibate life needs to be fully aware of this area of human experience and to help students to integrate their sexuality into a wholesome and healthy celibate religious life.

Students will inevitably experience tensions and challenges in the area of celibacy. Formators need to be prepared to help them. The more open and relaxed formators are in talking about sexuality and the challenges of celibate life, the easier it will be for students to talk about their issues.

Some of the areas of challenge are considered here.

#### **1. Un-integrated sexual needs and impulses.**

Depending on age and stage of development, sexual desires and impulses will be present and troubling. The desire for genital expression and pleasure is natural and can be controlled. Self-mastery and impulse control are an important part of the developmental stage of adolescence. Now the uncontrolled emotional outbursts of childhood are challenged and are no longer tolerated in the family or by peers. A gradual ability to control

emotional wants and the desire for immediate gratification is part of this phase of growth.

## **The importance of impulse control**

Impulse control is learned during adolescence. This is an essential stage in the development of a healthy sense of oneself and one's sexuality. The control of strong emotional outbursts is a measure of one's mature self-mastery. Feelings of anger do not inevitably lead to aggressive behavior. The same is true of sexual feelings. Self-mastery and impulse control are essential for a serene and peaceful life in the religious community.

## **2. Masturbation**

The Magisterium

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action" (n. 2352).

The psychological meaning of masturbation, and its spiritual significance depend on a number of factors. From a developmental perspective, infantile and adolescent masturbation is viewed more as exploratory behavior, while occasional masturbation in adulthood may serve as an outlet for tension. Abusive or compulsive forms tend to be considered harmful and a sign of some deeper problems.

Human beings are imperfect and on the way towards a greater level of maturity and human integration. Along this continuum, masturbation points to human imperfection and the fact that human growth remains unfinished. It is an imperfection that should not be dismissed or treated too lightly but something to struggle with and overcome. It is not always to be treated as a serious sin.

The formator can help a student by having an integrative view of his sexuality that sees it in the light of his overall situation, including the psychological difficulties and stress arising from his studies, relationships, and work. If it is chronic and compulsive it may be an indicator that he is not suited for a celibate life.

### **3. Flirting**

It is important that students in formation spend time with their peers and with young and older women. They have to develop interpersonal skills and a facility to relate in a mature and adult way with women. Flirting happens. It includes inappropriate physical closeness and touch, conversation about sexual matters, jokes and innuendo. It can seem innocent but it is simply seeking gratification of un-integrated needs, inappropriate intimacy, ignoring boundaries, inappropriate contacts, conversation and speech that is really disrespectful and abusive of others for one's own satisfaction.

Boundaries are necessary to mark the separateness of one person from another. They help to clarify the degree of closeness that is appropriate between people in particular situation. The boundaries between parents and young children are not the same as the boundary between a doctor and his patient.

The seminarian may be asked to work in a pastoral setting or parish. He will be expected to play multiple roles in the parish and to relate to people in a variety of circumstances. The pastoral role should be understood by the seminarian as a particularly sensitive role of caring for people who are vulnerable. Clear boundaries are needed to facilitate the pastoral care of the parishioner and to protect both the religious/priest and the parishioner from misunderstanding and hurt. The pastoral relationship is not an intimate relationship between equal adults who share a mutual and reciprocal friendship.

Supervision of pastoral work is an important help in the formation of the student and his growing in self-awareness and self-discipline.

### **4. Homosexual attraction and acting out**

The Magisterium

The Catechism of the Catholic Church 2357-2358 states, "the Church, while profoundly respecting the persons in question, cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies or support the so-called gay culture. Such persons find themselves in a situation that gravely hinders them from relating correctly to men and women. One must in no way overlook the negative consequences that can derive from

the ordination of persons with deep-seated homosexual tendencies” (See also *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 2017, nn. 199-201)

### **Homosexuals in the seminary**

How to respond to students who have homosexual feelings or behavior? Once again, the important thing is to listen with care and attention to see the overall context of the person’s life and stage of development. The following points might be helpful

(i) Adolescent discovery, exploration, curiosity.

Adolescents and young adults may go through a transitory stage of exploratory homosexual feelings and activity. Most grow out of this. The student may be caught in this stage and feel anxiety and guilt. He can be helped to move beyond this stage into a more integrated sense of self and his sexuality.

(ii) Situational homosexuality

This is the situation of heterosexual persons in a situation where there is little opportunity to meet and mix with members of the opposite sex. As a result, they may resort to same sex activity as a temporary means of sexual expression and release. This is not the expression of a preference or of a fixed and long-term sexual orientation. These feelings of attraction and desire can happen in the all male seminary situation.

It is important to decide if this is truly a case of situational homosexual acting out. If so, it can be successfully addressed and the person helped to move beyond it.

Intimacy needs and feelings of loneliness if not attended to can lead to inappropriate behavior. Lack of impulse control and self-gratification is also involved. These are not unusual or beyond help. The problem is when these become a fixed or habitual condition. The person can be helped to understand his behavior and to find more healthy ways of coping with emotional needs and sexual feelings. These feelings often arise spontaneously but they do not need to be acted on. They can be sublimated into other activities, hobbies or interests. If the person can speak openly about these matters, there

is a good chance he will also be willing to make the choices needed to change his behavior and give his life a different direction.

(iii) Relatively fixed homosexual orientation, fantasies etc.

A small minority of the general population have a strong inclination towards romantic and sexual relationships with members of the same sex. This inclination is not a choice they have made but they are faced with the challenge of choosing what to do with the inclination. Homosexual persons who feel called to the priesthood or religious life and are committed to live a chaste celibate life may experience added difficulties but if they are open they too can be helped to lead a healthy and fruitful religious and priestly life.

The Magisterium seems to be thinking about people in this category (iii) who also feel no tension between their sense of vocational calling and a homosexual lifestyle. Common sense dictates that homosexual persons who are not committed to a life of chaste celibacy do not belong in the seminary or the priesthood.

## **5. Falling in love**

People fall in love. In the seminary, this is usually a form of infatuation with another person that includes strong emotional content and may incline towards physical expression. The strong feelings are not necessarily reciprocated. It can happen as a result of loneliness or the human need for affection and warmth. Once again, depending on the personal situation of the student and his stage of growth, this can be addressed in the context of an open and caring form of accompaniment.

## **6. Chronic loneliness**

Loneliness is the painful feeling of being alone, separated, isolated, and unconnected to others. Loneliness can lead to anxiety, depression and even physical sickness. The lonely person experiences a lack of human warmth and affection. This feeling can be real despite the genuine love and affection of friends and family members. The lonely person may seek consolation in alcohol.

Loneliness may be caused by the loss of a loved one, rejection, failure in love, low self-esteem, a sense of inferiority, an inability to trust or

other factors. It may be a transitory experience or more long lasting. Sometimes a person may find it hard to identify the onset of painful loneliness since it seems to have been always present.

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Most people experience time alone but it does not cause suffering or stress. It can be a time to relax, get away from it all, to feel in tune with the cosmos or God etc. Everyone has to face the fundamental aloneness that is human existence. Each unique person came into the world alone and will leave this world alone. No-one can be born or die for us. These we must do alone.

Chronic loneliness is often accompanied by very strong needs for affection, companionship, friends, comfort. Unfortunately these needs are so strong that others feel overwhelmed or frightened. A very lonely person is not able to establish a healthy adult friendship because the emotional need is too strong.

How can those suffering from chronic loneliness be helped? The overall situation of the person needs to be taken into consideration. Issues of low self-esteem can be addressed by helping the person to see and appreciate his talents, gifts, achievements etc. Appropriate praise, appreciation and encouragement are important. The person can be helped to overcome the tendency to isolation by involvement in group activities and may be given some responsibility. Physical exercise is also important.

The chronically lonely person who is depressed can be a burden on the community and he may need to be encouraged to seek professional help. Eventually he may need to be encouraged to find another way of life.

## **7. Use of the internet,**

This is an increasingly important issue. The use of personal computers, notebooks and mobile phones has made the internet an indispensable form of communication. Students can access useful information, articles etc. for their work. Colleges communicate with their students using email, social media apps etc. This is an important part of daily life.

The internet also facilitates a range of cybersexual activities that are incompatible with our religious commitment. Among these activities are engaging in extensive sexually explicit exchanges on social media, email or chat rooms; downloading images or videos of explicit sexual activity; arranging sexual encounters.

Pornography is easily accessible for free on the internet. Young people are exposed to pornographic images from an early age. It is reasonable to presume that many of our candidates will have viewed pornography before joining us.

Religious should be aware that viewing pornography is incompatible with the commitment to live a chaste and celibate life. Pornography stimulates sexual fantasy and desire and often leads to self-stimulation and other forms of sexual acting out.

Those who are most vulnerable to cybersexual activities are individuals who suffer from low self-esteem, distorted body image, social isolation, or depression. Cybersexual activities can become addictive. Other psychological issues that may arise with this activity include struggles for intimacy, self-worth, self-identity, self-understanding. Vulnerable people should be supported and helped to avoid harmful use of the internet.

When the formation community is experienced as a safe place, when there is an environment of openness and trust, students may feel safe to talk about their use of the internet. Formators should also talk to students about the responsible use of the internet and about what is and is not appropriate.

## **8. Alcohol**

Sexual transgression is often accompanied by the consumption of alcohol. Alcohol weakens our normal defenses and self-control. When people have consumed too much alcohol they act out of character. Some become aggressive, others talk loudly and indiscreetly. Because the normal defenses are down, people will do things they don't normally do, including acting out sexually.

Alcohol abuse can be distinguished from alcohol dependence. Both are serious since they impair the functioning of the person and can cause serious mental and physical health issues.

