May 1971

Human Sexuality: A Question of Knowledge and Attitudes

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol38/iss2/8
Gross National Product, nor in permissively sexual indulgence. Conformity of human life and thought to the will of God, expressed in his divine law, is far more germane to its true understanding and possession.

We can appreciate the sincerity of those who are advocating the substitution of the law of God by the law of Thing, insofar as they are motivated by an honest, if mistaken, anxiety over the shape of things to come and the means to be adopted in order to avoid possible catastrophe. But at the same time we must serve notice that these political leaders persist in their efforts to propagandize compulsory family limitation and planned parenthood as a national policy, and abortion and the pill as weapons in the hands of the state to impose conformity in defiance of conscience and the rights of God, the Catholic community will fight back. Please God, it will not fight back alone.

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

Human Sexuality —

A Question of Knowledge and Attitudes

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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 need. Rational maturity is still another matter — the realization that the human function, sexuality must be exercised responsibly, as with the development of a strength of character so that its functions is entirely under the control of reason.

When sex begins to bloom, and the young man begins to feel its stirrings within him, eventually 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 urge of affection and emotional involvement, she too is lost unless she has some understanding of the nature of her 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, inspite of themselves, there grows the need to establish some degree of impersonal relationship with their sexual partners — a poor substitute for human love — yet evidence that stunted and all the beginnings of 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 insemiinating 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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1971

Gerald Kelly Lecture

Sunday, June 20, 1971

Chalfonte-Haddon Hall
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12 Noon (Luncheon)
All Persons Invited

Guest Lecturer,
David J. Bowman, S.J.
of The National Council
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"Ecumenical Life for Catholics,
For Men, for Medical Men in 1971"


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DRUG ABUSE—A Worldwide Picture

by

Sidney Cohen, M.D.
Los Angeles, California

It is rewarding to scan time and space to help understand and deal with the problems that beset us. Have conditions in the past ever existed comparable to the present day preoccupation with drugs? Indeed, they have. On numerous occasions in man's journey through time, mind altering chemicals appeared to threaten or even overwhelm certain cultures. Only a few examples can be cited now since we are concerned today with the space frame rather than the time frame.

Eighteenth century England was floating in a sea of cheap gin. Some of you will recall Hogarth's print "Gin Lane" where one could become "Drunk for a Penny, Dead Drunk for Tuppence." The consumption of neutral spirits was so great among men, women and children of the working class that for a while it seemed as if the sun would set on the British Empire. Finally, gin was taxed, and daily intoxication became too expensive a practice.


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