

## **Fourth Biennial International Sex and Relationships Education Conference**

**September 7, 2009**

### **Good Catholic Sex: an Insider's Guide to Religion and Sex in the Modern Era**

**Jon O'Brien**

**President**

**Catholics for Choice**

When I was growing up in Dublin, Ireland, my mother—who had to cope with four very loud, opinionated and unruly boys—had one rule at the dinner table. We were forbidden on pain of death to talk about three subjects:

RELIGION  
POLITICS and  
SEX

It is somewhat ironic that despite, or perhaps because of that, I have spent the last 30 years talking about and working on those very issues. Today, I would like to invite you to join me in that conversation.

Contraception, abortion, masturbation, sex outside of marriage, LGBT rights and comprehensive sexuality education...for centuries, the hierarchy of the Catholic church has denounced all things sexual. The question is still pertinent. Why does the Catholic hierarchy have such a problem with sex?

Before trying to get into the psyche of the hierarchy, it must first be noted that the hierarchy's views on sex are, by and large, quite different from ordinary churchgoers. A recent poll by Catholics for Choice found that in the United States—and these numbers are reflected around the world—six in ten American Catholics oppose requiring high school sex education programs to teach abstinence-only education. It will not surprise you to know that another poll found that 97 percent of sexually active Catholic women have used a form of contraception banned by the church hierarchy. A poll by the US bishops themselves found that only a paltry 11 percent of all Americans support a total ban on abortion. And despite what the pope says, Catholics around the world support condom use as prolife because it helps prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS, including 90 percent of Catholics in Mexico, 86 percent of Catholics in Ireland, 79 percent of Catholics in the United States and 77 percent of Catholics in the Philippines.

From Poland to Portugal and the Philippines to Pittsburgh in the United States, we see that Catholics are thinking and acting for themselves and their families. And, as good Catholics, we are perfectly within our rights to do so.

These numbers show that the hierarchy's attitude towards sex reflects neither the wants nor the needs of ordinary churchgoing Catholics, or non-Catholics for that matter. Rather, it reflects an ideology built on a history of unfortunate accidents—an ideology built by white, celibate men. It reflects the good, albeit misguided, intentions of some to devise a doctrine on sex that would bring Catholics closer to God. It reflects the bad intentions of a few to assert control over the private lives of Catholics and non-Catholics alike. It also reflects an unwillingness to change once-relevant doctrine and thought to respond to the needs, knowledge and scientific facts of our modern world.

Let's start, as they say, at the very beginning with a couple known as Adam and Eve. Throughout history, the story of Adam and Eve has been interpreted and reinterpreted by theologians, academics, believers and nonbelievers. And while the various interpretations could be debated for years, there is certainly no debate about the impact this story has had, especially in relation to sex and the Catholic church.

While many proponents of sex-negative ideologies, including the church hierarchy, now point to biblical stories like that of Adam and Eve for support, the history of sex and the Catholic church reveals that church teaching related to sex was, more often than not, based on temporal issues, not on biblical passages. It has far more to do with church politics than divine inspiration.

Early Judaism, from which Catholicism emerged, was full of sex-positive mantras and attitudes. According to the Talmud, heaven consisted of "sunshine, Sabbath and sex." Now that sounds good, doesn't it?

They saw the human as a whole person, honored bodily pleasure and did not value sexual abstinence. Furthermore in Judaism not only were all Jews commanded to marry and procreate but sexual intercourse itself was mandated on a regular basis to satisfy the sexual needs of both partners. Jewish mysticism even saw sexual union, particularly on the Sabbath, as an expression of the reunification of the transcendent and immanent (or male and female sides of God).

When Plato and Socrates arrived on the scene some 450 years before Christ, they sought to counter this notion of humans being whole people. Instead they split us into two separate entities—body and soul. It is here that we find the beginnings of sex-negative attitudes. Plato and Socrates valued abstinence above all other forms of sexual expression.

However, it would be a little while—more than 500 years—before Christianity adopted the sex-negative attitudes of Plato and Socrates. For about 33 of these 500 years lived a man named Jesus.

Jesus and his followers were Jewish. As such, many scholars assume that he embodied the sex-positive views of ancient Judaism. Some even suggest that Jesus pushed the sexual envelope, as it were, quoting passages from the Bible that show Jesus in close and unconventional quarters with members of the opposite sex.

The details of Jesus' actual lived experience are uncertain. However, it is interesting that some elements of Christianity seem focused on sex and sexuality, especially given that the Gospels very seldom mention anything on the topic.

This brings us to the writings of the Apostle Paul. These writings are often quoted to support celibacy, chastity and the inequality of women. However, it is essential that we acknowledge the context and time in which he was writing. Paul lived a very long time ago.

Paul believed that Judgment Day, or Jesus' second coming when the world would end, was just around the corner. It was going to happen in his lifetime, at any minute. If you heard the world was ending tomorrow you might do the same and embrace a chaste or celibate life, giving up beer and chocolate cake and doing the lottery. Or perhaps you might do the opposite. But what is important is that Saint Paul practiced celibacy because he believed that abstaining from sex "anticipated the reign of God." However, as he doubted the capability of his followers to hold to this standard, importantly he did not preach what he personally practiced. He did not require everyone else to be celibate.

The fixation on sexual repression reached its height at the Council of Elvira around 300 AD. The council, comprised of bishops, priests, deacons and laymen, issued 81 canons, or church laws. More than half of these canons deal with sex, covering topics ranging from adultery to interfaith marriage. Needless to say, these canons are less than positive on sex. Take, for instance, canon 63, which states, "If a woman conceives in adultery and then has an abortion, she may not commune [or have the sacrament of communion] again, even as death approaches, because she has sinned twice." (Canons of Elvira) They were a bit mean, these guys at the Council of Elvira.

It was with these canons from Elvira in place that St. Augustine entered onto the scene in 354 AD. Sadly, Augustine, who was on other topics a great thinker, framed the basis for the sex-negative attitudes of the modern church. Augustine believed that the sole moral justification for sex is procreation—a belief that would be reiterated again and again as grounds for banning contraception, homosexuality, masturbation, assisted reproductive technology and so on.

With such disdain for sexual pleasure, this left some confusion about marriage. As you know, marriage has a lot to do with going to IKEA and shopping for furniture. But it also involves sex. Around 1100 AD, along came Peter Lombard, a scholastic theologian and bishop. Lombard advocated for the recognition of marriage as a sacrament, although he considered it the lowest of the seven sacraments intended for third-class Christians. In making marriage a sacrament, Lombard did not seek to affirm sex (he actually was of the view that the Holy Spirit fled the room during marital sex). Rather, he sought to extend the control of the clergy over sex.

With the creation of sex as sacrament came more restrictions and a resurrection of Gnosticism—an ascetic or abstinence-driven spirituality. . Newly married couples were to abstain from sex on the following days:

- Thursdays in memory of the arrest of Jesus
- Fridays in memory of the death of Jesus
- Saturdays in honor of the Virgin Mary
- Sundays in honor of the resurrection
- Mondays to remember the departed soul

In addition, you were not supposed to have sex during the 40 days before Christmas, Pentecost and Easter.

These restrictions, designed by celibate male clergy, left only 61 days in which marital intercourse was deemed acceptable. To be kind, we will have to assume that these guys were on another planet than the rest of us.

These ideas on sex prevailed until the 1500s and the Protestant Reformation. During the Reformation, Martin Luther, John Calvin and King Henry VII (he of the six wives) moved away from these sex-negative approaches and made room for married clergy, divorce and eventually contraception and abortion.

As you can imagine, the Reformation sparked fear in the Catholic hierarchy: a fear of losing power and losing moral authority over issues pertaining to sex and sexuality. This fear continues to prevail in today's Catholic church and many of us argue that it is at the root of the problem.

For the past hundred years, the church hierarchy has published several encyclicals and declarations, further narrowing the already very narrow teaching on sex. Not surprisingly, the new teachings continue to fall upon deaf ears.

1930 saw the publication of Pope Pius XI's *Casti Connubii*, an encyclical on marriage. While this encyclical affirms marriage as a sacrament equal to religious life or unmarried life, it also reasserts the antiquated belief that the primary purpose of marriage, and by extension marital sex, is the propagation of life—that is to have kids.

In the 1960s it was—would you believe—a Catholic scientist who invented the contraceptive pill. The sixties were a time of great change including the possibility of civil and women's rights. People could be heard in new ways by government and the dominant power structures in our cultures.

Catholics the world over wanted change too and they held their breath that it might happen. In 1963, Pope John XXIII brought together a process of discernment called Vatican II. John XXIII was a great pope who believed in *aggiornamento* or bringing the church up to date. Vatican conservative insiders feared how the progressive vibes at Vatican II would deal with lifting the ban on contraception so they convinced John XXIII

to set up a special separate commission to reexamine the church's teaching on birth control.

After John XXIII died, Pope Paul VI expanded the commission and included married men and women. It was at this point that many believed a miracle happened. The conservatives at the Vatican stacked the commission with conservative, "no to contraception" bishops. But when those bishops heard from ordinary Catholics about childbirth after childbirth and sex and the pressures of married life, the hearts and minds of the bishops changed. The commission voted overwhelmingly to recommend that there was no obstacle in church teaching for the church to rescind its ban on artificial contraception. Can you imagine the lives saved if that had been accepted? Can you imagine what that would mean for women in developing countries today?

Tragically however, instead of listening to the commission, Pope Paul feared that, in the views of writers like Pulitzer Prize winner Garry Wills, the church would fall apart if the hierarchy admitted they might have got it wrong. Pope Paul did not have enough faith in Catholic people and so he favored a minority report compiled by a few conservative bishops who claimed that the teaching on contraception could not change. This report laid the groundwork for *Humanae Vitae* which cemented the ban on contraception.

After the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, it became clear to many members of the church hierarchy that the faithful were unlikely to follow this draconian teaching. And so, many bishops officially accepted the encyclical but reaffirmed the right of Catholics to follow their conscience about whether to use birth control. Dissent is hard for those who are in the employ of the institutional Catholic church but today there are still brave bishops speaking out. Bishop Dowling from Rustenburg South Africa is among them. He works in South African shanty towns where AIDS is crippling whole communities. Bishop Dowling believes that the Catholic hierarchy needs to allow the use of condoms because, as he says, it is not about preventing the transmission of life but stopping the transmission of death.

As the sexual revolution progressed and a growing number of Catholics began to question or completely ignore church teaching on sex, the Vatican published yet another declaration in 1975. This time the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith set out to provide the definitive document on sex. Yes, this was the bishops having a go at writing *All You Ever Needed to Know about Sex but Were Afraid to Ask*. Naturally, you should be afraid—very afraid—to ask. This document related to sexual ethics in order to put straight, according to them the "corruption of morals" found in the "unbridled exaltation of sex."

The declaration covers a number of topics:

- On sex outside of marriage: "[E]very genital act must be within the framework of marriage."
- On homosexuality: "The judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible

for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered and can in no case be approved of.”

- On masturbation: “[T]he moral sense of the faithful have declared without hesitation that masturbation is an intrinsically and seriously disordered act...the deliberate use of the sexual faculty outside normal conjugal relations essentially contradicts the finality of the faculty.”
- On sexuality education: “Whether it be a question of artistic or literary works, public entertainment or providing information, each individual in his or her own domain must show tact, discretion, moderation and a true sense of values. In this way, far from adding to the growing permissiveness of behavior, each individual will contribute towards controlling it and even towards making the moral climate of society more wholesome.”

Two years later, John Paul II was pope. In an attempt—perhaps a desperate attempt—to get Catholics on board with the sex-negative dictates of the church hierarchy, Pope John Paul II used his people- and communications skills to try and soft sell the church’s teachings on sex and sexuality. This soft sell is best seen in the publication of the *Theology of the Body*.

The *Theology of the Body* is a collection of Pope John Paul II’s reflections made at 129 papal audiences from 1979 to 1984. The reflections, based on biblical passages, cover many topics related to sex and sexuality including marriage, divorce, celibacy, contraception and adultery. John Paul II tried to clear Catholic teaching of any negativity around sex and revamp appreciation for the “goodness of sexuality.” Unfortunately, however, sex-negative ideologies still ran deep throughout these lectures.

In 1996, the Pontifical Council for the Family set down guidelines for sex education which are well worth a read. The guidelines support parents as the primary educators of their children and suggest that the “years of innocence (from age 5 to puberty)...must never be disturbed by unnecessary information about sex.” More chastity education than sex education, the guidelines warn against teaching about contraception or its evil twin, artificial conception, even after puberty.

Then, at the turn of this century, news of the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic church broke (again). And while the sexual abuse scandal has much to do with abuses of power, any telling of the story of sex and the Catholic church would be remiss not to mention this dark time in the church—from which many of us have still to recover.

Despite this setback in its claims to be a moral authority on sex and sexuality, the church hierarchy continues to assert its supposed authority on all things sexual. In 2008, the Vatican released its most recent declaration on sex, *Dignitas Personae*. This instruction on bioethical questions makes it clear that, in the hierarchy’s view, assisted reproductive technology is as damaging as contraception in that it overrides the “conjugal act.” So much for supporting and responding with Christian love to those who are called to have children. The hierarchy’s culture of life is myopic about how you have sex and does not

take into account what motivates our actions or the true love that underlies our motivations.

This most recent foray attacking assisted reproductive technologies shows the hierarchy's determination to apply ancient teachings to modern circumstances. Despite this determination (and the monetary and political power the hierarchy has to support it), countries with a large and powerful Catholic presence have still managed to overcome the protests of the church hierarchy to create good comprehensive sexuality education programs not to mention a host of other legislation supporting sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Take, Mexico, for instance. Back in 2006, Mexico, a country that is overwhelmingly Catholic, adopted government-mandated textbooks which included good information on sex and relationships. The bishops called the information in these books "pornographic" and suggested that it would lead to "sinful behavior." They asked the government to recall the textbooks but the government insisted that government-run programs should be based on scientific evidence and the bishops were defeated. Similarly, in the most populous Catholic country in the world—Brazil—the government of President Lula, on the heels of a special papal visit no less, still held up the needs of the people and proceeded with a condom and contraceptive program despite the vocal objections of the Catholic hierarchy.

In some areas of the world, the church hierarchy has been much more amenable to sexuality and relationships education. Here in the UK, for instance, the church hierarchy has been solidly supportive of sex and relationships education, somewhat surprising given the hierarchy's history opposing contraception and abortion at every turn.

Last year, when the British government released their commissioned report on Sex and Relationships Education (SRE), the Catholic Education Service, funded by the bishops, came out in support of the government's efforts. They supported a "values context" for SRE. In addition, they supported the rights of parents to be the primary educators of children—although they asserted that they hoped parents would not exercise their right to opt out of the SRE program. Finally, they supported the government's respect for the autonomy of faith schools.

Indeed, the government ought to respect the autonomy of faith schools. Where these schools are completely independent from the government and do not accept government funds, the government should not have a mandate over the type of education that is administered. However, where taxpayer money is used, then taxpayers should decide what type of curriculum is implemented. And while some secularists disagree with the autonomy of faith schools, it must be said that neither extreme—forcing faith schools to teach comprehensive sexuality education or forcing public schools to conform to religious ideologies—are beneficial to parents or students.

Importantly neither should it be assumed that private faith schools do not develop progressive, evidence-based programs for sex and relationships education. Catholics,

Muslims, Christians, Jewish, and other parents of faith are just as concerned that their children get the same sort of support to manage this aspect of their lives as does anybody else. Education experts here in the UK tell me that some faith-based private schools actually have very well developed curriculums. Indeed Vincent Nicols, the archbishop of Westminster, developed a marvelous program when he was archbishop of Birmingham called “All that I Am” which had age-appropriate information for children at primary level schooling. Catholic parents had an integral role in developing the successful program and were partners in its implementation.

Those working for comprehensive, evidence-based sex education should not lump all of us who are people of faith into the camp of the minority who believe in a flat earth approach to sex education. Equally those of us who are parents and have religious beliefs must speak up and cannot allow a uberconservative minority to monopolize our parent teacher meetings and take away the sort of comprehensive lifeskills education that we want for our kids.

Conservative Catholics were outraged at the bishops’ support for SRE. The National Association of Catholic Families in the UK sent a letter to the Catholic Education Service in which they accused CES of “arrogantly and undemocratically attempt[ing] to usurp our rights and challenge our moral authority as primary educators and protectors of our children.” Fear mongering and muck throwing are the usual lobbying tactics of this sort of opposition the world over.

However, CES forged ahead, relatively unfazed by these ultraconservative Catholics. This year, when the British government proposed to make Sex and Relationship Education compulsory in primary schools, CES again supported the government. The only difference was that there was a bit more support for an opt-out clause. On this, a CES spokesperson stated, “This is a crucial right in a community where parents are the first educators of their children.”

My hope is that staff at international health organizations like the UNFPA will take a lesson from the UK’s Catholic bishops. Recently it was reported that the UNFPA caved in after a small campaign by minority religious pressure groups in the United States and withdrew its support for some UNESCO developed sex education guidelines. UNFPA staff and their colleagues in other similar organizations need to have more faith in people of faith and stand up for what we believe in.

Surely, parents are the first educators of the young. However, sex education should not just be about what parents and educators think young people need or what we fear they may get up to. It should be about what young people actually need. Which brings us to the question: what does good sex and relationships education look like?

Currently, much of the impetus for sex and relationships educations is based on preventing what are problems—teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Certainly in the United States it appears that the only way to sell sex education to policy makers is that sex education exists to prevent disaster as opposed to being an integral part



of self-development. I believe that problematizing sex education may be a way of selling the need for it in the short term but it can lead to programs that instill more fear than confidence for those seeking to lead healthy sexual lives.

A quick story from one of my colleagues at Catholics for Choice: His children, seven and nine, attend a state school in Washington, DC. One day, my colleague got a letter that his children were to receive their first lesson on sex education from a rape crisis counselor. As they did not want their children's first sex education experience to be focused on the negative, he and his wife exercised their parental right to opt-out of this session.

Young people need to know about sex and relationships to lead full and healthy sexual lives. Sex and relationships education should never be framed in the context of fear; rather, we need a growth-centered curriculum that helps young people become healthy adults. Sex and relationships education needs to be fact-based and evidence-based. And certainly for Catholics, sex and relationships education can and should be values based.

Catholicism inherently contains all that is needed for sex-positive teaching. Catholic teachings afford individuals the right to make moral decisions about their lives. At the heart of church teachings on moral matters is a deep regard for an individual's conscience. The *Catechism* states that "a human being must always obey the certain judgment of his conscience."

Equally important is church teaching on respect and human dignity. Belief in the inherent dignity of every person is the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. However, as Catholics, we believe that humans are both sacred and social. This means that only in healthy and respectful relationships with others do we discover the dignity within ourselves.

Using these two teachings alone as guidance, Catholics can, in good conscience while upholding the respect and dignity of others engage in healthy sexual activity and maintain a positive, values-based attitude towards sex.

In finishing my remarks today let me say that there is no doubt that many in the church hierarchy globally are behind the times when it comes to teachings on sex. All the while, they are sitting on important church teachings which provide for a positive, healthy outlook on sex and sexuality.

Luckily, churchgoing Catholics around the world are already following their consciences. Catholics are using contraception, exercising a right to choose, masturbating, having sex outside and inside of marriage, living blessed lives as LGBT people as well as allowing their children to receive quality comprehensive sexuality and relationships education. Time will tell when the church hierarchy releases its fear-filled death grip on antiquated church teachings on sex and begins to respond to the health needs and desires of all people. Until then, good Catholic sex and sexual decision making is happening all around you. Take a look and see.