

YOUTH UPDATE



Jessica O. Schalk (17), Danielle Rooney (16) and Nicholas E.C. Rottman (17) gathered at the home of Chris and Beth Holmes, who coordinate Celebration! Retreats, the youth retreat program for the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky. These three team members previewed this issue and asked the questions you see answered here.

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SEXUALITY

A Gift With Strings Attached

At many youth conventions and high school retreats, I've been asked why I, a Roman Catholic priest, choose to address this topic of sexuality. Perhaps teens suspect that I can have nothing to say on the matter, given priestly celibacy, or perhaps

they think I should have no interest in the subject.

I can answer quite simply. I want all teenagers to be holy, happy and healthy. Your life, your body and the gift of your sexuality are precious gifts from our loving God. You only receive one body and it's yours for life. You are the only person who

will ever see the world through your eyes, the only person to touch the world with your fingerprints.

When you use your body according to God's plan, you can do amazing and wonderful things. Two that seem extraordinary are entering into a marriage covenant with your spouse and cooperating with God to create human life.

by Rev. Gary Bagley

If you use the gift of sexuality properly, you will be holy, happy and healthy. If you misuse those gifts, you can end up feeling very sad, wounded and separated from God.

This *Youth Update* isn't so much a *sex* talk as it is an *attitude* talk. I want to describe a way to consider all the very concrete decisions about sexuality you'll be asked to make. If you allow God to shape your heart and your conscience, then your body will be better able to follow.

Sometimes you and your friends may think that the Church's teachings about sexuality are old-fashioned. You hear claims that the Church's rules do not apply to contemporary situations.

But rules are important. Imagine what a football game or a basketball game would look like if there were no rules. Because your sexuality is so precious, valuable and powerful, you need rules to guide and direct you.

This *Youth Update* doesn't attempt to list all the rules about sex and sexual activity. I'm simply encouraging you to accept that rules don't equal repression; they are for your good and for your growth.

\$20 for Your Thoughts

When I was preparing a homily for a reconciliation service, I searched for a message that would both challenge and console. I found a story that I was able to use—then and now—at www.coffeeintherain.com. It was entitled, "Crumpled and Priceless," and the author is unknown.

It's a story about a \$20 bill. I held one up and asked, "Who

would like this \$20 bill?" Hands shot up quickly.

Then I crumpled it up and crushed it in the palm of my hand. I displayed the badly wrinkled bill and asked, "Who is interested in this bill now?" All the participants waved their hands more vigorously.

Finally, I dropped it on the ground and started to grind it into the floor with my shoe and asked, "Now who wants this dirty, crumpled bill?" A sea of 900 hands greeted me.

No matter what happened to the \$20 bill, it didn't lose its value. Each of you has a gift much more valuable than the crispest \$20 bill.

Many of you are like a crisp, brand-new \$20 bill, fresh from the mint or the ATM. You continue to face challenges that are bold, blunt and powerful. You have faced the challenges presented by a permissive society and you have still made good decisions.

Even though it hasn't been easy and not always popular, you have kept your focus and your faith. You are worthwhile and valuable.

Some of you have been wrinkled or crumpled. You may have drifted away from the values that you had when you were younger. Mistakes and regret are now part of your history. You can often feel dirty and ashamed of something that happened. You need and deserve powerful and frequent reminders that you are still worthwhile and valuable. The example of the \$20 bill is a reminder that just because you may make a mistake with sex, that doesn't mean you are a mistake.

Jesus tells you that no one condemns you. "Go [and] from now on do not sin anymore," he says in the Gospel of John (8:11). This story of Jesus' compassionate care for the woman caught in adultery is especially

important for you.

Some of you have been ground into the dirt by circumstances beyond your control. You have good, strong values but someone hurt you, abused you or took advantage of you. Because of unfortunate situations, usually not your fault, you may feel worthless.

No matter what has happened or may be happening now, however, you never lose your value in God's eyes. To God, your life and your sexuality are still gifts and treasures.

The Church has a strong message and the teachings of the Church provide powerful

too, can be misused, but it always remains a decent and wonderful gift.

Sexual Activity Is Meant for Good

Sexual activity that hurts another person in any way is not sexuality the way that God intended it to be. No one has any right to pressure anyone into anything that is physically painful, makes the future frightening or damages self-respect.

Meaningful sexual activity, from holding hands to married

- **q.** So, do you think that non-married sexual intercourse is necessarily meaningless? **a.** All intentional sexual activity, especially intercourse, can be meaningful. The Church believes that sexual intercourse is most meaningful in a married, committed relationship and that good Christians should be chaste until they can share the full meaning of sexual intercourse. (Read St. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter Four, or his First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter Six.)

guidance—whatever shape you are in. I want to offer six values rooted in Church teaching.

Sex Is Good

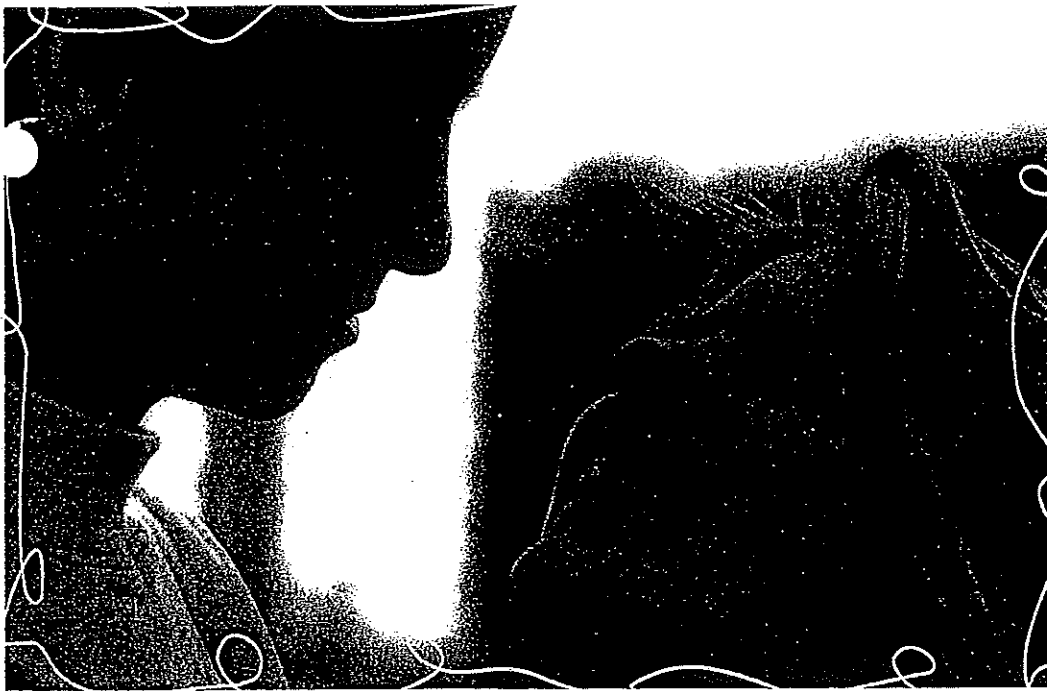
Sex is a strong and powerful drive. It is not dirty or automatically bad. God has not created anything that should be banned or dumped. Both teens and adults can—and have—misused God's gifts but that doesn't make the gift ugly or evil.

Food can be the object of gluttony and food can be abused during food fights in a cafeteria, but that doesn't mean that food is dirty or evil. Sex,

intercourse, should be pleasurable. It should make both people hopeful and optimistic about the future and it should build self-esteem and self-respect. If any activity in a relationship causes pain, erodes hope or makes someone feel worthless, it's not a good use of sexuality.

All Sexual Activity Is for Loving

Sexual activity is not about celebrating the prom, exploring curiosity, keeping a boyfriend or a girlfriend, proving "maturity" to someone or keeping up with the crowd because



"everyone else has done it." Sexual activity is about loving, and love is about sacrifice.

If you want to know who really loves you, make a list of all the people you know who will make a sacrifice for you, even when they are not going to get anything out of it. Try to identify the people who will give up what they want so that you can have what you need to be holy, happy and healthy.

A few years ago, I was explaining the importance of sacrifice to a large group of high school seniors. From the front of the room, I could see that one of the girls in the group was becoming visibly upset. I called a 15-minute break.

When I approached the crying girl, she explained her struggles. She and her boyfriend had been going out

for almost three years. They had lived through three false alarms about pregnancy and a couple of scares about sexually transmitted diseases. She was also very upset because she hid all this from her parents.

I gently observed that she didn't look as if she was feeling holy, happy and healthy. I told her that she and her boyfriend should stop having sexual intercourse outside of marriage. It was jeopardizing her future and her relationship with her parents.

She agreed, but wondered whether her boyfriend loved her enough to make that sacrifice. I suggested that if he didn't love her that much, maybe this wasn't love. I reminded her that the people who really love you are the ones who help you handle the tension in life and not increase the pressure. Two peo-

ple who truly love each other will make sacrifices and control desires so that they can both be holy, happy and healthy.

Sex Involves More Than Love

Sexual activity and sexual intercourse express more than love. Some people conclude, "Sex is O.K. as long as you love each other and are willing to make sacrifices for each other." Not exactly!

You should definitely love the person that you have sex with, but you don't have sex with everyone that you love. Love and sexuality are more than that. Sexual activity, especially sexual intercourse, is also a decision and a commitment.

Imagine that I give a very expensive necklace to one of my nieces for Christmas. At graduation time in the spring, I take the necklace back to give to another niece as her graduation present. Suppose I let her keep it until another niece leaves for college. I give the necklace to a third niece who is going to college. I tell her that she can keep it until her sister gets married. Then I will need it to use as a wedding present.

A real gift is a gift forever, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death. A "temporary gift" is a loan and not a real gift.

Because your body and your sexuality are so precious and meaningful, they are among the best gifts you have to give. Sexual intercourse is the way that you will share yourself as a gift to your spouse.

When you share intercourse as a sign of your unconditional love for your spouse, you are loving each other as God loves and that is the highest form of love on earth. Your marriage covenant will be sealed with the gift of married love and that is the best reflection of God's love that we have.

Sexual intercourse is not a casual activity or an experiment. It isn't something you do to see if you can get along and love each other. It is the ultimate celebration and the bond between you and your spouse when you have committed yourselves to each other. Sometimes young people think that sexual intercourse should be allowed as long as they are careful and

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q. You describe sexual intercourse as a responsibility and a commitment. Do you say that only because of the possibility of children? **a.** *Because they are married, spouses have the privilege of cooperating with God to conceive children. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that the responsibility and commitment are even more than that. You are a profound union of mind, heart and soul. Because you are such a unique reflection of God, all sexual activity, even if it doesn't create life, is powerful and holy because it affects each and every aspect of your personality.*

are going to get married some-
time in the future.

Your Body Is a Gift

A popular argument for intercourses outside of marriage is, "What I do with my own body is my own business." Your body is your way of expressing your Christian beliefs; Your body is a tool on loan from God.

One day at a workshop, I asked if the teenagers present had any special mementos from their grandparents. One boy mentioned that he had his deceased grandfather's favorite pipe.

When I asked him how long he would have to know a girl before he would give her that pipe as a gift, he said, "At least five years!"

I asked him to think about his life and his body as a gift from his grandfather and his father. Part of his life, his inherited characteristics, his genetic makeup and some of his physical characteristics were handed down to him from his grandfather, just as the pipe had been.

Then I asked how long he

would have to know a girl before he would share his body with her. Later that day, he privately told me that he was not respecting the gift of life he had received from his ancestors. Although he would not give the pipe to a girl unless he knew her for at least five years, he had had intercourse with casual acquaintances with whom he had no relationship or commitment!

Your life, your body and your sexuality are not yours alone. They are

Your Church History

gifts that you have received from parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Someday, most of you will share that gift with your children, your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren.

It's Never Too Late

What if you are a crumpled, wrinkled \$20 bill? Our faith and our Church offer you a great gift of hope and healing.

I have an old watch that has a cracked crystal. It doesn't keep accurate time anymore

Voices of Wisdom on Sex

- You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery; but I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. —Matthew 5:27-28
- The tradition of the Church has understood the sixth commandment as encompassing the whole of human sexuality. —Catechism of the Catholic Church #2336
- Chastity is both an attitude and an act. The Ninth Commandment, which speaks of purity of heart, dwells on the inner attitude. The Sixth Commandment leaves more on a case-by-case basis for liturgical and ways to achieve it. All people are called to be chaste in the sense that human sexuality should be integrated into the full humanity of the person and not considered a physical act. —Alfred McBride, O.Praem., "The Men's Commandments"
- Some people are called to a more narrow and remoter life. I saw a man, King David, who would never willingly seek for a second wife, and a priest, after committing adultery with his wife, who would never again make a new commitment to start fresh with God's help. Ask God to show you what situations to avoid and what people you need to ask to support you. —Catholic Youth Alliance, St. Mary's Press. This edition of the Bible contains many other helpful references regarding sexuality which can be found by consulting the index and all footnotes.

and the gold-plated finish has worn off. For sentimental reasons, I cannot get rid of it.

Like the crumpled \$20 bill, the watch is not brand-new. Even if I took it to a jewelry store and had it repaired, it would still not be brand-new. When it's repaired, it becomes a valuable antique. As Jesus says in the parable of the lost sheep, "[T]here will be more joy in heaven over one sinner

who repents..." (Luke 15:7).

No one can steal this gift from you. If you have been abused, taken advantage of or pressured into a bad decision, you are still a gift and will be a gift until you freely choose to give yourself to someone.

So then, why is this Catholic priest writing to you about sexuality? I hope that these ideas about a \$20 bill, a necklace and an antique watch will give you some ideas about how you can respect and understand the great gifts of life and sexuality so that you will be as holy, happy and healthy as our loving God wants you to be. **YU**

Father Gary Bagley has been a Catholic youth ministry leader for 27 years. He was the director of the diocesan youth department and the director for youth retreats for 25. He is currently the pastor of St. Benedict Parish in Buffalo.

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q• You call sexuality a gift. I'll go with that, but it confuses me, too. Most other gifts we get, we're expected to share. If sexuality is such a great gift, why are the rules so different with it? **a**• *All gifts deserve respect, and the great gifts should always get extra-special care. If someone gives you the gift of confidence and shares a special secret with you, you should not "share" that gift but respect it and cherish the intimacy as a special gift. A gift that you give to everyone is a gift to no one. When the grandchildren are around, my mother is more careful about her Waterford crystal than some of the other gifts in the house. We are more careful with the more special gifts.*

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