

SEX, LOVE AND CHARACTER:

A Message to Young People

BY THOMAS LICKONA, PH.D.

*A*s a psychologist specializing in character development, I am often asked to speak to young people about sex. I usually begin by saying:

“All of you belong to one of four groups: (1) You have never had sexual intercourse, and you do not intend to do so until you get married; (2) You haven’t had a sexual relationship, but you’re not sure what you think about sex before marriage; (3) You’ve had a premarital sexual relationship, and you don’t see anything wrong with it; (4) You’ve had a premarital sexual relationship, but you now consider it a mistake—or you’re not sure what you want to do in the future. Whichever group you belong to, I’d like to offer you a way of thinking about sex—a way I believe will help you make good sexual decisions, ones that will help you build a good character and lead a good and happy life.”

I then address a number of questions that young people often have about sex.

*Chastity is the strength
that helps us use our
sexuality according
to God’s plan.*

—THE NEW CORINTHIANS
CURRICULUM

Isn’t Everybody Doing It?

In fact, about half of high-school-age teens are virgins. Furthermore, the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth found a drop in adolescent sexual activity for both males and females, ages 15 to 19, for the first time since the survey began in 1970. Fifty percent of the girls in this age group now report that they are virgins; so do 45% of the boys.

According to a number of studies, students who get good grades, who have goals for the future, who abstain from drugs and alcohol, and who often attend religious services are all significantly less likely to have had sex than students who do not possess these qualities. So if you’re a virgin, you’re in good company.

Isn’t Sex a Way to Express Love?

The way to answer this question is to ask: What does it mean to “love” another person?

Love means wanting what is best for the other person, seeking the greatest good for that person. How do you know when somebody really loves you?



When he or she wants what is truly best for your welfare, your happiness—now and in the future. Measured against this standard, is having sex without being married truly an act of love?

Think about the harmful consequences that can come from sex between unmarried persons. Consider these lines from the pamphlet “Love Waits”:

Love is patient, love is kind. Love wants what is best for another person. Love never demands something that will harm you or the person you love.

Love will never cross the line between what's right and wrong. It's wrong to put one another in danger of having to deal with hard choices. ... choices that could change your lives, your goals, and your plans forever.

Having sex before marriage may feel right for the moment. But the possible costs of an unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease—as well as the deep hurts that can come from a broken relationship—outweigh the feelings of the moment. The feelings are temporary; their consequences are long-lasting.

All good things are worth waiting for. Waiting until marriage to have sex is a mature decision to control your desires. If you are getting to know someone—or are in a relationship—remember: If it's love, love waits.

What if You Use “Protection”?

There are two ways to respond to this question. One is to explain why contraception goes against God's plan for sex, even in marriage.

God designs sex for two purposes: to be love-giving and life-giving. Sex is for deepening love between a husband and wife and for the procreation of children. God intended for these two purposes to be inseparable. That's why He places sex within marriage; it's the only relationship where a man and woman can give themselves to each other totally and can responsibly conceive and raise a child. This is an awesome and sacred privilege—being able to cooperate with God in the creation of his own children, whom he desires to live eternally in his company.

Contraception is contrary to God's plan because it artificially separates sexual love from its God-given power to create new life. By contrast, Natural Family Planning (NFP) involves abstaining from sex during the few days each month when a woman can get pregnant. NFP is not

only highly effective (98%) but it's “all-natural sex”; it doesn't place artificial barriers (devices or drugs) between a husband and wife, or between their lovemaking and God's will.

There's a second way to respond to the question about “protection,” and that's to ask: Does contraception really make unmarried sex “safe,” as is so commonly claimed?

No matter what type of contraception is used, a girl can still get pregnant. It happens—and then there is a developing life to deal with. Among adult users, according to studies published in *Family Planning Perspectives*, condoms have an average annual failure rate of 15% in preventing pregnancy.

What about AIDS? Dr. Susan Weller at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, in an analysis of 11 different studies, found that condoms on the average failed 31% of the time to prevent transmission of AIDS virus (*Social Science and Medicine*, June 1993).

Medical studies show that condoms provide *even less protection* (“zero” to “some”) *against what are now the three most common STDs. Human papilloma virus (HPV)*, which is the cause of virtually all cervical cancer, can infect anywhere in the male or female genital region and may be spread by skin-to-skin contact during sex. *Chlamydia* which, undetected, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease and scarring of the fallopian tubes, is the fastest growing cause of infertility and may be transmitted by skin contact outside the area covered by the condom. *Herpes*, which causes genital sores, cannot be cured, and, like HPV and chlamydia, can be transmitted by skin-to-skin contact in the entire genital area.

No Condom for the Heart

What about the mental, emotional, and spiritual consequences of temporary sexual relationships? Sex involves our full person, our whole self. There is no condom for the heart, mind, or soul. Here is a teenage girl speaking of her experience:

I am 16 and have already lost my virginity. I truly regret that my first time was with a guy that I didn't care that much about. Since that first night, he expects sex on every date. When I don't feel like it, we end up in an argument. I don't think this guy is in love with me, and I know deep down that I am not in love with him either. This makes me feel cheap. I realize now that this is a very big step in a girl's life. After you've done it, things are never the same. It changes everything. My advice is, don't be in such a rush. It's a headache

and a worry. Sex is not for entertainment. It should be a commitment. Be smart and save yourself for someone you wouldn't mind spending the rest of your life with.

The psychological and spiritual repercussions of sex outside marriage are many and varied. They include: (1) Regret and self-recrimination; (2) worry about becoming pregnant or getting an STD; (3) the emotional turmoil associated with an unexpected pregnancy, the stress of premature parenthood or the self-sacrifice of adoption, or the trauma and aftermath of abortion; (4) guilt; (5) feelings of being used; (6) self-contempt for being a user; (7) the lowered self-esteem that accompanies finding out you have a sexually transmitted disease; (8) fear of commitment because of having been burned; (9) rage over betrayal, sometimes leading to violence; (10) depression, sometimes leading to suicide; (11) ruined relationships (because sex often comes to dominate a relationship); (12) stunted personal growth (because premature sex can hinder your identity development); (13) the marital stress that comes from infertility caused by an STD; and (14) the separation from God that serious sin, until repented, always causes.

You don't see these consequences of sex outside marriage depicted on TV or in the movies. You don't read about them in *Seventeen* or *Sassy*. But they are very real.

Over the years, I have collected the personal stories of people who have experienced these unhappy consequences. A college guy says, "I finally got a girl into bed when I was 17. Then she started saying she loved me and getting clingy. After four weeks of having sex as often as I wanted, I was tired of her and dumped her. That made me feel pretty low, because I could see that she was hurting."

Another college male talks about his loss of self-control: "I had always heard that having sex was a way to get rid of sexual tension, but having sex just increased my desire. It was like a drug. I couldn't stop myself, yet at the same time, I wasn't satisfied at all."

A 33-year-old wife says, "Sometime during my wild college days, I picked up an infection that damaged the inside of my fallopian tubes and left me infertile. I am now married to a wonderful man who very much wants children, and the guilt I feel is overwhelming. We will look into adoption, but this whole ordeal has been terribly difficult."

In short, contraceptive devices don't make sex physically safe (you can still get pregnant or sick), emotionally safe (you can still get hurt), or ethically loving (you can't claim to love someone if you're gambling with that person's health, life, and future happiness).

What if You are Engaged?

What if you're planning to get married—isn't sex okay then? One way to answer this question is to ask: What is the intrinsic meaning of sexual intercourse?

When you have sexual intercourse with someone, you are being as physically intimate as it is possible to be with another human being. When you're married, this kind of intimacy is part of a total commitment. You join your bodies because you've joined your lives. The ultimate intimacy belongs within the ultimate commitment.

Pope John Paul II points out that bodily actions, just like words, have meanings. In body language, sex says to the other person, "I give myself to you completely." Within the marriage commitment, that's really true.

However, sex before marriage is like saying, "I give myself to you completely, but not really." It's a form of lying with your body. You aren't completely committed yet. About half the people who get married have been engaged at least once before.

Premarital sex can also fool you into marrying the wrong person. Seven different studies, cited in David Myers' book *The Pursuit of Happiness*, find that couples who lived together before their marriage are significantly more likely to divorce than couples who did not live together. For example, a Canadian study of more than 5,000 women found that those who lived together with their future spouses were 54% more likely to divorce.

How Far is Too Far?

A high school counselor offers this wise advice: "If you don't want to drive over a cliff, don't pull up to the edge and race the engine." George Eager, in his book *Love, Dating and Sex* (1989), says you're going too far when:

- either a guy's or a girl's hands start roaming
- either of you starts to remove clothing
- you are doing something you would not want to be doing around someone you really respect
- you are arousing genital feelings
- you are arousing feelings that reduce your ability to make and carry out an intelligent decision.

Saving sex for marriage, as chastity educator Mary Beth Bonacci points out, means saving *all* of it for marriage. All forms of sexual intimacy are "the language of marriage."

Secondary Virginity

What if you haven't saved sex for marriage? "Start saving it," says Molly Kelly, a chastity educator. Remember, chastity is a moral decision and a spiritual state, not a physical condition. If you've made mistakes in the past, you can forgive yourself, seek God's forgiveness, and, with His help, make a fresh start. Some people call this "choosing secondary virginity." A great many young people have made this choice.

In her book *The Power of Abstinence* (1996), medical writer Kristine Napier sums up the benefits of saving sex for marriage:

- Waiting will make your dating relationships better. You'll spend more time getting to know each other.
- Waiting will help you find the right mate (someone who values you for the person you are).
- Waiting will increase your self-respect.
- Waiting will gain the respect of others.
- Waiting teaches you to respect others; you'll never pressure anyone.
- Waiting takes the pressure off you.
- Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no conflicts, no regrets).
- Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage (free of comparisons with other premarital partners and based on trust). By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.

Dr. Janet Smith, a Catholic writer and philosophy professor at the University of Dallas, adds still another reason for saving sex for marriage: By practicing the virtues involved in waiting—such as faithfulness, self-control, modesty, good judgment, courage, and genuine respect for self and others—you're developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner and attract the kind of person you'd like to marry.

What About Homosexuality?

Given the media's intense discussion of homosexuality, young people today naturally ask, "What makes a person 'gay'? And why shouldn't gay people be able to have sex, like everybody else?" If we do not address this issue in a direct and understandable way, we risk undermining young people's confidence in Catholic teaching about sexual morality in general.

According to several recent studies, about 1% of men and about 1% of women say they are exclusively homosexual in their sexual behavior. There is no scientific agreement about what leads a person to be attracted to the same sex. A study of identical twins in a 1992 issue of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* found that if one twin was homosexual, the second twin was just as likely to be *heterosexual* as homosexual. The researchers concluded: "Genetic factors are an insufficient explanation for the development of sexual orientation."

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) affirms the intrinsic dignity of homosexual persons but it does not affirm homosexual sex. It states that homosexual persons, just like unmarried heterosexual persons, are called to live chastely with the help of God's grace. They may enjoy friendship and all other forms of human intimacy but not sexual intimacy.

This teaching is supported by the Old and New Testaments, both of which present homosexual sex as being against God's law. Jesus names "fornication"—sex outside marriage—as a serious sin for all (Mark 7:21). When Jesus speaks of marriage, he describes it exclusively in heterosexual terms, stating that the Creator made us "male and female" and that a man shall "be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh" (Mt 19:4-6). Only in heterosexual marriage can God's two purposes for marriage—the complementary love of husband and wife and the procreation of children—be fulfilled.

Sex, the Pope reminds us, is the beautiful gift of a good God. But if we wish to be happy with God in this life and the next, we must use His gift as He intends. Realizing this is the first step in successfully leading a chaste life. Other vital steps: practice modesty in speech, dress, and actions; delay and minimize single dating, date only people who share your values, and avoid sexual temptation, such as time alone with "nothing to do"; avoid sexual stimuli (as in many "R"-rated movies); limit your physical affection to light hugs and kisses; take advantage of God's forgiveness and strengthening grace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation; and develop the habit of daily prayer (at least five minutes at the start of every day), asking God's help in remaining pure and faithful to Him. He will not refuse your request.

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