

# INTRODUCTION

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When a former student of mine, now a book editor for Ave Maria Press, first approached me about editing a book on sexual integrity, I was intrigued and excited. I have long been concerned that the Church historically has not given people, particularly the laity, a robust approach to sexuality. And now we are all paying a dear price for that across every vocation—broken families, disillusioned parishioners, disgraced clergy, vocations miscarried and abandoned.

When an energy as powerful as our sexual drive is not given constructive outlets or guidelines, other than being viewed as an occasion of sin, it tends to go underground and emerge in ways that are hurtful to us, to others, and to our relationship with God: sexual trafficking and abuse, hookups (sex disconnected from love and relationship), and a wide variety of sexual addictions, including pornography addiction.

Educator and author Parker Palmer tells us that we live in the shadow of our leaders. All of us have been deeply disappointed in witnessing the ripple effect of sin as bishops and priests tried to hide the sexual abuse crisis in the Church, and in doing so violated the souls and destroyed the lives of countless children, adolescents, and adults. But this is not the whole story of our Church. St. John Paul II has provided us with a positive approach to our sexuality through his teaching on the Theology of the Body. Had anyone else written this theology, it would have been critiqued as too good to be true! Since its publication, there have been many other books written on human sexuality as well.

So why another one? What is missing? What is missing is the personal witness and testimony of men and women who have struggled to live by the Church's teaching on sexuality and, in so

doing, model for us what sexual integrity looks like. So, I invited Catholic women and men from a variety of vocations and backgrounds to share their personal and professional stories regarding the integration of their sexuality into a healthy spiritual life. My hope is that their wisdom, drawn from personal experience, will enable you, the reader, to gain insight into how to live out your sexuality with authenticity and integrity within a mature, vibrant Christian spirituality.

## My Story

Providing some of my own background will help explain why this topic is so important to me. The scriptural passage “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10, JB) expresses the goal of my life and my ministry.

This focus began many years ago during my first teaching position as an instructor at Marygrove College in Detroit, Michigan. When students came to talk with me about what was going on in their lives, I realized that there was a disconnect between their Catholic faith and their life experience that could best be summed up in an observation of one young man: “You can’t be Catholic and enjoy sex.”

To tackle this unfortunate state of affairs, I decided to offer a course titled “Faith and Human Development.” Many of these young adults had never considered the possibility that God was inviting them into a personal relationship with him; they had no idea that God was encouraging them to find him in all the circumstances of their lives, including their sexuality. But as we studied Erik Erikson’s stages of human development interwoven with James Fowler’s stages of faith development, these students came to view their faith as a spiritual journey to wholeness and holiness. I made the decision then and there to devote my professional life to helping people see the connection between their Catholic faith and their human experience as an avenue of God’s grace.

I chose Catholic University of America for my doctoral studies for three reasons: First, as a Catholic laywoman in the Church, I wanted a strong background in Catholic theology and spirituality.

Second, I was looking for a consortium of schools that would allow me to pursue the centerpiece of my studies—the relationship between human and spiritual development. Third, Washington, DC, provided me with the opportunity to receive a certificate from the Shalem program in spiritual counseling—and later, a faculty position at the Washington Theological Union, where I taught courses in spirituality and human and spiritual development.

In 1988 I returned to Detroit to marry my wonderful husband and join the faculty of Sacred Heart Major Seminary. It was an extraordinary blessing that enabled me to fulfill my deepest personal desires as a wife and mother and to use my professional training as a theologian in the Catholic Church.

Over the years, as wife, mother, professor, and spiritual director, my commitment to help people grow in wholeness and holiness has only deepened and intensified. I came to realize that many people lacked a clear understanding of their Catholic faith, and most had a false or distorted understanding of the Church's teaching on human sexuality. As one well-educated businessman remarked to me, "I didn't know the Church had anything positive to say about sexuality." And again, as I gave a presentation in which I described sexuality as an avenue of God's grace, a young man in the audience laughingly remarked, "You've got to be kidding me!" Over the years, experiences like these have motivated me to focus special attention on the role of sexuality and its impact on our spiritual lives.

## Sexual Integrity and Family Life

After the birth of our son, my husband and I discovered that we were unable to have another child, and so we decided to adopt a child from Russia. At an orphanage outside of Moscow, we adopted a beautiful two-year-old girl. We immediately fell in love with this bright-eyed but scared and very wary little girl. Over time we experienced our daughter's heartache over feelings of abandonment and rejection by her birth parents. We also experienced the consequences of a lack of skin touch—the absence of

hugs, kisses, and cuddling that are so essential during the first years of life.

I recalled psychologist Erik Erikson's observation that "the need to experience a confirming face, not only at the beginning of life, but to some extent throughout life . . . is a psychobiological need just as basic as food and water. The infant feels recognized when it senses its very presence has awakened in the parent an inner joy—a joy which is, in return, radiated back to the infant in the parent's countenance, voice and touch."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the years, with plenty of love, hugs, and kisses, our daughter's deep wound became a scar. The loss would always be there but it did not control her, and she experienced the security that comes from knowing she is deeply loved by her adoptive family and a thoughtful, caring community of relatives and friends. Many adopted children whom we have met have not fared so well. We knew many who, in the teenage years especially, pursued sexual relationships as a way to fill the emptiness they felt inside. But these relationships often exacerbated the situation, causing more hurt, disappointment, and pain.

Our daughter's high school counselor told us that the most vicious fights were often between girls, and always over a boy. With probing, the counselor often found that these girls seldom had fathers who were physically and emotionally present or who gave them a confidence in their femininity such that they did not need to seek it out in unhealthy ways.

These experiences motivated me to speak as often as I could to parents of young and teenage children regarding their own human, sexual, and spiritual development, its impact on their children, and the positive or negative effects of their parenting skills. One new young father told me he had no idea that parenting was such a responsibility; he also had serious misgivings about his capability to nurture the spiritual life of his children when he realized he didn't have much of a spiritual life himself.

## Spiritual Direction at Sacred Heart

One of the privileges of my ministry at Sacred Heart Seminary is the opportunity to serve as a spiritual director to people from all walks of life. The purpose of spiritual direction is to accompany individuals who are seeking to grow in their relationship with God. This journey includes recognizing and dealing with anything that blocks growth in that relationship as well as our relationship with others.

Within this context I have had the opportunity to accompany many individuals working through issues of sexuality that they felt were hindering them from growing in love for themselves as well as their love of God. Their stories were both deeply personal and unique: a young man struggling with an addiction to masturbation, a young woman confused about her gender identity, a religious woman involved in a sexual relationship with another woman, a married woman discerning whether to stay in a marriage with a husband consumed with an addiction to pornography, a young woman grieving the end of a marriage, a priest trying to be faithful to his call to priesthood yet discovering the joy of falling in love with a woman. With each situation I have been reminded of the power of sexuality as a force for love, life, and blessing, or as a source of hurt, pain, confusion, and disappointment.

Along with the ministry of spiritual direction, I have also taught a course that enabled students to recognize the crucial difference between their *espoused* theology (what they think they believe) and their *operative* theology (the beliefs out of which they actually live and minister). In her book *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings*, Sr. Janet K. Ruffing provides the following example of the difference between the two:

Thirty-year-old Sister Mary is making her annual retreat. She is seeking greater intimacy with Jesus in her prayer. While on retreat she discovers through the help of her director that although she believes Jesus is loving,

compassionate and interested in her (her *espoused* theology) she actually harbors a hidden fear that drawing closer to Jesus will inevitably result in suffering (her *operative* theology).

Her director suggests that her relationship with Jesus might feel different if she stopped approaching it as if she was going to the dentist. When Mary realizes she is operating out of a theology other than the one she thinks expresses her belief, she becomes free to act on her espoused theology.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years I have recognized the importance of having students identify the negative messages or “scripts” regarding sexuality that many of them have unconsciously internalized from their families, church, and culture. Acknowledging these messages gives the students the freedom to choose and minister out of their espoused theology, that is, the positive, life-giving theology of sexuality they were exposed to through their courses.

## Sexuality and the Spiritual Life: Opposing Perspectives

In the many years I have taught the history of Christian spirituality, I have identified two opposing perspectives that have influenced our teaching on sexuality and the spiritual life. One is biblically based, the other based in a kind of spiritual dualism.

The first begins with the Old Testament revelation that God is the author of all creation and that every part of it is good. It continues in the New Testament, which celebrates the Word becoming flesh in human history. Jesus, in the fullness of his humanity, affirms every part of us—body, mind, and spirit—as *good*. The second perspective locates its origin in the heresies of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, Manichaeism, and Stoicism. Each promotes a spiritualistic dualism that splits apart things that essentially belong together—spirit against nature, soul against body, reason against passion, *agape* against *eros*, Church against the world. It finds its most influential expression in the teaching of St. Augustine, whose

personal struggle with sexual addiction left us with a negative view of sexuality as the chief source of sin.

As Christopher West points out in his book *Theology of the Body Explained*, this negative view of sexuality continues to this day: "A suspicion toward the physical world and discomfort with all things sexual is by no means a neurosis induced by Christianity. It hangs like a dark shadow over all human experience. Yet, the Church still struggles today to counter the spirit good–body bad dichotomy which many people assume to be orthodox Catholic belief."<sup>3</sup>

Within the broader Christian tradition, this spiritualistic dualism often led to an overemphasis on the ascetic life and, in the pursuit of holiness, the decision to leave the world and flee to the desert or monastery to live a life of celibacy as the preferred avenue of God's grace and blessing. And yet, it is important to note that Jesus did not choose to leave the world to find God. He spent his days in the Temple and in the marketplace, teaching and healing, finding God among the people so in need of his message of unconditional love and mercy. He was a man who could enjoy a wedding feast and who was not known for extreme fasting or asceticism; rather, he was a man who deeply needed and loved his friends, and was not afraid to embrace them or touch those in need of healing.

Considering the influence of this spiritualistic dualism within our tradition prompts us to ask the question, What message is communicated about the body when saints such as Catherine of Siena, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius of Loyola ruined their health in their denial of their bodies' basic needs? What image of God would motivate them to think that God was pleased to have them treat their bodies in destructive ways? Later in their lives, having gained some wisdom, each regretted their earlier decisions, for those choices impacted their ability to minister as effectively as they wished.

In the study of our spiritual tradition, it is edifying to see how God drew each of these saints into a deep relationship with him, but the strange silence around their sexuality is mystifying.

Of course, we presume that these great friends of God must have channeled their sexual drive into their love and service of God and others, but there is no explanation as to *how*. In his book *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Fr. Ronald Rolheiser states, "Spiritual literature tends to be naïve and in denial about the power of sexuality, as if it could be dismissed as some insignificant factor in the spiritual journey, and as if it could be dismissed at all! It cannot be. It will always make itself felt, consciously or unconsciously."<sup>4</sup>

## The Meaning of Sexuality

The word "sex" has a Latin root from the verb *secare*, which means literally to "cut off," "to sever," "to disconnect from the whole."<sup>5</sup> Many people are surprised by the negative connotation, yet does it not express our experience of life? We are pushed out of the warm, nurturing womb of our mothers into a world that will often be experienced, even in the best of circumstances, as arbitrary, inhospitable, or not necessarily committed to our well-being. Feeling incomplete or disconnected, we often search out relationships that will make us feel connected, secure, and whole. And one of the most universal ways of doing this, as the Hogans point out in their chapter, "The Joyful Dance of Sexual Connection," is through our sexuality.

Unfortunately, the term "sexuality," as commonly used today, does not reflect its original meaning. On the contrary, it only carries the very narrow connotation of having sex. For the purposes of this book, we prefer a broader meaning: *Sexuality is our way of being in the world as gendered persons*. It includes our self-understanding as male or female, our body feelings, and our attitudes. Most important, sexuality refers to an all-encompassing energy inside us—the drive for love, community, friendship, family, affection, wholeness, joy, delight, self-transcendence.

This understanding of sexuality is beautifully described by James B. Nelson as "God's ingenious way of calling us into communion with others through our need to reach out and touch and embrace—emotionally, intellectually and physically."<sup>6</sup>



In his later work, *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, Nelson further describes sexuality as the desire for intimacy and communion, both emotionally and physically. It is the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity to love. At its undistorted best, our sexuality is that basic *eros* of our humanness—urging, pulling, luring, driving us out of loneliness into communion, out of stagnation into creativity. Sexuality, thus, is a deep human energy driving us toward bonding and compassion, and without it, life would be cold and metallic. Even in its distorted and destructive expressions, sexuality betrays this fundamental longing. It is God-given for no less than that.<sup>7</sup>

### The Relationship between *Eros* and *Agape*

Such an understanding necessitates a renewed interpretation of the relationship between *eros* and *agape*. In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*, Pope Benedict XVI points out that there are three distinct meanings to love: *eros*, the drive toward communion; *philia*, the love of friendship; and *agape*, self-sacrificing love.<sup>8</sup> Benedict questions the Enlightenment critique that Christianity destroyed *eros*. He admits that the Christianity of the past is often viewed as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed. Yet, he maintains that Christianity has not destroyed *eros* but rather has declared war on a warped and destructive view of it—the perspective that *eros* is principally a kind of intoxication, an overpowering of reason that strips *eros* of its dignity and dehumanizes it.

Pope Benedict explains that it is neither spirit alone nor the body alone that loves. On the contrary, it is the whole person, composed of body and soul, who loves:

Christian faith, at its best, has always considered [the human person] a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrates and in which each is brought to a new nobility. True, *eros* tends to rise “in ecstasy” toward the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very

reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing. (*DCE*, sec. 5)

The pope insists that only when both dimensions are truly united does the human person attain full stature. Only thus is love—*eros*—able to mature and attain its intended grandeur. For us to be fully human, then, *eros* must mature into *agape*. And in Jesus, the incarnate love of God, we find the integration of all three: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*.

### Sexuality and Spirituality: Two Sides of the Same Coin

Given our description of sexuality as the drive for intimacy and communion physically, emotionally, and spirituality, as well as a renewed understanding of the relationship between *eros* and *agape*, what then, is the relationship between our sexuality and the spiritual life? Christian spirituality refers to the response we make to God in Christ through the power and energy of the Holy Spirit. That response takes place within the concrete experiences of our lives, which includes our sexuality. Our attitudes toward sexuality can either hinder or facilitate our growth toward a healthy spiritual life. The very energy that moves us toward communion with one another is the same energy that moves us into relationship with God.

A Christian spirituality, then, should affirm the presence of God and the sacred in our sexual feelings and expressions. It should view sexuality as an avenue of God's grace and see sexuality not as an enemy but as a friend. It is within this framework that I have invited men and women from every state in life to share their personal stories and professional insights regarding their own quest for sexual integrity and spiritual health. My hope is that their honest description of their struggles and successes will help others who desire to reclaim this part of their lives in order to live out their vocations with greater integrity, wholeness, and intimacy.

## About This Book

Because sexuality and spirituality are essential components of the lived human experience, I was careful to seek out the experiences and insights of men and women from every walk of life: married and single (whether by choice or design), those who are ordained or professed members of religious communities, and those whose journey toward sexual and spiritual integrity presents particular challenges, including homosexual attraction and sexual addiction. Finally, I sought the particular expertise of those with considerable experience in forming the next generation of vocations—again, to both marriage and Holy Orders or religious life.

These ten chapters have been organized according to the particular needs of each vocation, beginning with married life (since the vast majority of Catholics marry and have families), followed by the single life (arguably the next largest group), consecrated, and finally ordained. My hope is that these deeply personal perspectives from all walks of life will enable you, the reader, to better understand not only your own vocation, but that of others as well, so that we might learn to better appreciate and encourage one another as we seek wholeness and authentic intimacy. Each chapter concludes with a set of questions that may be used for personal reflection or group discussion.

I am forever grateful to Ave Maria Press for supporting the vision and conviction of my editor, Heidi Hess Saxton, that now was the time to write this book. I am deeply indebted to Heidi for her gifted editorial skills. Each contributor expressed admiration and appreciation for her ability to help them clarify their thinking and refine the quality of their work. I am most thankful to all the staff of Ave Maria Press for the design, layout, and shepherding of this book to publication.

I also want to express my appreciation for the administration and faculty of Sacred Heart Seminary, who have been supportive and encouraging of my efforts to write this book. Lastly, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the men and women who contributed chapters to this book, for their willingness to be

open and vulnerable, and to share their professional and personal experience to help others. At a time when so many Catholics are conflicted about the issue of sexuality and faith, both in how they profess it and in how they live it out, these brave testimonies are a welcome invitation for Catholics from every walk of life to consider where God is calling them to experience healing and growth. Perhaps that is exactly what inspired you to pick up this book in the first place! My prayer for you, then, as you begin to read this book, is that you will find the answers you seek in these pages.