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Human Sexuality —

A Question of

Knowledge and Attitudes

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Sexuality is an integral and important part of human life. It has always been so, although we may not always have been willing to admit it. There have been moments in our history when we tended to ignore it, moments when we tended to suppress it, and there are times, like ours today, when we seem to be pre-occupied with it as if there were nothing else to living except sex and its consequences.

Sex may not be the summum bonum of life, but neither is it an insignificant detail which can be left ignored in the background to resolve itself into what it will. It is, undeniably, one of the strongest driving forces in life, and it permeates the entire personality of each individual. Every single cell in the body is, in fact, male or female, because each cell contains the chromosomes that make it one gender or another. Manifestations of our sexuality are present, in one way or another, in practically every action we undertake. It forms an integral part of our personality and affects our lives and well being in many different ways.

But human sexuality is essentially different from pure animal sexuality or the sexuality of plants. In plants, it functions at a purely mechanical level. In animals, it is pure instinct, or perhaps, pure biology. In man, it has dimensions that put sexuality at an entirely different level of

function. Certainly, it is also mechanical and biological. But it functions at a higher level — the level of the psyche — so that in man sex exists in a psychosexual which is not present in the animals. And, because man is rational, it must function in that plane too, with all its attendant implications in terms of control, ethics, responsibility, and reason.

While sexuality at the level of the animals is important because it provides an insight into the biology of sexuality which would be otherwise difficult to attain, and while it is useful because it serves as a tool to teach the biological facts to the youth, the danger is ever present that animal sexuality will be equated with human sexuality so that sex in the human being will be understood only in its purely biologic sense. Much of the usefulness of sex education is lost if sexuality is presented only at this biological level — both in terms of information as well as in terms of attitudes. For man, biology is only the base, and to ignore the facts of life above the biological, is to miss the point completely.

The difficulty is compounded by the fact that while man, sexually, must function at the biological, psycho-sexual, and rational levels, he does not reach maturity in these levels at the same time. Biologic maturity comes early, with puberty and adolescence, and the forces of sex, in its biologic terms, are strong and sometimes irrepressible. Meanwhile, psycho-sexual maturity is a long way off — the

realization that in man sex and love function together, are the expression of the other, and that the sexual relationship is the fulfillment of human love. Rational maturity is still another matter — the realization that as a human function, sexuality must be exercised responsibly, and with the development of a strength of character so that its function is entirely under the control of reason.

When sex begins to bloom, and the young man begins to feel its stirrings within him, even a drive with an explosive force that seeks satisfaction, urgently and violently, he is lost unless by that time he has some basic understanding of the meaning of these forces and their eventual purpose. When the young woman begins to feel the surge of affection and of emotional involvement, she too is lost unless she has some understanding of the nature of these emotions and, again, their ultimate purpose. It is not only an understanding of the nature of the sexual urge and drive that is necessary, but also the acquisition, by that time of the attitudes so necessary for them to view these developments as something natural and beautiful, something to look forward to in its proper fulfillment, something healthy, good and desirable as an evidence of their forthcoming adulthood.

Unless this information has been given at home, and unless these attitudes are formed by the family environment, it is unlikely that the young man and young woman will reach adolescence with the frame of mind necessary for the restraint and guidance they

must accept as part of their sexual formation. Sex can become, for them, so easily an outlet for their boundless energies, a source of pure sensual gratification, just one more experience to be had for the pure thrill that it offers and nothing more. And the psychosexual maturation so necessary for the exercise of sexuality in a human context is stunted, delayed, or forever prevented from developing. Yet, even in those who see in sexuality nothing more than the physical gratification of a sensual appetite, in spite of themselves, there grows the need to establish some degree of interpersonal relationship with their sexual partners — a poor substitute for human love — yet evidence that stunted and all the beginnings of a psychosexual maturation has established itself.

Rational maturity and reasoned control over sexuality is most difficult of all. Rational control must be deliberately provoked and fostered. It is unlikely ever to come by itself. It consists of an understanding of the true meaning of human sexuality and its attendant responsibilities, together with a capacity to control the exercise of the tendencies that the sexual impulse brings with it. This, of course, cannot be attained overnight. A reasoned understanding comes only through adequate sexual formation — in knowledge and attitudes — but beyond that must come the exercise of control only which can give meaning and reality to this reasoned understanding.

The control of the sexual drive requires years of formation and discipline. Here, once more, lies a difficult dilemma. In an age when discipline is often misinterpreted as regimentation, the youth are expected or asked to develop that strength of character they need so much. The Olympic champion does not attain that status overnight, he goes through grueling years of practice and training to steel his body for what is to come. The artist does not learn his art spontaneously, but must through constant practice and rigorous discipline reach that perfection of control that can give his art genuine expression and value. So too, the control of the sexual instinct — must come from years of guided exercise in control and self-denial, so that the mastery one has over biology is total — so that, in the example given by Suenens, a man can exercise sexuality and deliberately control himself sufficiently to stop short of the inseminating reflex.

Sex is nothing but a brute instinct if it manifests itself only in terms of pure biology. Sex is most human, when it is exercised within its proper context of psychosexual maturation and rational control. Sexually, a man is a man, only when he has attained this degree of development.

All this development depends on the formation of the youth, from the very earliest years, on the continued guidance he must have over his "difficult years," on his understanding and development

of mastery of reason over instinct. Unless we can achieve it, we do not attain the true manhood that was meant for us to reach. Unless we reach it, we shall be forever chained to a mechanistic control over our excesses, and never be the men we must be, the kind of men that Malthus himself, when he wrote those prophetic essays on population, feel we had to become

if we were not to destroy ourselves.

Unless we attain it, we cannot truly and joyfully be grateful to the Almighty for the beauty that is sexuality, for the meaning and the happiness and fulfillment that it can bring to our human lives.

This is the challenge that faces us today.



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