

## **SEX IS HOLY: PSYCHOSPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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Parents and child caretakers in today's world would have to be blind to miss the proliferation of sex in all aspects of our culture. Possibly it took the superbowl halftime show wherein a performers breast was displayed simply for shock value, or the modification of state laws legalizing gay marriage, to wake up the Christian community to the increasing "sexualization" of secular society. Sex sells. It sells in advertising, music, movies and television and in Europe one female newscaster broadcasts topless, so it even extends to reporting the news. One response could be: "What is the fuss all about?" "What is wrong with sex?" "Sex can be fun and pleasurable and if it is consensual what is the big deal?"

I strongly believe that one mistake made by Christians in response has been to react on a very simple theological and psychological level. For example, simply cite two of the ten commandments: "Thou shalt not commit adultery", and "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbors wife". Without the context of Divine Love and God's plan for divine love for us this is a recipe for disaster. I also believe it is not effective to say we must be "pure" as if sex is "dirty". I also maintain it is useless to argue: "Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit ... so be pure". Although the reasons just cited are absolutely correct, without the underlying profound spirituality or theology of Christian sexuality these reasons will not be very effective in curbing selfish, Godless sexual behavior and prompting deep loving Christian sexual behavior. In fact given the "fallen nature" of mankind telling someone what not to do, often is the incentive to make them want to try it out. This has been known through the ages as the "attraction of the forbidden fruit". An invitation to do the "prohibited".

Children even at young ages are exposed to our "sexual society" and have developed a rather protracted "knowledge of sexuality". A study done several years ago at a major United States university demonstrated the seriousness, ubiquity and deleterious effects of this exposure. The subjects in the study were 4-5 yr old children. They were shown primetime TV advertisements and then asked their interpretation of what was going on. The children's parents observed the procedure behind a two way mirror. For example in one scene, a man and women are in a kitchen. It is the man's birthday. The women say's something like "Ok, big boy now for your birthday present." [She seductively winks and goes out the door]. The man opens the refrigerator, takes out a can of whipped cream, looks at the camera, winks at the viewers, and exits the same door. The scene ends and the children are asked "What happens next?" The overwhelming majority of these little ones answered: they are going to have sex and he is going to lick the whipped cream off her body. The parents, and even the researchers did not expect such an "adult" interpretation in children so young.

Surely the use of sexual and scatological "cuss words", innuendo, rudeness, and crass behavior about sex and other body parts are at variance with Christian teaching. What should be done for our response to be effective? We know from psychological studies that "internalizing" the reasons for moral behavior facilitates individuals acting morally. Children who function on a "hedonistic" or pleasure level "act out" more than children who have developed higher levels of moral reasoning such as empathy. (Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Bear & Rys, (1994). Thus scientific psychology would suggest that presenting the morality of sexuality and sexual behavior on a higher level would make it more effective. In Kohlberg's (1976) system, the highest level of moral development are "universal ethical principles". For Christians the "theology of sex", based on Divine Love is at the highest principal infinitely beyond empathy or any other set of ethical standards. It goes to the essence of God Himself. St John tells us "...for love is of God ....God is love." (1 John 4:7-8) This is the love we are to have for one another. Archmandrite Sophrony (1999) reports St. Silouan the Athonite echoing the Church Fathers said: "Both Christ's commandments – of love towards God and love toward neighbor – make up a single life." The Church fathers have said the same thing. The Persons of the Holy Trinity interrelate amongst themselves in Love. Creation is an act of love between God and His creation. He creates in love and continues to keep the universe and mankind in being out of love. The infinite God, creates out of nothing, and continues to create through the laws of nature He has created. God has given

mankind through its two modes of male and female a share in His creation. Sexuality is the gift from Him, by which we share in His creation. Therefore, sexuality is holy and should be treated as such, because it is the way we were made to share in God's creation. The sexual organs are the instruments of this creation. God made them to be what they are anatomically and function the way they do. So they too are holy. Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb and she gave Him birth in the female way. Thus these body parts are holy. By the male sexual organ the seed of life is implanted. Because this is a Godly creative act, it too is holy. But it is holy only if it is used in the spirit of Love as God Himself created them to function. He gave it to us to be used only in the way He created: Love. He created out of self-emptying love. This is no better seen than in the Person of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave of Himself to us. In one of the most beautiful descriptions of the duty of spousal love St. Paul tells the Ephesians: ". Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..." (5:25) Therefore any type of sexuality which is self-centered, manipulative and degrading is impure, because it is not based on self-emptying, self-giving, committed creating love. Love always has as its core the good and welfare of the individual. It is for our good and welfare that we were created by God, our Father, redeemed by Christ in His act of "Extreme Humility" of embracing the cross, and sanctified, by the Spirit whom He sent. As Christ took on our flesh, a man and woman in marriage "...shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh." (Mat. 19:5-6) Thus the words of St. Paul to the Corinthians have so much meaning: "The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body". As God's love is not casual, crude, rude and self-centered; so too sexual love should not be this way. As God's love is giving, emptying and creative; so too should sexual love should be this way.

Parents have to be the main teachers of the Christ's Orthodox faith on human sexuality. This should be supported by clergy, clinicians and teachers etc. From early childhood to teen years, parents and child caretakers such as teachers should present this "theology of sexuality". This presentation must first be modeled by the parents themselves, in word and action. Use of crude words for body parts or the sex act undermines all holiness and sanctity of sex itself. It also bespeaks of unbelievable hypocrisy. Any presentation of sexuality must be age appropriate. Ordinary daily events give parents so many opportunities to discuss sexuality and its meaning. For example, young children, are naturally inquisitive. Frequently they ask about the sexual organs. Instead of shying away from discussion, this is an opportunity for parents (and other appropriate individuals) to tell them these are gifts from God. Children ask about birth. They should be told age appropriate accurate information: "This is how God, gave mommy the way to have your "little brother/sister" born", etc. What is most important is never to separate the explanation of sex from the love of God in terms of His creation and commitment to us and the creative act and commitment implied in the sex act within marriage. When family members are exposed to sex, devoid of God's creative love and commitment in the media, parents can comment on it. Simple interpretive comments on advertisements can be very effective. When a suggestive ad on TV appears for example, a parent may comment: "Look how this ad is using that seductive (look, posture, etc) where is the deep meaning and love they should have for one another as Christ had for us"? Comments do not have to be long and preachy. Children learn very effectively from short pointed statements. Use of analogy is also efficacious: "When we receive communion, Jesus is really in us we would never defile Him or the chalice that holds His Precious Body and Blood, so too we should never defile the body parts that God gave us to share in His creation."

Frequently sex focuses on the "hedonistic", pleasurable feelings that accompany a sex act. This topic should also not be avoided but addressed. God, does allow us to feel pleasure, this is the way He made us. The acts that can produce pleasure can be either be acts that help ourselves and others grow psychologically and spiritually, or can enslave us and others in terms of ordinary human development: socially, occupationally, and spiritually. Pleasure blinds and enslaves us, when we are motivated to act selfishly and not for the good and welfare of the other God asks us to Love. Pleasure as a result of a loving act, can help and motivate us to continue sharing in God's loving committed creative acts. In this context, parents and child caretakers can bring up other pleasure centered activities that have similar consequences. Drugs can be used to heal, as for example when recovering after surgery. Drugs can also addict, impede clear thinking

and prevent us doing well at school and occupation, etc. We become enslaved to pleasure instead of free in Christ's love.

The dignity and importance of the Christian vocation of parents becomes more meaningful after meditating on the beautiful prayer said by the priest as the married couple become "one flesh" in the Orthodox wedding service: "Unite them in one mind and one flesh, and grant unto them fair children for education in the faith and fear..." Reminded of this prayer may aid in parents remembering the reason for the spiritual depth of Christ centered marriage and parenting. This is the sacramental grace and commission bestowed on the newly married couple by the Holy Spirit. At evening prayer what a beautiful way to end the day would be for parents and all who work with children to say: "*Come Holy Spirit, [unite us in one mind and flesh] that our children be educated in faith and fear. Strengthen us for our appointed service as [parents, grandparents, caretakers] of our children. Let the Love of Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ impel us in all we say and do on their behalf*"

Clergy as part of an "adult education" program in a parish might want to include a section on the "Orthodox Christian Theology of Sex". This would also include material discussed above as it relates to adults and how such material can be incorporated into children's religious education at home and at religious school. Responsible religious education programs will include material interfacing what parents teaching (and modeling to) their children at home about sex. Clergy should be knowledgeable and comfortable discussing 'the theology of sexuality' with all parishioners. This would include taking account differing ages, sex, marital status, and cognitive and emotional maturity. With the continuing secularization of our society (**SEC·U·LAR·ISM**. 1. Religious skepticism or indifference. 2. The view that religious considerations should be excluded from civil affairs or public education. From The American Heritage Dictionary) it is all the more important that we put Christ and His teaching back into our lives, homes and society. Secular sexuality is proliferating. It is time for all leaders and healers to be zealous about developing a secular sexual **non-proliferation** action plan. Put Christ back into our lives, our homes, our schools and our society. Make sex holy again.

Glory to God in all things!

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