

# THE BENEFITS OF MARRIED SEXUAL LOVE

By Sister Renée Mirkes, O.S.F.

**A** pastor ought to discuss the meaning of human sexuality with every engaged couple who come to him asking to be married in the Church. I raise this point because some people involved in Catholic marriage-preparation programs in the United States are considering a completely different approach. They suggest that, in the pastor-couple interviews that take place in the months or weeks before the wedding ceremony, if the engaged couple raise questions concerning sexual issues, then sponsor couples or lay counselors (not the priest) ought to handle the matter.

I believe this latter proposal is ill-advised (and even disquieting) for three very important reasons. The couple, the priest, and the Church — each in its own way — would stand to lose. And by lose I mean the engaged couple and the priest (and by extension the ecclesial Body of Christ) would be deprived of divine guidance and an opportunity to learn to love as God loves.

Think about it. When a pastor and an engaged couple reflect together on the Church's vision of human sexuality and prayerfully submit their minds to divine Truth and guidance in these mat-

ters, it is the Holy Spirit Who assists them to find and travel down a proven path toward sexual maturity. It is the Spirit of Jesus Who will transform each of them consistently to become a more whole — that is, a more holy — person.

Focusing on what's gained from such an exchange is the best way to expose what would be lost. And accentuating the positive — the couple, the pastor, and the Church all stand to benefit from this dialogue — has an important added advantage. It reveals (and perhaps even debunks) the tendentious misconceptions lurking behind the reasons that people commonly give for limiting clerical involvement in sexuality instruction: Priests aren't married (and, ostensibly, are incompetent to prepare others for marriage); priests are confused about their own sexuality; priests are often judgmental and off-putting on these sexual questions.

## 1) The Couple Benefits

What a priest does when he presents the nature of sexuality and marriage within the Church's "total vision" of the human person is to invite the engaged couple to make it their shared, lived vision. And what a countercultural vision it is! Goodbye to the sex pol-



Church's teaching on sexuality, the engaged couple encounter 20 centuries worth of the lived truth about the human body, sexuality and marriage.

The pastor's first order of business is to impress upon this couple that their central consideration ought to be that of the Church: The vocation to marriage is a love-centered not a rule-dominated call. The controlling question for the couple should not be, "What must we avoid doing, or what rules must we avoid breaking?" but, "How do we live a life of sexual love that conforms with our dignity as human persons who are called to the vocation of marriage?"

So, for example, when evaluating specific sexual issues such as contraception, sterilization, reproductive technology, adultery, premarital sex or divorce, the priest is not primarily concerned to show the couple how these practices break some external rule, but how they suppress the interior dimension of the gift that marks them as sexual human beings — how these actions fracture the life-giving communion of persons that their marital sexual love is meant to foster.

The playbook the priest and couple study together — God's plan for marriage and marital sexual love — is as old as Adam and Eve, but, as Jesus taught, as relevant in successive ages as it was at the dawn of creation. In fact, the Book of Genesis holds up the relationship between the first man and the first

lution that is all too familiar to the couple — sex for sale, sex as a tool, sex outside marriage, sex without love, sex on demand and sex without boundaries. Hello to the clear, clean mountain air of the Church's theology of the body and sexuality — a life-giving sexual love that is, at once, expansive, invigorating and truly liberating.

The truth of the matter is that the height and depth of this kind of exposure boggles the mind. It means that the couple are the beneficiary of the combined wisdom acquired not only by their priest but also by all of his advisers after counseling scores of engaged and married couples. What's more, in discussing with their pastor the

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woman — one that is human, total, faithful and fruitful — as God's peerless plan for all men and women who marry. Thus the priest points out:

- Human beings — this woman and this man who are engaged — are by nature embodied persons who are sexual beings. Male and female, masculine and feminine are two wonderfully different but complementary ways of being a body, two ways of being in the image of God.

- The sexual differences between this man and this woman, rather than being a source of division between them, are what will bring them into the unity of love, into the most intense sort of communion possible between two bodily persons: the one-flesh union of marriage.

- In their sexual union, the husband and the wife come to understand the mystery of their unique sexual identity. In making a gift of himself in sexual intercourse, the husband comes to understand his own sexual identity — what it means to be a male human person — and in receiving her husband and making a gift of herself in return, the wife comes to understand her sexuality — and what it means to be a female human person.

- Both husband and wife come to know that, in their mutual acceptance of the unique sexual identity of the other, they complement and complete each other as embodied, sexual persons.

- In their marital embrace, a husband and wife are an icon, or a manifestation, in human form of that interpersonal, dynamic, generative love of

the Triune God. Thus genuine married love naturally diffuses itself; it's a love that manifests its perfection in creating a new human life with God.

And what better context for the priest to raise the issue of responsible family planning than the discussion of a sexual love that is life-giving? Out of a genuine fatherly concern, the pastor explains to the couple that being open to life means, fundamentally, that they should do nothing deliberately to suppress the procreative good of their sexual love. Or, stated positively, responsible

parenthood means that, as husband and wife, this couple understand and respect the fertile/infertile phases of their reproductive cycle and intelligently (prudently) use that knowledge to achieve and avoid pregnancy according to the dictates of their marital circumstances.

Abstinence during the fertile phase of their cycle (needed at times in their marriage when the couple is avoiding a pregnancy) will provide occasions for the couple to acquire the much needed virtue of marital chastity. The pastor will be quick to point out that neither priestly nor married life can flourish without this virtue. Only a chaste husband and wife can freely give first place to the good of the other as each of them honors the common good of their procreative plans.

The Church's realist position on sin has always been a direct indictment of society's ambivalence on the matter of choosing evil. It is no small favor, then, for the priest to help explain to the engaged couple how the law of the gift,



the law of genuine self-giving that is essential to their sexual love, has been corrupted through original sin and its effects. Thus in the presence of sin and sinful tendencies — sure to rear their head amid the “stresses and strains of a developing marital relationship” (“New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law,” Paulist Press) — the pastor cautions this couple that their married love could easily turn into lust, their freedom of giving into the freedom of taking, their desire for mutual self-donation into domination and subservience, and their desire for the other's good into the desire for passing pleasure.

Since the fall of man is only a part of the picture, however, it's also no small favor for the priest to point out that everything that is human, including the body and sexuality, has been redeemed by Christ. The priest can give the couple this assurance: With Christ at the center of their marriage and the source of sacramental graces, it is possible for them to live out marriage with a purity of heart and an openness to new life, as God intended it to be lived “from the beginning.” The alienation between the sexes, the domination and subservience, the use and abuse of their fertility and each other — all these adverse effects of sin, the stuff out of which ruined marriages are made — can be overcome by cooperating with God's grace working in the couple. This husband can love his wife as his own body, and this wife can respectfully receive that love so that both practice “mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21).

## 2) The Priest Benefits

Master teachers will be the first to tell you that knowing their subject matter, continually improving their presenta-

tion skills, and really wanting their students to learn are the essential ingredients of scholastic excellence. Similarly, every time a priest takes the opportunity to study and discuss the Church's vision of the human body and of marital sexuality — out of love for the couple — he gets better at it. He not only avails himself of another chance to make a gift of himself to this engaged couple sitting in his office, but he becomes more effective in teaching Catholic sexual morality and more proficient in helping others to apply it to their lives.

A second benefit for the priest — the opportunity for a personal examination of conscience — is closely related to that of becoming a better teacher. Sharing with couples the Church's teaching on, and his own lived experience of, sexuality is a constant reminder to the priest of the graces and responsibilities of his own calling to be *alter Christus* — an embodied male person who is called to lay down his life, as Christ did, for others.

Every time he “breaks open” the Church's rich tradition on personhood and sexuality for another engaged couple the priest encounters himself and the quality of his own lived sexuality. For the priest, marriage-preparation interviews are self-revelatory, graced moments that encourage him to take a personal inventory. They prompt the pastor to ask: Do I work at acquiring the charity and self-control that are essential to being able to love as God loves? A conscientious pastor knows that he cannot be about the important task of helping couples develop the virtues essential to sexual maturity — charity, prudence, temperance, courage and chastity — without at least being on the way toward mastering those virtues himself.

Predictably, it is the law of the gift that becomes the pastor's principal examination point and leads him to a healthy self-scrutiny. Is my celibate love human, total, faithful and fruitful? Do I give first place to God and thus to the good of my parishioners and the Church in whatever I do? Does my interpersonal love, just like God's love, manifest its perfection in giving life? Do I administer the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick in a fatherly spirit, fully conscious that the fatherhood of God flows through me as I baptize, anoint, forgive sins, feed and strengthen those human/divine persons whom I serve? Is exercising spiritual paternity — assisting those in my care with the means of grace, enlightening them with the light of truth — the highest priority of my priestly service? Do I delight in my sacramental duties, so that my first concerns are not administrative but spiritual: bringing to birth, healing, strengthening the Christ-life in those entrusted to my care? Do I spiritually contracept in the sense of suppressing new spiritual life in others due to my selfishness, worldliness, laziness, failure to teach in full harmony with the Magisterium or failure to set a good example in the use of my own sexuality? Have I given myself totally to Christ and His Church?

### 3) The Church Benefits

The Church is a body. Just as the human body is healthy when its individual cells and organs are operating cooperatively, so the Body of Christ is a well-functioning organism whenever its individual members are harmoniously interacting with every other member together with Christ their Head. The priest is *in persona Christi*, and it is

Christ Whom the couple invites to stand at the center of their married life. When you think about it, the prenuptial interviews may be the first time that this man and this woman, as a couple, encounter Christ through the person of their pastor.

With the eyes of faith, the engaged couple will be given the grace to acknowledge that it is Christ Who teaches them, guides them and ministers to them, so that they will intend for their marriage what the Church intends: a communion of persons that is indissoluble and open to life. The pastor-couple interviews, then, are nothing other than a re-enactment of Christ's love for the Church.

Furthermore, priest-couple interviews that address marital sexuality help to guarantee the liturgical integrity of the Church's wedding rite. What the couple pray and celebrate in the wedding ceremony expresses, fosters and nourishes their faith. How personally or ecclesially effective can it be when the priest gives a homily during the wedding liturgy that is "drawn from the sacred text," and that speaks "about the mystery of Christian marriage, the dignity of wedded love, the grace of the sacrament, and the responsibilities of married people" — as the marriage rite stipulates — but does so absent any previous consideration of these realities in his prenuptial interviews with the engaged couple?

Or, when the priest asks the couple in the context of their wedding vows, "Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and his Church?" is the question a rhetorical one? Surely not! But mere effect is precisely what you get when this query is insulated from any previous priest-couple discus-



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sions about family planning and a love that is open to life.

Or, when the priest-celebrant prays for God's blessing on the newly married woman so that she may be "a good wife and mother," on the newly married man so that he may be "a faithful husband and a good father," and on husband and wife that they may "enrich [the] Church with their children," the blessing is not intended to be a petition in the abstract. It should be proximately rooted in a deep desire of the newly married couple for God's help in welcoming new life, in being good parents, and in building up the family of the Church. And that desire, in turn, ought to follow from prior efforts of the pastor to help the couple appreciate the demands and rewards of the Church's vision of responsible parenthood. The marriage liturgy itself teaches the newly married couple that they "signify and share in that mystery of unity and fruitful love that exists between Christ and the Church" (Canon 1063).

Finally, as the Bishops' Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices points out in "Faithful to Each Other Forever," "the married couple and the family that grows from their mutual love" share in the Church's life and mission. First, they are prophets who "speak in the name of God and proclaim God's message"; second, priests who "live holy lives that will radiate Christ's love to all those who come in contact with them"; and, last, kings who "have the task of building a better Church and world through their loving service of others." ✚



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Franciscan Sister Renée Mirkes is director and editor of The NaProEthics Forum, which analyzes the Catholic view of natural procreative ethics.