

# To combat aberrant sexual behavior, Church must teach relationship

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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Sexual harassment has dominated the news in the last three or four months. It got me thinking about how far we still need to go to understand our sexuality and to better form our young people to be successful lovers.

Integrating our sexual self into our whole self is essential for spiritual progress in our holiness journey. Perhaps the great Augustine is the saintly teacher about this! After

he led a promiscuous youth and young adulthood, complete with mistress and child, he later understood that human love is grounded in desire for deep union with another, a union which ultimately can be satisfied only by union with God. Hopefully, however, we can be faster learners than he was, and without his missteps!

We have not been very good at forming people for relationships that include integrated sexuality. It is not that we are wrong in what we say and teach about sexuality, but that some aspects of our formation are over-emphasized and other aspects are slighted. The result is that sexuality comes to be seen as a dangerous power which we must control, and the expectations about controlling it are so high that we inevitably fail, and so we become almost fatalistic about our sexual drives. Isn't that really what is behind excusing sexual harassment as "what guys just do" or "it's just locker room behavior?" You can't control it, so bad behaviors like that, or like marital infidelity, or promiscuity, or pornography become the new normal.

Relationship needs to be the starting point. It is the under-emphasized aspect of our formation about sexuality. And that is really puzzling because we have a resource that people in the past ages never had: social science, especially psychology. Wouldn't it be great, for example, if a faith-based human development course was required for Confirmation? Then maybe teens would hear and begin to integrate things that those gifted with the resource of psychology explain about relationships!

For example, that relationships go through relatively predictable stages. After infatuation—the "can't keep hands off" stage—where the other loved person is very idealized—comes conflict. Conflict is a very important time or stage in a relationship, and the question is,

do I stay or leave? Knowing how to decide that is vital for later life. We can make the mistake of leaving relationships whenever conflict arises and becoming "butterflies" who go from one relationship to another casually; or we can make the mistake of staying in destructive relationships. These issues need to be shared and spoken about openly with young people. Healthy resolution of conflict leads to a deeper, more realistic relationships. It creates a pattern for dealing with conflict which we must learn if we want long marriages or relationships.

Another example of topics for relationship formation would be aspects of relationships. Besides being physical, including sexual intimacy, lasting relationships also need to be intellectual, psychological, and for us people of faith, spiritual. The physical aspect will be more integrated if the other aspects are healthy. How can we better teach about these other aspects of relationship? And what about suffering? There will be suffering in long relationships. What do we say about suffering that helps young people face it when it happens within a committed relationship? There are many other examples that ought to be mentioned for inclusion in a more robust formation about relationships, but space precludes going on and on!

Relationship formation needs to start early, beginning in middle school when first friendships are developing. And as children age, relationship formation should be the context for everything we say about sexuality. Parents, grandparents, catechists, clergy—we all need to get comfortable talking about relationships, comfortable sharing the wisdom we have learned about them, and how sexuality fits into them. And we need this talking to be part of the teaching ministry of our Church, in catechetical materials, in homilies, and in print!

Our Church holds up "for life" relationships because they are the major path to holiness for most of us. "For life" relationships are our worthy goal. For it is through generative and self-sacrificing love in long union with another that we glimpse and touch that union with God which Augustine spoke of, and for which we all long.

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