

The Experience of the Church with MCP: The Catholic Perspective

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The Bible

According to the bible, God created men and women and their sexuality. God created them in his image according to his own likeness, and God saw that everything he had created was very good (Genesis 1:26-31). According to Jesus, marriage is sacred (Matthew 5:31-32) and makes a man and woman to become one flesh; God joins them and no one should separate this unity (Matthew 19:6).

The bible is also clear that adultery and sexual immorality are not to be tolerated, and that men should glorify God with their bodies (1 Corinthians 6:15-20).

We want to emphasize again that there are some specific sexual behaviors that are forbidden in scriptures. Adultery, that is, having sexual intercourse with another person's spouse or another partner other than one's own spouse, is a sin. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, deepens the importance of marital faithfulness by extending the prohibition of infidelity to include a lustful thought life as well as the physical act of intercourse. Looking into our minds and hearts is an important principle for safeguarding the delights of intimacy.

Scripture is also clear about the evil of fornication—premarital sexual intercourse—which most of our culture accepts as normal and irresistible. We see many couples suffering from the consequences of their early promiscuity. The "sexual freedom" of our time isn't free and usually carries some pretty heavy costs.

The Perspective of the Catholic Church

The teaching of the Catholic Church with regard to risky sexual behaviors is clear and unchangeable. Sexual activity is permitted only in the context of a permanent and mutually faithful marriage. In addition, marriage is considered to be indissoluble.

Previously, the Catholic Church would not and could not engage in any activities that promoted or condoned sexual activity between husband and wife. However, precisely because the HIV pandemic threatens the very survival of individuals, families, and communities, the church responds to this threat from its fundamental mission to protect life and thus dedicates itself to prevent the further transmission of HIV. Clergy as well as religious and lay leaders have been trained so that they, in turn, can educate themselves and the members of their parishes and local faith communities about the problems and risks associated with this pandemic. Rather than focus on a narrow or mechanistic view of HIV prevention education, the church continues to promote and encourage sexual relationships that are based upon mutual respect for God-given dignity and mutual responsibility within the context of permanent and faithful marital relationships.

The Catholic church also respects sexuality and views it as a blessing from God as clearly stated in our Catechism: “Sexuality, by which a man and a woman give themselves to each other through exclusive and proper actions of the spouses is not something purely biological but it concerns the human person in his intimacy where man and woman love each other up to death.”¹

We consider sexuality to be an integral part of the dignity and transcendental vocation of man and woman as they are created in the image of God. Human sexuality supposes, expresses and realizes the integral mystery of the person. Therefore, all explanations that tend to reduce sexuality to a biological dimension are poor. Sexuality needs to be taken seriously because it is a sacred issue which is oriented to life, and it is useful for the transmission of life. Sharing sexuality with somebody means sharing life with that person.²

Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II developed the theology of the body whose main points are:

- God reveals his mystery in and through man’s body;
- The relationship between man and woman must reveal God’s love;
- Their sexuality and love must be oriented to life;
- One of the primary ways we remain open to the Spirit is by *remaining open to children*. Who is the Holy Spirit but the Lord and giver of life? Those couples who close their union to children at the same time close their union to the Holy Spirit. Their union is no longer a sign of God's Trinitarian love but, in fact, it becomes a *counter-sign* of it;
- The Pope congratulates the African culture and family for their respect and openness to life, for their love of children, for receiving their children with joy, for respecting their ancestors who they believe intuitively continue to live and commune with them, and finally, for their sense of solidarity and community life³;
- The battle against the scourge of HIV ought to be everyone’s battle.

Pope Benedict XVI

In his visit to Australia, Pope Benedict XVI dedicated particular care and attention to the issue of sexuality. He appealed for true love that brings life and condemned the permissive approach to sexuality that brings death.

Authentic love is obviously something good. Without it, life would hardly be worth living. It fulfils our deepest need, and when we love, we become most fully ourselves, most fully human. But how easily it can be made into a false god! People often think they are being loving when actually they are being possessive or manipulative. People sometimes treat others as objects to satisfy their own needs rather than as persons to be loved and cherished. How easy it is to be deceived by the many voices in our society that advocate a permissive approach to sexuality, without regard for modesty, self-respect or the moral values that bring quality to human relationships! This is worship of a false god. Instead of bringing life, it brings death.⁴

¹ CEC, n° 2361

² Cf. *op.cit.*, p. 49

³ Jean-Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n°43

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI. (2008, July 18). Choose the path of life and shun the path of death. *Zenit.org*. Available at <http://www.zenit.org/article-23258?l=english>.

On his way to Cameroon on March 17, 2009, the Holy Father observed that AIDS “is a tragedy that cannot be overcome by money alone, and that cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms which even aggravates the problem.”

He insisted that chastity and fidelity are divine qualities that are ingrained in the traditional teachings of the church.

The African Bishops

The Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), in their XIII Plenary Assembly held in Dakar in 2003, elaborated a common plan to fight against HIV/AIDS and reaffirmed the same doctrine of chastity and fidelity as follows:

We want to educate appropriately and promote those changes in attitude and behaviour which value abstinence and self-control before marriage and fidelity within marriage. We want to become involved in effective sexual education ...to help young people and couples discover the wonder of their sexuality and their reproductive capacities. Out of such wonder and respect flow a responsible sexuality and method of managing fertility in mutual respect between the man and the woman. This type of education can only be undertaken effectively with the active collaboration of lay men and women who not only speak about principles of morality but also, as youth and as couples, give living testimony that fidelity to these moral principles yields a humanising and sexual life.

This commitment was adopted by all Episcopal Conferences of Africa and the Islands and guides our churches' responses to HIV. I would like to mention the example of Bishop Maurice E. Piat, C.S.Sp., Bishop of Port-Louis, Mauritius who very clearly summarized this educational message and strategy as follows:

The Catholic Church makes her contribution to the struggle against AIDS ... by appealing to what is most noble in the human being: one's conscience. Indeed, what allows a person to become truly responsible is to learn how to reflect on his behaviour, to know how to control himself and to become free by being honest in relation to the moral values of life, by reflecting on his sexual behaviours and by being inspired by the meaning of love, fidelity and chastity.⁵

The 2nd Synod for Africa

In this Synod held in Rome in October 2009, the bishops from Africa and from all parts of the world were convened by Pope Benedict XVI to reflect on both the present and future of Africa in the light of the Gospel. They had a special message for African families – a message that once again asserts the sanctity of marriage and traditional cultural and family values:

We now turn our attention to our dear Catholic families of Africa. We congratulate you for doggedly remaining true to the ideals of the Christian family and retaining the best values of our African family. We alert you to be on your guard against some virulent ideological poisons from abroad, claiming to be ‘modern’ culture”.⁶

⁵ Piat, M.E., C.S.Sp. (2006). The prevention of AIDS. In *Speak out on HIV & AIDS* (Rev.ed.). Paulines Publications Africa.

⁶ Message to the People of God of the 2nd Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, #24, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_message-synod_en.html

The Theology

According to some young African theologians, some cultural practices that contribute to a quick spread of HIV and AIDS include polygamy, circumcision, sacrifices, the levirate, marriages of minors, genital mutilations, traditional medicine as well as multiple concurrent sexual partnerships. Therefore, it is up to the person or the populations involved to discern cultural practices that are not against human development. If this happens, the reduction of HIV will be assured. HIV invites us to embark deeper into a reflection of sexuality and view it as a marvelous gift that needs to be properly used. St. Paul's text is very clear in this regard when he considers the bodies of Christians as members of Christ. Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to subject the members of Christ to the service of a prostitute and impurity because "the one who abandons himself to a prostitute sins against his own body" (1Corinthians 6:15-17).

HIV and AIDS must invite us to reflect upon the greatness of love and life. God created sexuality in order to help us live the mystery of love and life in the best way possible. As a matter of fact, sexuality is neither dirty nor a taboo. It is good, created by God for life and love; it is there to assure prosperity and posterity.

Christ came to give life and give it in full (John 10:10). Man and woman are called to collaborate for the fulfillment of this plan through a proper orientated use of their sexuality. This means the rejection of whatever is against chastity and fidelity. Many explanations are given to encourage the observation of sexual deviations such as multiple concurrent partnerships. In the light of this, the Church needs to go back to God. He himself said to man, "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28).

Therefore, in the plan of God, human love is oriented toward creation of life in the context of family. Sexuality has three objectives that should not be dissociated from each other: love, remade concupiscence and procreation. Following this line of thinking, sexual acts must be realized within marriage in strict respect to the partner. In this way, it becomes a source of blessings. For this reason the people must be educated. Love is a marvelous gift at the service of life; a gift that makes man a collaborator in God's project of procreation.

Based on the recent documents of the church, Carlo Rochetta⁷ summarizes the principal elements of the theology of sexuality:

- Moral and sexual education should be developed at all levels;
- Sexuality is a constitutive dimension of the human person;
- Sexuality differentiates between man and woman at all levels: biological, psychological and spiritual;
- We are sexual beings in all parts of our bodies and in all aspects of our lives.
- Sexuality is not egoistical, nor is it simply individual pleasure; it is an appeal to love and commune with another;
- Sexuality must be mature and integrated and demonstrated in love and communion, availability to others, patience, tolerance, spirit of sacrifice, bounty of heart, serenity and responsibility in regard to one's duties;

⁷ Rochetta, C.Cf.(1990). *Pour une théologie de la corporéité: Théologie de la tendresse. Un évangile à redécouvrir*, EDB, Bologne, 2000, 137-142.

- “Chastity before marriage is recommended to Christians and even boy and girl friends who prepare to get married in order to be in conformity with Christ’s model of all chastity (Galatians. 3:27). [Similarly]... married couples are invited to exercise marital chastity according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.”⁸
- Fornication and its different forms are highly condemned because sexual relationships should only occur within a marriage.
- Consequently, every sexual activity out of marriage is a sin or a big disorder, including cohabitating, prostitution and the keeping of concubines.

Thus, we can affirm and promote the church’s teaching on human sexuality, including its relevance to HIV prevention education, with both scientific and theological confidence. In order to increase the acceptability and effectiveness of abstinence and fidelity campaigns, more and more church leaders are taking the time and effort to explain the *why* of the church’s teaching rather than thinking it sufficient to *just say no*.

Examples in the Field

The Catholic Church has joined other faith traditions to offer practical action in response to the risks and dangers posed by multiple concurrent sexual relationships. In 2006, UNAIDS noted the behavioral patterns of multiple sexual partnerships and reached out to Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, and World Vision in order to encourage the heads of Christian communities to intensify the AIDS response of the faith communities in Lesotho. Faith leaders were convened and received detailed briefings about the rate of multiple sexual relationships in Lesotho. It is estimated that approximately 90% of the population in Lesotho is Christian, with 65% as Roman Catholic and 25% as Evangelical, Anglican, and other Christian denominations. In addition, Lesotho also is “home” to a generalized epidemic of HIV where the adult population (15-49 years old) has a 25% or higher infection rate. Despite the fact that many people from this country are frequent church-goers, public health experts found that both men and women had an average of four to five concurrent sexual relationships and that married people had more concurrent sexual partners than did single people.

After receiving this information and reflecting on the threat posed by dangerous activity to the life and future of the population, the religious leaders publicly signed a “Statement of Commitment” to the fight against HIV and AIDS in Lesotho. The signing ceremony was held at the Lesotho King’s Palace and was attended by the King of Lesotho, the Prime Minister, multiple Government Ministers, the Director of the Lesotho National AIDS Commission, the Ambassadors to the U.S. and Ireland, and the heads of many international and local organizations. These same church leaders then attended a two day training session on HIV and AIDS so that they themselves could be knowledgeable in their efforts to convince the faithful in their congregations about the need to observe sexual fidelity within marriage. In conjunction with World AIDS Day 2007, and with the help of local consultants, these church leaders produced and jointly approved an educational resource called *The Sunday Pack*. This is a series of ideas for local church leaders to use during homilies and when presenting HIV and AIDS topics to their congregations. Each *Sunday Pack* lesson addresses a topic related to HIV and AIDS and includes a scripture verse, personal story, discussion topics, and a place for notes.

⁸ CEC, n° 2349

Finally, the church leaders gave their approval to a *Faith-based Prevention Campaign* designed by Catholic Relief Services and World Vision and funded by the U.S. government. The Campaign was designed to address issues relating to sexual abstinence and faithfulness among specific age and gender groups in a way that would encourage positive behavior change and HIV risk avoidance behavior. The key messages targeted the youth by promoting delay of sexual debut until marriage as well as avoidance of early sexual activity and cross-generational sexual activity. There were also messages urging fidelity in marriage and avoidance of multiple partners and cross-generational sexual relationships.