

GO ORGANIC: THE SCIENTIFIC CASE FOR CATHOLIC SEXUAL ETHICS

by Jennifer Roback Morse, Ph.D.

The Catholic Church has taken more heat over its teachings about sex than any other topic. You may be surprised then to learn that modern science is on the Church's side. That's right. The Church's traditional teachings can now claim the authority of both social, evolutionary and biological sciences. I learned this while doing the research for my book *Smart Sex: Finding Life-long Love in a Hook-up World*.¹

I wrote *Smart Sex* as a protest against all the dumb sex that is going on in our world. I have to confess how I got to be an expert on smart sex and its opposite: I've tried many of the hare-brained things I write about. That's how I know they don't work.

So, here is a quick quiz. Which demographic group has the most sex? The best sex? What kinds of relationships face the most sexual violence?

Answers: Married people have more frequent and more satisfying sexual relations than the unmarried.² As for sexual violence, marriage is by far the safest kind of sexual relationship, both for women and their children. Rates of domestic violence for cohabiting and for dating couples are higher than for married couples. Children are more likely to be abused by their mothers' boyfriends than by their mothers' husbands, even when the boyfriend is their own biological father.³

Do these politically incorrect facts surprise you? The key to understanding them is to get past the modern vision of sex that I call "Consumer Sex." That view holds that sex is a private recreational activity with no moral or social significance. Sex is just for fun. Don't take it too seriously. Just stay safe and don't get pregnant. This view is so prevalent that it is hard to avoid, even if you've been well formed in Catholic teaching.

I call the alternative vision "Organic Sex." This view of sex, which happens to be the Catholic view, is that sex is an organic reality, with two natural purposes written into the human body. The first purpose is procreation. The second is to build up and solidify the couples' relationship. Building a long-term relationship has survival value for a species whose young have a long period of dependency. The offspring of parents who work with each other to stay together are more likely to survive than the offspring of parents who can't or won't cooperate with each other. The fact that sex is "fun" is along for the evolutionary ride. The fun is nature's way of getting us to keep the species, and the most basic unit of the community, going.

The procreation part of this equation ought to be self-evident. The widespread acceptance of contraception and abortion has obscured the reproductive purpose of sex for many people. Some have entirely written off the reproductive aspect of sex, viewing it as an interesting optional feature that one can utilize later in life if one decides to have a child.

But since even Planned Parenthood calls the sexual aspect of our bodies "the reproductive system," let me not dwell upon it. Let me say more about the bonding part.

Science can now show the physiological pathways by which we attach to our sex partners. The physiology is different for men and women. During sex, women secrete a hormone called oxytocin. This is the same hormone that we experience when we give birth or are nursing our babies. Some experts refer to oxytocin as the attachment hormone, because this hormone causes us to both relax and connect with the person we are with. In the aftermath of sex, we relax and commit to our sex partners. Immediately after birth, we begin to bond with the new arrival. While we are nursing, we relax and connect with our babies as well.⁴

In all these situations, oxytocin, the bonding hormone, has survival value. Connecting with our babies helps us to take pleasure in being with them and caring for them, even at times when it wouldn't ordinarily be very pleasant (like in the middle of the night). Connecting with our sex partners increases the chances that we will stay together long enough to build a stable home and raise a baby to adulthood.

What about men? At least one psychologist argues that jealousy helps men to connect with their sexual partners.⁵ A man doesn't feel jealous or possessive toward every woman he sees, or even toward every woman he finds attractive. He feels jealous over women he has had sex with.

Men must compete for women, and women prefer men who will be faithful providers for them and their children. The fact that women have a choice compels men to be more faithful, and less philandering than they might otherwise like to be. The evolutionary payoff for men to settle down with particular women is the assurance that the children he invests in are indeed his own. Possessiveness helps him settle down.

Possessiveness is the dark side of male attachment. The bright side of the very same tendency to attach is loyalty. Men are capable of heroic loyalty to their wives and children, to their teams, companies and countries. Our culture indulges in so much male-bashing that we sometimes overlook this salutary fact about the male half of our species. Loyalty is the desirable trait which is signaled by male jealousy. Even though male possessiveness can be a nuisance or worse for a woman, most women are looking for men who have the capacity to commit.

So the Catholic understanding of sex, which dates back to the Apostolic Age, is supported by modern evolutionary biology and endocrinology. Biblical authors and Church fathers recognized that sex has a procreative purpose and a unitive purpose. Now, science can show that they knew what they were talking about.

This biological tendency to bond with each other means that, in a very real sense, casual sex isn't even possible. There is a reason guys come unhinged when they find out their "friend with benefits" has another "friend." There is a reason girls sit by the phone, wondering whether the guy they hooked up with the previous night will ever call them again. The basic desire to create a lasting bond with our sex partners is built into our physiology. So, the Church is right again. Messing around outside marriage is not as much fun as we've been led to believe.

Most people hope to get married someday. We hope, then, that our sexual lives will be very meaningful and that we will matter very much to the other person. We hope that someday we can relax into that great intrinsic meaning, written into our bodies. In other words, we want Organic Sex, where sex builds up a permanent relationship with our spouse.

But many people have already participated in five, ten, or maybe fifteen years of Consumer Sex by the time they get married. The habits created during those years of Consumer Sex undermine the ability to create healthy married relationships. The most basic problem is that Consumer Sex affects how we see and treat our partners. When we treat sex as just recreation our sex partners become means to that end – they become consumer goods. And we all know what we do with consumer goods that don't satisfy us: we get rid of them. It takes time and deliberate thought to overcome the habits created in that environment.

The Catholic Church has always taught that we should treat others as we want to be treated. John Paul II, in the "theology of the body" and in his earlier work *Love and Responsibility*, makes it very clear that it is always wrong merely to "use" another person to serve our own purposes. And, of course, our own experience shows us the problem with using other people. No matter how much fun we think we're having during casual encounters, the truth is that no one wants to be on the receiving end of the "use and be used" culture.

Another common pitfall is cohabitation. Many earnest young people live together because they are afraid of divorce. Some have already been through the divorce of their parents. These young people very much want to get married and stay married for a lifetime, but this seems too risky. So they live together, thinking it is safer than marriage.

But the social sciences have shown that living together is not good preparation for marriage: people are more likely to divorce if they lived together before marriage than if they did not. The habits created before marriage are a crucial part of the reason. The organic reality of sex is that it bonds people together. Sex is and ought to be an act of complete self-giving. But cohabiting couples often hold back on each other. Instead of giving with abandon, they calculate whether it is in their interest to stay in the relationship or leave it. They practice not trusting. They practice conditional, not unconditional, love. Instead of the “love and be loved” Catholic model of marriage, the cohabiting relationship enshrines a “use and be used” consumer approach to dealing with each other. Once again, social science validates Church wisdom. Cohabitation is a bad idea.

It is no good to say that it is perfectly okay to use each other by mutual consent. The agreement would amount to this: “I am willing to let you use me as if I were a commodity, as long as you allow me to treat you as if you were a commodity.” This is a bogus bargain. We can say at the outset that we intend to be the “man of steel” or “woman of steel.” But we can’t credibly promise to have no feelings of remorse, pain or jealousy if and when the relationship fails.

In order to keep this agreement, a person would have to be steeling himself or herself against certain kinds of feelings. Many cohabiting couples have a set of unmentionable questions, including: “Where is this relationship going?” The woman tries to broach the question, but gets pushed back by the man’s reluctance to commit. Rather than challenge the stability of the relationship, she lets it slide. If they eventually do get married, they need to con-

front the issues they avoided, as well as that habit of letting important things slide. Even marriage counselors and marriage preparation specialists may find it very difficult to help them address these issues.

For two millennia, Holy Mother Church has been trying to tell us that marriage is the only appropriate context for sexual activity and for child-rearing. The Church has been trying to tell us that Organic Sex is the path that will make us happy. Today, science shows that she has been right all along.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Morse, Jennifer Roback. *Smart Sex: Finding Life-Long Love in a Hook-up World*. Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2005.

² Waite, Linda J. and Maggie Gallagher. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially*. New York: Doubleday, 2000, Chapter 6.

³ A recent study in *Pediatrics* confirmed this long-standing finding that children are more at risk from unrelated males in their households, especially from their mothers’ boyfriends. Schnitzer, Patricia G. and Bernard G. Ewigman, “Child Death Resulting from Inflicted Injuries: Household Risk Factors and Perpetrator Characteristics,” *Pediatrics*, 2005; 116; 687-693; available on-line at www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/116/5/e687.

⁴ Crenshaw, Theresa L. *The Alchemy of Love and Lust*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997, pp. 90-105; Taylor, Shelly E. *The Tending Instinct: How Nurturing is Essential to Who We Are and How We Live*. New York: Times Books, 2002, pp. 24-28.

⁵ Buss, David. *The Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy is as Necessary as Love and Sex*. New York: Free Press, 2000.

PROGRAM MODELS

The good news is that today there are a variety of excellent programs and resources on Catholic and Christian sexuality/ chastity/ marriage.

Jennifer Roback Morse has developed all-day leadership training workshops for pastors, youth ministers and counselors, and shorter workshops for the public, covering cultural and personal aspects of casual sex, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce. Also available are programs such as “Love Is Worth the Effort” (one designed for singles, one for couples) and “Changing the Terms of the Debate” a hands-on workshop to improve pro-life/ pro-chastity communication strategies. See www.jennifer-robback-morse.com for more information on programs and print and CD resources.

Jason Evert. Chastity speaker’s program materials are found at www.catholic.com/chastity.asp.

Familia Catechetical/ spiritual enrichment programs for husbands/father, for mothers of young children, and youth programs, designed for small groups: <http://www.familiausa.net/>

Family Honor, Inc. offers a variety of chastity programs, training, resources, etc.: www.familyhonor.org.

Free to Be offers Life Choice One peer training and curricula; a religiously-neutral program of Central California Catholic Charities: www.free-to-be.net.

Generation Life develops young adult leadership by recruiting, motivating, and training young adults and college students to spread the pro-life and chastity messages to their peers and to teens: www.generationlife.org.

Keys to Chastity 4-class series for parents and teens from Northwest Family Services (NWFS): www.nwfs.org/keystochastity.htm.

LifeSaver Retreats 1-day workshop retreats for teens from NWFS: <http://www.nwfs.org/lifesaver.htm>.

Peers Educating and Encouraging Responsible Sexuality (PEERS) offers program, training materials. See on-line video for more information at: www.peersproject.org/index.html.

Project Reality offers Game Plan and Navigator curricula, plus additional resources: www.projectreality.org.

Real Love, Inc. Program and materials by chastity educator/motivator Mary Beth Bonacci: www.reallove.net/index2.asp?CID=1.

Reapteam is a Catholic youth retreat ministry of the Archdiocese of St. Louis: www.reapteam.org.

YAM, Young Adult Ministry of the Archdiocese of Atlanta; check the website for great, cleverly marketed, programs: <http://www.yam.org/yam.cgi/>.

RESOURCES

Teaching Documents

Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life). Pope John Paul II, 1995.

Familiaris Consortio (On the Family). Pope John Paul II, 1981.

Humane Vitae (On the Regulation of Births). Paul Paul VI, 1968.

The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan. Pope John Paul II. (forward by John Grabowski, Ph.D.) Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997.

Baker, Robert, Bishop of Charleston, “The Redemption of Our Bodies”; available at www.ccli.org/pdf/PastoralLetterUpdated.pdf.

Chaput, Charles J., O.F.M. Cap., Archbishop of Denver, “Of Human Life” (a pastoral letter on the truth and meaning of human love); available at www.archden.org/archbishop/docs/of_human_life.htm.

Flavin, Glennon P., (late) Bishop of Lincoln, “In Obedience to Christ”; available at <http://ccli.org/nfp/morality/b-flavin.php>.

Galeone, Victor, Bishop of St. Augustine, “Marriage: a Communion of Life and Love,” available at http://www.dosafll.com/index.php?page=leadership/bishop-pvg_pastoral.

Martino, Joseph F., Bishop of Scranton, “A Pastoral Letter on Chastity”; available at <http://ccli.org/nfp/morality/b-martino.php>.

Pennsylvania Bishops, “Questions and Answers on Cohabitation”; available at <http://www.pacatholic.org/bishops/%20statements/index.htm>.

Print

Books

Arnold, Johann C. *Sex, God & Marriage*. Robertsbridge, U.K.: Plough Publishing House, 2002.

Cavins, Jeff et al., *Amazing Grace for Married Couples*. West Chester, Pa.: Ascension Press, 2006.

Grabowski, John S. *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Catholic Moral Thought). Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003.

Hogan, Richard M. and John M. Levoir. *Covenant of Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992 (First edition: Doubleday, 1985).

Kippley, John F. *Sex and Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality*. Cincinnati: The Couple to Couple League, 1991.

Lawler, Rev. Ronald D., Joseph Boyle and William May. *Catholic Sexual Ethics. 2nd Edition*. Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1998.

Lukas, Carrie. *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Women, Sex and Feminism*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2006.

Morse, Jennifer Roback. *Smart Sex: Finding Life-Long Love in a Hook-up World*. Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2005.

Padgett, Chris and Linda. *Not Ready for Marriage, Not Ready for Sex: One Couple's Return to Chastity*. Cincinnati, Oh.: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2006.

Rhoads, Steven E. *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004.

Schu, Walter J., L.C. *The Splendor of Love: John Paul II's Vision for Marriage and Family*. New Hope, Ky.: New Hope Press, 2003).

Smith, Janet (ed.). *Why Humane Vitae Was Right: A Reader*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.

Torode, Sam & Bethany. *Open Embrace: A Protestant Couple Rethinks Contraception*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2002.

West, Christopher. *Good News about Sex & Marriage*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Publications, 2000.

Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II's Sexual Revolution. West Chester, Pa.: Ascension Press, 2004.

Wotyla, Karol (Pope John Paul II). *Love and Responsibility*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993.

CD/ DVD

A wealth of excellent videos, CDs and audio cassettes can be found at One More Soul (www.omsoul.com) and Life Cycle Books (www.lifecyclebooks.com, in the on-line catalog under abstinence).

Note, in particular, the following CDs at One More Soul: “Contraception: Why Not?” by Janet Smith; “John Paul II’s Theology of the Body” by Christopher West; “Why NFP?” by Jason Evert; and “NFP Talks for Clergy” (also available on audio cassette).

Note, in particular, these videos from Life Cycle Books: “Sex Has a Price Tag” (Pam Stenzel); “Sex Is Not a Game”; “Sex, Lies & the Truth” (Christian and secular versions available); and “Sex, Love & Relationships” (4-session, 2-video curriculum, with leaders’ guide and reproducible handouts).

“Taking a Stand: Helping Our Kids Win the Battle for Sexual Purity,” by Tom Curran and Mary Beth Bonacci, is a 5-video (or 5 DVD) set for parents: www.mycatholicfaith.org/resources_bonacci.html.