

A Spirituality of Sexual Intimacy

Readers may find it helpful to reflect on an important aspect of an integrally Christian approach to sexuality, namely, a spirituality of sexual intimacy.

Sexual intercourse is fully meaningful only when it is seen as a most effective and intimate way of expressing one's love for another person. This means that our sexual relationships must never be exploitative. It also means that is quite disrespectful to get involved in a sexual relationship as just a pleasurable recreational activity.

We humans are bodily creatures, so we are spontaneously inclined to express our love and trust through our bodies. When we fall in love with somebody, our usual inhibitions about allowing ourselves to be touched intimately are outweighed by our desire to come as close as possible to that person. Those who have a healthy relationship with their own bodies and their own sexuality find that this provides them with an 'in-built guide' on when and how to touch others and on when and how it is appropriate to allow themselves to be touched by another person.

Human touch has a healing power. And the very intimate touch that takes place in a mutually respectful sexual relationship brings a high degree of healing and wholeness to both partners. This two-way intimacy enables both partners to develop a growing degree of trust, acceptance, and respectful love. There is a self-giving which both invites and expresses a total openness of soul and spirit, a desire to be utterly present and transparent to the other. No wonder, then, that both the Old Testament and the New Testament speak of the two partners becoming 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5).

Sexual intimacy between two people who are deeply in love with each other is a profoundly spiritual experience. It lifts each of the partners out of the preoccupation with self which is the normal state for most people for much of the time. For significant periods of time—sometimes for days on end—the person who is in love is focussed instead almost entirely on the other. One looks on the other with passion—not primarily a passion of wanting to possess the other but rather a passion of tenderness where one is entirely taken up with feeling for, and loving concern for, the other.

In the early stages of having fallen in love, one's experience of everyday life is changed quite radically. One seems to be lifted out of the humdrum reality of normal living and to exist instead in a world that sparkles with energy and excitement. With the passing of time the

excitement dims. But ideally that does not mean that one has returned to a dull and commonplace state of existence. Instead, the exhilaration of early love becomes transformed into a quiet abiding sense of gratitude for being loved and trusted unconditionally. One has the assurance of being ‘held’; and the holding of the body gives expression to a deep acceptance at every level.

The sad reality is that many people fail to live up to this ideal. Their sexuality has become damaged and distorted to a greater or lesser extent. The most serious cause of such a wounded personality is sexual abuse. Those who have been abused require a long course of counselling or therapy before they find healing. A lesser, but still serious, degree of damage to a person’s sexuality comes from faulty up-bringing—parents and teachers may have caused the child to experience an unhealthy degree of shame and guilt in relation to sex. This was a particularly serious problem in Ireland in the past. It was linked to the seriously defective and distorted theology of sexuality propounded by theologians and spiritual leaders.

The younger generation are much less likely to be infected by such a distorted attitude to sex. This is partly because much of the earlier puritanical Church teaching on sex no longer seems credible—even to many deeply committed Christians. Unfortunately, however, the blank space left by the abandonment of the previous rigid Church teaching has not been filled with a truly healthy and life-enhancing understanding of sexuality. A lot of adults are no longer sure about what is right or wrong in the area of sexual activity. Consequently, they no longer feel competent to ‘lay down the law’ about sex to their children, or to give them firm guidelines.

Even where parents and teachers do seek to control or advise their children in relation to sexual activity they may not be heard or heeded. This is because there has developed a ‘youth culture’ which evokes attitudes in young people which makes them to some extent impervious to the values of parents, teachers, and society leaders.

Nowadays a significant number of quite young teenagers have come to believe that it is ‘normal’ to engage in full-scale sexual activity. The sad part is that these young teenagers are simply too immature to have developed a healthy spirituality of sexuality—one based on respect and sensitivity to the rights and needs of those involved. Furthermore, young people are constantly bombarded with sexual imagery employed to sell products of all kinds. This sexual marketing is directed at ever younger children, so that little girls and boys are being sexualized at a very early age.

In this situation it is important that those of us of an older generation should ourselves be comfortable with our own sexuality. We need to have a healthy spirituality of sexuality to which we give witness both in our lives and in our words. This is particularly so in the case of those who are in daily contact with young people, as parents or teachers or youth leaders.

Such a spirituality will justify and intensify the outrage which people feel in relation to the reality of sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and the trafficking of people. It will encourage an ever-increasing number of people to become involved in raising awareness about such exploitation, and in lobbying politicians to put in place a legislative regime which protects the victims of abuse and trafficking.

Hopefully, too, an enriched spirituality will lead many people to join the campaign for a change of mentality and of legislation in relation to the 'demand' side of prostitution. This will include support for those politicians who favour the enactment of legislation which will make it illegal to look for sex not just from a trafficked person but from anybody involved in prostitution. Furthermore, it will encourage the development of a richer and more mature approach to sexuality in young and old alike, leading to a more healthy society. Our hope is that this booklet may contribute to the development of such an authentic and life-enhancing spirituality.