

# SEX: WHAT DO WOMEN (AND MEN) REALLY WANT?

*by Theresa Notare, M.A.*

From all corners – magazines, movies, TV and "talk shows" – there's no escaping the message: What people want and *need* is the latest car, a leaner body, more sex and more money. Such things can be alluring, but their pleasure is fleeting, and ultimately unfulfilling. They bring neither lasting happiness nor love.

The false cultural messages are not without impact. You may spend more than you can afford on the car you thought you couldn't live without. Or buy gym equipment to get into shape that ultimately ends up as a clothes tree in the corner of a room. But when people allow themselves to be misled with regard to sexuality, love and marriage the impact can be serious and destructive.

When dealing with the gift of human sexuality, we need to see beyond the beguiling enticements and look very critically at the facts.

Science provides a wealth of information about human fertility. Not only do we know what constitutes a healthy reproductive life of males and females, but we know how to suppress fertility with contraceptives or facilitate it with reproductive technologies. Within this world of techno-wizardry, few stop to ask if manipulating fertility is healthy or good.

There are many devices and chemicals to control a woman's fertility and they all have serious side effects. In April 2004, for example, an 18-year old New York woman reportedly died from a blood clot, resulting from her use of the contraceptive "patch". Norplant can cause irregular bleeding and increase the risk for ovarian cysts, blurred vision and migraine headaches. Various forms of "the Pill" increase the risk of blood clots, high blood pressure, gallbladder disease, cervical cancer, migraines, heart disease, and depression. Hormonal contraceptives can also act as abortifacients. This is clearly not healthy or good for women.

Today's obsession with controlling human fertility has led millions of women and men to unknowingly put their health and fertility at risk. The dominant societal message that sexual activity is morally neutral – as long as it is in private and consensual – has fostered the practice of multiple

sexual partners and given rise to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). After the sexual revolution of the 1960s, it took only two decades for the U.S. to reach epidemic levels of STDs.<sup>ii</sup>

By 1999 there were 70 million Americans infected with one or more STDs.<sup>iii</sup> The lifetime risk of becoming infected with an STD is estimated to be over 20%.<sup>iv</sup>

Certain strains of human papilloma virus (HPV), one of the most common viral STDs, are responsible for over 99% of all cervical cancer.<sup>v</sup> Genital herpes, an incurable disease, afflicts 45 million Americans, and one million new cases are added each year.<sup>vi</sup> Some STDs are lethal. HIV/AIDS, for example, has caused the deaths of nearly 500,000 Americans since the epidemic began, and over 22 million worldwide.<sup>vii</sup>

The fact is that the human body cannot handle multiple sexual partners. From the perspective of the physical body alone, the only thing that makes sense is to practice abstinence or monogamy. One's health and happiness may depend upon it.

## EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Science also sheds light on our emotional well being. Sociological research shows that since the 1960s there has been a steady increase in non-marital sexual activity in Western developed countries. In 1998, the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago reported an average of 7.8 sexual partners after the age of 18 – an increase over the 1990 level of 7.0 partners – but significantly lower than the 9.5 partners mean reported in 1996.<sup>viii</sup> In May 2003, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that one in five teens has sex before age 15, 37% between the ages of 15 and 17, and 80% between the ages of 18 and 24.<sup>ix</sup>

Today it is estimated that half of newly married couples cohabited prior to marriage. In the 2000 Census, there were 5.5 million cohabiting unmarried couples (up from 3.2 million in 1990).<sup>x</sup>



Given these facts, are people happier? Does this behavior aid growth in emotional or sexual maturity? Does it make people more generous or better able to persevere in difficult situations? What impact does this behavior have on marriage and family life? Are those who have multiple sexual partners better able to form lasting relationships? Better prepared to put the needs of loved ones above their own desires? Research provides answers to many of these questions.<sup>xi</sup>

Over 25 percent of sexually active teenage girls 14-17 report being depressed all, most or "a lot" of the time, a rate of depression more than three times that of teenage girls who are not sexually active (7.7 percent).<sup>xii</sup> Sexually active boys 14-17 report being depressed all, most or a lot of the time at a rate 2 times greater than boys who are not sexually active (8.3 percent vs. 3.4 percent). "A full 14.3 percent of girls who are sexually active report having attempted suicide [in the past 12 months]. By contrast, only 5.1 percent of sexually inactive girls have attempted suicide."<sup>xiii</sup> The contrast between sexually active boys (6.0 percent of whom attempted suicide in the past 12 months) and boys who were not sexually active (0.7 percent) is even greater – almost 8 times higher. Do teens regret having become sexually active? 72% of sexually active girls and 55% of sexually active boys said they wished they had waited longer before starting to be sexually active.

And a 2002 study on the attitude of young men toward marriage is telling. Included in the top ten reported reasons why men won't commit to marriage are: "they can get sex without marriage," "they fear that marriage will require too many changes and compromises," "they want a house before they get a wife," and "they want to enjoy single life as long as they can."<sup>xv</sup> Such reasons lend support to the belief that non-marital sexual activity fosters immaturity and materialism.

Current sociological research overwhelmingly demonstrates "strong correlations between the practices of premarital sex and/or cohabitation and divorce."<sup>xvi</sup> Some of the more prominent studies:

- As early as 1974 the correlation between premarital sex and divorce was known. Robert Athanasiou and Richard Sarkin. "Premarital sexual behavior and postmarital adjustment," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 3 (May 1974).
- A 1991 study suggested a "relatively strong positive relationship between premarital sex and divorce." Joan Kahn and Kathryn London. "Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991):845-55.

- In May 2003, a study concluded that women who had their first sexual experience before marriage with partners other than the man they eventually marry, are about 34% more likely to experience divorce than women who did not. This increased risk is not present with women whose only premarital sex involved the man they married. This study also notes that cohabitation is considered to be "one of the most robust predictors of marital dissolution that has appeared in the literature." Jay Teachmen. "Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (May, 2003).

Bottom line? It seems safe to say that sex outside of marriage causes emotional harm and also seems to harm marriage and the family. Ultimately, for the emotional health of the individual, the family and society itself, only married couples should engage in sexual intercourse.

## GOD'S DESIGN FOR LOVE

Early Christian thinkers taught that God originally created marriage to signify His relationship with every soul. But sin entered our world and warped God's creation. With regard to the male/female relationship, St. Augustine said that what was to be a "patriarchy of love, service and cooperation," because of sin turned into "aggression, power and envy."<sup>xvii</sup>

When we consider the problems surrounding human sexuality, it is worthwhile to ask: "How has Christ redeemed human sexuality?" Christ's death on the cross restored human sexuality to what God originally intended. Human sexuality is not "tinged" with sin, nor is it morally neutral. Although we can misuse even the best of God's gifts, that does not change the fact that sex is God's gift of life and love to each of us.

## PRO-CREATIVE

God's command "to be fruitful and multiply" (Gen.1:28) was considered by our Christian ancestors to be an *officium* – a holy office.<sup>xviii</sup> In the earliest life of the Church when marriage was attacked by various philosophies, procreation was identified as the principle good of marriage. But procreation did not stand alone; it was linked to the education and nurture of children. Sexual intercourse is not a leisure activity to be enjoyed on its own. It is the way that a man and a woman can cooperate with God to bring a new life, a new soul, into existence. When society tried to take the baby out of sex by promoting contraceptive use, it devalued this awesome possibility of creating new life, and put personal pleasure over the common



# M A D E I N H I S I M A G E

## RESPECT LIFE PROGRAM

good. No more are children unqualified "bundles of joy." They are "expenses," "burdens," and things that "tie you down."

Unless, of course, you are infertile. Today fertility has been turned into a commodity. "Designer" gametes are sold on the Internet. Infertile couples can expect to pay an average of \$66,000 to become pregnant and have a live-born baby, if IVF succeeds in the first cycle. They'll pay an average of \$114,000 per delivered baby if treatments are not successful before the sixth cycle. And today, cloned human embryos are trumpeted as the future key to curing a host of diseases.

### UNITIVE

Sexual intercourse is a powerful event of interpersonal communion. It involves the whole person – body, mind, emotions, and soul. Our faith tells us that Christian marriage is a sign of Christ's presence in the world. St. Paul is the first to articulate this when he says, "This is a great mystery; I mean that it refers to Christ and the Church" (Eph. 5:32). As Christians we accept on faith that human sexuality is caught up in God's transformation of a man and woman into "one flesh" which in turn reflects how Christ loves us, His Church. This indeed is a charism of the Sacrament of Marriage. Christian marital love is therefore unconditional, generous, faithful, life-giving, and sacrificial.

The history of the Sacrament of Marriage is enlightening with regard to God's message about human sexuality and fertility. St. John Chrysostom (347-407) taught that the "one flesh" of the spouses is "not an empty symbol": "They have not become the image of anything on earth, but of God Himself."<sup>xx</sup>

On the nature of marital love, St. Augustine (354-430) said that "conjugal charity" is not so much a "feeling" as a "doing." It is "oblative love" – love that shares on all levels, an offering of one to the other. Thus husbands and wives are instruments of each other's salvation. The Carolingian bishops (c. 700 – 899) emphasized both husband and wife as being made in the image and likeness of God which created a spiritual equality and enabled the wife to be thought of as a "friend," rather than a "servant."

Fast forward to the 20th century. Philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977) said that marriage in its nature is fundamentally a community of love and that this love involves total giving of the spouses' selves one to the other. This completeness makes marital love exclusive and permanent. Contemporary Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft says that with the creation

of human fertility and sexual intercourse, God designed a sacred door as the way He would continuously enter the world to perform His greatest miracle – new life. And the new innocent life, adds Kreeft, is God's message that He hasn't lost hope in humanity.

"Authentic married love," says Vatican II, "is caught up into Divine love and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ."<sup>xxi</sup> "Hence the acts in marriage by which the ... union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable ... [it] fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses."<sup>xxii</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Catholicism teaches that sexual intercourse realizes a profound gift of self between spouses. It teaches that fertility is to be respected and sexual intercourse should be treated with reverence. God created sex to involve the whole person – body, mind and soul. When this vision of human sexuality is understood, and we strive to live it, there will be true freedom, growth in emotional maturity, holiness and peace. In short, we will be happier for living this truth. Our Lord reminds us of what God has planned for us.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love. You will live in my love if you keep my commandments, even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and live in his love. All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete. (Jn. 15:11)

What do men and women really want? To love and be loved the way God designed it — generously, faithfully and unconditionally.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> M. Weiss and K. Sheehy, "Lethal Birth Control," *New York Post* online edition, April 7, 2004. Available at <http://www.nypost.com/news/regionalnews/22366.htm>. (Last visited April 13, 2004).

<sup>ii</sup> See M.F. Goldsmith, "Silent Epidemic of Social Disease Makes STD Experts Raise Their Voices." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 26 (1989):3509-3510.

<sup>iii</sup> W. Gates, American Social Health Association Panel. "Estimates of the incidence and prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases in the United States," *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* 26 (1999): 52-57.

<sup>iv</sup> E. Laumann *et al.* *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>v</sup> N. Munoz, International Agency for Research on Cancer. "Human papilloma virus and cancer: the epidemiological evidence," *Journal of Clinical Virology* 2000, Oct. 1; 19 (1-2): 1-5.

<sup>vi</sup> D.T. Fleming *et al.* "Herpes simplex virus type 2 in the United States, 1976 to 1994." *New England Journal of Medicine* 1997; 337: 1105-1111.

<sup>vii</sup> National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services. *Workshop Summary – Scientific Evidence on Condom Effectiveness for Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Prevention*, July 20, 2001. Available at: [www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/stds/condomreport.pdf](http://www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/stds/condomreport.pdf).

<sup>viii</sup> T. Smith, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *American Sexual Behavior: Trends, Socio-Demographic Differences, and Risk Behavior*, available at <http://cloud9.norc.uchicago.edu/dlib/t-25.htm>.

<sup>ix</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation. *National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults: Sexual Health Knowledge, Attitudes and Experiences*, 15 (May 2003) available at [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org). (Last visited August 4, 2003); quoted by Alvaré, p. 21.

<sup>x</sup> Jason Fields and Lynne M. Casper. "America's Families and Living Arrangements: March 2000." *Current Population Reports*, P20-537, p. 12. Quoted by Helen Alvaré, "Saying 'Yes' Before Saying 'I Do': Premarital Sex and Cohabitation as a Piece of the Divorce Puzzle," p. 23, paper to be published in the *Journal of the University of Notre Dame School of Law*. "Married-Couple and Unmarried-Partner Households: 2000," *Census 2000 Special Reports*, Feb. 2003.

<sup>xi</sup> For a summary of classic research and links to studies, see the web sites of the Heritage Foundation, [www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org); Family Research Council, [www.frc.org](http://www.frc.org); The National Marriage Project, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>.

<sup>xii</sup> R. Rector *et al.*, *Sexually Active Teenagers are More Likely to Be Depressed and to Attempt Suicide*. A Report from the Heritage Center for Data Analysis, June 2002.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Id.*

<sup>xiv</sup> *Id.*, citing National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, June 2000.

<sup>xv</sup> Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe. *The State of Our Unions, Why Men Won't Commit. Exploring Young Men's Attitudes About Sex, Dating and Marriage*. The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002. Available from <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/TEXTSOOU2002.htm>

<sup>xvi</sup> See note 6, Alvaré, p. 25.

<sup>xvii</sup> See especially Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*, and *The City of God*.

<sup>xviii</sup> Both Bonaventure (1217-1257) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) called this an *officium naturae* – a holy office in service of nature (the human race).

<sup>xix</sup> P. Neuman *et al.*, "The Cost of a Successful Delivery with in Vitro Fertilization," *New England Journal of Medicine* 33 1:239-243 (July 28, 1994).

<sup>xx</sup> See Homily 12.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, #48.

<sup>xxii</sup> *Ibid.*, #49.

## RESOURCES

### NFP PROVIDERS

*The following groups provide NFP teacher training, client education, and resource materials. Some also produce chastity education materials.*

- Billings Ovulation Method Association (BOMA-USA), P.O. Box 16206, St. Paul, MN 55116, (888) 637-6371 [www.BOMA-USA.org](http://www.BOMA-USA.org)
- Couple to Couple League, Inc., P.O. Box 111184, Cincinnati, OH 45211, (513) 471-2000, [www.ccli.org](http://www.ccli.org)
- Family of the Americas Foundation, P.O. Box 1170, Dunkirk, MD 20754, (800) 443-3395, [www.familyplanning.net](http://www.familyplanning.net)
- Marquette University College of Nursing, Institute for NFP, Milwaukee, WI 53201, (414) 288-3838, [www.marquette.edu/nursing/nfp](http://www.marquette.edu/nursing/nfp)
- Northwest Family Services, Inc., 4805 N.E. Glisan St., Portland, OR 97213, (503) 215-6377, [www.nwfs.org](http://www.nwfs.org)

- Pope Paul VI Institute, Creighton Model FertilityCare™, 6901 Mercy Road, Omaha, NE 68106, [www.popepaulvi.com](http://www.popepaulvi.com)

### NFP RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS

*The following organizations publish or distribute a variety of generic NFP materials with the exception of NFP Outreach which provides speakers for weekend parish missions on NFP and Church teachings.*

- Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, USCCB, 3211 4th St. NE, Washington, DC 20017, (202) 541-3240, [www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index)

- Natural Family Planning Outreach, 3366 NW Expressway, Bldg. D, #630, Oklahoma City, OK 73112, (888) NFP-6383, [www.nfpoutreach.org](http://www.nfpoutreach.org)
- One More Soul, 1846 North Main St., Dayton, OH 45405, (800) 307-7685 [www.OMSoul.com](http://www.OMSoul.com)

### MEDIA RESOURCES

*Many audio tapes, videos, and PowerPoint presentations are available to promote Church teachings on human sexuality, conjugal love and responsible parenthood as well as the individual methods of NFP and chastity education. Each of the NFP providers and One More Soul, listed above, have such materials. Other sources include*

- Audio tapes or CDs of various USCCB's Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and the DDP/NFP conferences such as the 2003 NFP Conference, "Humanae vitae-30th Anniversary" (Phoenix, AZ), and the 1999 "In God's Image", Culture of Life Conference, can be purchased from AVER Associates, 6974 Ducketts Lane, Elkridge, MD 21075, (410) 796-8940

- A variety of video and audio tapes can be borrowed from The Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning (202-541-3240). See, NFP Video/Audio Directory at [www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index](http://www.usccb.org/prolife/issues/nfp/index)

### CHASTITY RESOURCES

- Mary Beth Bonacci, Real Love, Inc., 191 University Blvd. #335, Denver, CO 80206, (303) 237-7942, [www.reallove.net](http://www.reallove.net)

- Couple to Couple League, Inc. (see above for contact information)

- Family Honor, 2927 Devine Street, #130, Columbia, SC 29205 (803) 929-0858, [www.familyhonor.org](http://www.familyhonor.org)

- Mother/Daughter, Father/Son Programs, Diocese of Memphis NFP Center, 5825 Shelby Oaks Drive, Memphis, TN 38134, (901) 373-1285, [www.cdom.org](http://www.cdom.org)
- Northwest Family Services, Inc. (see above for contact information)

### RESEARCH WEB SITES

*Research on the following topics can be obtained from the sites listed below.*

### MARRIAGE, FAMILY LIFE, DIVORCE, COHABITATION

- The Heritage Foundation, [www.heritage.org](http://www.heritage.org)
- Family Research Council, [www.frc.org](http://www.frc.org)
- The National Marriage Project, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu>

### CONTRACEPTIVES, SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

- Center for Disease Control
- <http://www.cdc.gov/node.do/id/0900f3ec80009a98>

Medical Institute for Sexual Health

- <http://www.medinstitute.org/medical/index.htm>

National Institute for Health

- [www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/stds](http://www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/stds)
- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sexuallytransmitteddiseases.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

- <http://www.os.dhhs.gov>