

In Defense of Catholic Sexual Ethics

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May 2008

In the mid-1990s, Father Andrew Greeley released a book wherein he argued that “Catholics have sex more often than do other Americans, they are more playful in their sexual relationships, and they seem to enjoy their sexual experiences more.” Was he right? Who knows? One thing is for sure: at least he challenged the conventional wisdom that Catholics are plagued with sexual hang-ups. It is also worth noting that if Catholics are so guilt-ridden about sex, it needs to be explained why they have such large families vis-à-vis the adherents of most other religions.

The time has long past when Catholics should be defensive about Catholic sexual ethics. After all, it is not those of us who put a premium on restraint who are ruining their lives with psychological and physiological problems of a mountainous sort—it is those who have chosen to do the opposite and abandon restraint altogether. Let me share with you an anecdote on this subject.

The last group debate of “Firing Line” that Bill Buckley did was on the merits of the ACLU. Held at Bard College several years ago, I was one of the participants on Bill’s side. The upstate New York college has a reputation for being cutting-edge radical, so it was not surprising that when ACLU president Nadine Strossen attacked me for being against sex education, the earrings-in-the-nose crowd smirked. But their smile didn’t last long: I quickly informed them that I was not unequivocally opposed to sex education (there are responsible curricula available), and then I hit them with a question that

literally wiped the smile off their faces. I asked them why, if restraint is so bad, do they spend so much time going to funerals. There wasn't a peep.

Sexual license—the very opposite of what the Catholic Church teaches—kills. It kills psychologically, socially, spiritually and physically. For instance, the reason why legions of heterosexuals and heterosexuals wind up with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is because they don't value restraint. As a result, some die young. Which explains the funerals.

Of all the killer STDs, none is worse than AIDS. But like all other STDs, it is (with some exceptions) behaviorally induced; promiscuous drug use, especially when combined with dirty needles, and reckless sex, straight or gay, accounts for most of the AIDS cases. It follows that because the disease is behaviorally induced, it is behaviorally preventable. Those who don't take drugs are not going to get AIDS. Those who don't engage in dangerous sex acts, and those who don't sleep around, are not going to get AIDS. But those who rebel against an ethos of sexual reticence are not so lucky—they are precisely the ones who suffer. It really isn't too hard to figure out.

The reason we have AIDS, and other STDs, is because we have made restraint a dirty word. So instead of telling people to slam on their brakes, we counsel research, technology and education. Never mind that all three have proven to be a monumental failure, and that only a return to Catholic sexual ethics will save us from ourselves, our society appears to have learned absolutely nothing.

In 2006, the U.S. spent an average of \$48 per diabetes patient on research. We spent \$144 for those suffering from Alzheimer's and \$154 for those suffering from Parkinson's. For AIDS patients, we spent \$3,084. And what are we told is the answer to AIDS? More research. The tragedy is that those with

Alzheimer's and Parkinson's did nothing voluntarily to cause their malady.

Technology, in the form of condoms, pills and the like, are also supposed to save us. But they never do, and no one has demonstrated this better than Edward C. Green, director of the AIDS Prevention Research Project at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies.

In a piece he recently co-authored in *First Things*, Green concluded that "In every African country in which HIV infections have declined, this decline has been associated with a decrease in the proportion of men and women reporting more than one sex partner over the course of a year—which is exactly what fidelity programs promote." He adds, "The other behavior that has often been associated with a decline in HIV prevalence is a decrease in premarital sex among young people." As for the utility of condoms reducing HIV/AIDS, he properly calls it a "myth."

In other words, in countries like Uganda, which have adopted Catholic sexual ethics, AIDS is declining. In the wealthy and well-educated countries in southern Africa, where condoms are promoted and restraint is shunned, AIDS is taking a terrible toll. Which raises the question: Why are the educated so dumb?

In 1987, six years after AIDS was discovered, gay journalist Randy Shilts wrote a provocative and startling honest book about the gay lifestyle. He said that the two segments of the homosexual community who refused to change their behavior were the most educated and those who frequented the bathhouses. The latter was easy to understand—it was in the bathhouses where lethal sex practices occurred. But the well educated? Shilts said it was their sense of invincibility that led them not to change.

The learned ones still don't get it. Thanks to a recent national study of STDs among young girls, we know that

approximately 20 percent of white teenage girls and 50 percent of African-American teenage girls are infected with at least one of four STDs. The situation is so sick that in Leflore County, Mississippi, health officials are offering 9-year-olds vaccines for the most common STD, the human papillomavirus.

In response to this study, Chicago talk-radio host Laura Berman spoke for many when she said, "we as a country have allowed our school system to limit sex education in the classroom." Really? Never before have more boys and girls learned at such a young age the entire panoply of the sexual experience, including practices that are as dangerous as they are disgusting. Never before have more young people been indoctrinated with the most "value-free" propaganda about the wonders of condoms, pills and other devices. And yet the rates of STDs continue to skyrocket.

The entire failure of "progressive" sex education started in Sweden in the 1950s, and it was instituted at a time when illegitimacy rates were declining; they've been cresting ever since. In short, when adolescents knew the least about sex, they engaged the least in it. Now that they've all become sexual Einsteins, they're burdened with unwanted pregnancies, abortions and diseases. Does this mean that the answer is to keep kids ignorant? No. It means that sex education programs must stress the 3 "R's"—responsibility, respect and restraint; they should also stress that the proper context is the institution of marriage.

If you really want to see stupidity at work, consider New York City. In 2006, the government gave away 17 million free condoms. The result? The rate of syphilis went through the roof (in that same year, the rates of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis nationwide broke all previous records). So what did New York City do last year? It more than redoubled its efforts: it distributed 36 million free condoms. By the way, it also embarked on a new advertising campaign, the theme of which is "Get Some."

The biggest losers in this totally mindless sex-crazed crusade are young women. Think about it. What segment of society has *always* been the most irresponsible—in any society? Young men. They account for more violence and predatory behavior than other demographic group. And who are their sexual victims? Young women. So when government workers are telling guys on the street corner to “Get Some,” we shouldn’t be surprised if they do just that. Without their trusty condoms, it needs to be said.

And why, if condoms are so available, do matters not improve? Several years ago I debated a health official on the “Today Show” about this issue. He made the point that laboratory studies show that if used properly, condoms can save lives and stop unwanted pregnancies. He had no response when I told him that the real laboratory was the back seat of a Chevy. He looked positively dumbfounded when I said that the Centers for Disease Control says there are about 15 steps that must be taken for condoms to work, and that the average teenage boy doesn’t have enough discipline to do his homework on time—never mind faithfully execute the 15 steps.

So what is the answer? We didn’t get kids to stop smoking by simply preaching abstinence in the classroom. We got Hollywood to stop glorifying smoking. When I was growing up, TV talk-show hosts and their guests smoked on the air, and there was hardly a detective or a bad guy in a drama who didn’t light up as well. Now almost no one is seen smoking. If Hollywood exercised half as much restraint in dealing with sexuality—from TV commercials to the big screen—we wouldn’t be drowning our kids in this sexual swampland.

The only way to curtail the negative consequences of promiscuity is to deal with sexuality the way we’ve dealt with smoking, and that means a full-court press involving every segment of society. Right now we are sexually engineering young people from K-12, using sexual situations in advertisements, television, newspapers, magazines and movies

to lure them. Indeed, we have eroticized the culture to such an extent that it would be mind-boggling if we didn't suffer from a surfeit of sexually driven problems.

Hollywood and Madison Avenue, of course, are not likely to cooperate. The cultural and corporate mavens are infinitely more concerned about the effects of second-hand smoke and trans fats than they are illegitimacy, abortion and disease. As long as the sex is consensual, they preach, that's all that matters. But bribery, the drug market, prostitution and dueling are all consensual acts, yet we outlaw them all, never mind fail to give our blessings to them. In other words, consent is not an absolute moral good.

In short, Catholic sexual ethics is what works. What doesn't work is the rejection of it. Because the evidence is so clear that the current approach—the one that stresses research, technology and education—has done nothing but increase sexual problems of all sorts, it is incumbent on Catholics to stand up and proudly promote Catholic teachings on this subject.