

NOTRE DAME SEMINARY

THE MORALITY OF ORAL SEX WITHIN SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

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MORAL THEOLOGY 201

HUMAN SEXUALITY AND THE STATES OF LIFE

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While preparing some young adults for the Sacrament of Confirmation three years ago, one of my female students raised her hand during the session on conscience formation and asked the following question: “I know that premarital sex is a sin, but what about oral sex? What does the Catholic Church teach about oral sex? If oral sex is a sin, how serious is it?” I was somewhat shocked that this tenth grader would speak so openly about such a delicate subject, especially with thirty of her peers sitting in the same room. However, I did not hesitate to say that oral sex is a serious sin—since it is an undeniable form of genital sexual expression, and this expression separates the sexual act from the intended purpose of sexual union. Needless to say, my students were not happy with the answer they received... but the question was certainly relevant to the common practices of our day and age. Primetime sitcoms and daytime talk shows openly discuss oral sex and dramatize these actions as normal. The Catholic Church clearly teaches that any form of genital sexual expression outside of marriage is immoral, but what about oral sex within the context of marriage?

Naturally, one would first look to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for a definitive answer to the question. (After all, it seems to talk about everything else Catholics should and should not do...) The *Catechism* does not speak of oral sex by name, but it talks about offenses against chastity and names lust and masturbation as two of these offenses. The *Catechism* states that lust “is [a] disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.”^[1] Secondly, the *Catechism* states: “By masturbation is to be understood the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure. ‘...[M]asturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.’”^[2] Once again, even though the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not specifically name oral sex, one may describe it as a deliberate stimulation of the genitals in order to experience pleasure. Masturbation is not limited to self-initiation. From this specific definition, coupled with the definition of lust, it follows that if a married couple engages in oral sex and this act results in orgasm, then the act is immoral by its very nature.

The preceding information may be both new and surprising to married couples. However, they should realize that they are not alone. Christopher West, a contemporary educator in the area of Catholic sexual ethics, admits that many people have an incorrect understanding about sexuality within marriage. When a couple enters the sacrament of marriage, that does not give them the freedom to do whatever they can imagine or desire in the way of sexual actions. Such an understanding of marriage and freedom is incorrect. Christopher West believes that the meaning of chastity is often confused with abstinence, and this misunderstanding is the root of the problem. The Church calls all unmarried persons to abstinence... but chastity is a lifelong virtue—not just one that applies to single people and those in religious life. In other words, chastity within a marriage is very important. According to the *Catechism*, “[t]he virtue of chastity comes under the cardinal virtue of *temperance*, which seeks to permeate the passions and appetites of the senses with reason.”^[3] According to West, chastity “is the virtue that frees all our sexual thoughts, desires, and behaviors from self-seeking and orders them toward the truth of authentic love. So if spouses are truly to love one another, the virtue of chastity isn’t an option—it’s an absolute requirement.”^[4]

So, thus far, I have argued that the Church clearly teaches that oral sex is wrong when a couple chooses to separate the act from sexual intercourse and merely achieve orgasm(s). However, what happens when a married couple wishes to use oral sex as a means of foreplay? This is where language and wording becomes tricky... for would this action be called oral *sex*, or oral *stimulation*? In the case of foreplay before sexual intercourse, the act is more properly called oral stimulation. By engaging in this activity, the couple wishes to promote orgasm during the intercourse that follows. As Christopher West points out, this is morally acceptable:

The acts by which spouses lovingly prepare each other for genital intercourse (foreplay) are honorable and good. But stimulation of each other’s genitals to the point of climax apart from an act of normal intercourse is nothing other than mutual masturbation... An important point of clarification is needed. Since it’s the male orgasm that’s inherently linked with the possibility of new life, the husband must never *intentionally* ejaculate outside of his wife’s vagina. Since the female orgasm, however, isn’t necessarily linked to the possibility of conception, so long as it takes place within the overall context of an act of intercourse, it need not, morally speaking, be during actual penetration... Ideally, the wife’s orgasm would happen simultaneously with her husband’s [orgasm], but this is easier said than done for many couples. In fact, if the wife’s orgasm isn’t achieved during the natural course of foreplay and consummation, it would be the loving thing for the husband to stimulate his wife to climax thereafter (if she so desired).^[5]

Christopher West is not the only theologian who writes on this topic. Vincent Genovesi, a professor at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, expresses the following thoughts concerning the legitimacy of oral sex (or stimulation) as a means of foreplay:

According to the Church's traditional teaching, it is neither unnatural, perverted, nor immoral for couples to seek sexual stimulation and arousal by means of oral (...) intercourse, but such activity should not be continued to the point of orgasm... Sexual climax, however, is to occur only after vaginal penetration... On another matter of marital sexuality, some wives may need reassurance. Should it happen that she fails to achieve sexual fulfillment in the act of sexual intercourse, a woman is morally permitted, according to the Church's teaching, to seek and achieve orgasm by other means.^[6]

Just like West, Genovesi acknowledges that male orgasm ordinarily may occur before female orgasm. Ideally, both should happen at the same time, and couples should strive for this goal. However, if the male should reach orgasm before his spouse, it is morally acceptable to help the spouse reach orgasm as a completion of intercourse. Nicholas Halligan, author of the series, *The Ministry of the Celebration of the Sacraments*, comments: "Although a woman is not obliged to do so, she may immediately after her husband's ejaculation in the vagina or immediately after his withdrawal upon ejaculation obtain her own complete satisfaction through her own or her spouse's efforts performed by means of touches or in some other manner."^[7] In other words, as long as the oral stimulation serves an honorable purpose, namely, to help both of the spouses reach sexual climax through normal intercourse, it is permissible.

As mentioned above, the importance of language cannot be downplayed. There is a clear difference between the phrases 'oral sex' and 'oral stimulation'. It may be helpful to point out that oral sex (within itself, isolated) never denotes the full reality of a true sexual union. According to West, the term 'oral sex' most often refers "to acts in which orgasm is sought and achieved *apart* from an act of intercourse. Indeed, many couples consider such behavior a desirable *alternative* to normal intercourse. And, yes, this is wrong, even for married couples..."^[8]

The intentions of oral stimulation, especially when it becomes habitual, should be closely monitored for several reasons. First of all, the act can easily be dictated by lust instead of love and concern. Once again, couples cannot neglect their call to chastity and purity. The ideal of mutual climax and affirming the goodness of each other's bodies should never be confused with using the

other person to satisfy one's sexual cravings and objectifying the spouse's body. Secondly, the act of oral stimulation should happen when both partners are comfortable with the idea and have the proper motive. The couple must respect each other's desires and beliefs. Otherwise, the act would be governed by selfishness instead of respect and spousal affirmation.^[9]

Finally, the habitual employment/need for oral stimulation after normal intercourse merits some moral discussion. Specifically, why does the man reach orgasm before the woman? Is it due to the fact that the man suffers from premature ejaculation, anxiety, or other situations? Or, could it occur because he wants to experience sexual pleasure as a means of gratification... and does not concern himself with the desires and needs of his spouse? The former sounds more morally plausible than the latter, but I would still question both of these situations. What is stopping the man from adequately stimulating his wife before intercourse? Sex was not meant to be enjoyed by only one of the spouses! Therefore, I would speculate that one or both of the couples are not communicating as well as they should. Genovesi states the same conclusion when it comes to the habitual need for oral stimulation after normal intercourse:

...[In] this situation, I would suggest that a wife's regular or habitual failure to achieve a desired orgasm through sexual intercourse would seem to highlight the need for better, more open, and honest communication between spouses concerning their sexual expressions of love. Given a woman's generally slower response to sexual stimulation, it may be necessary for a husband to prolong the period of foreplay out of concern for his wife and her sexual fulfillment. At the same time, a wife should freely tell her husband what actions please her, and she should better inform him as to whether or not she is ready for the initiation of vaginal intercourse.^[10]

Now that the Church's teachings concerning oral sex have been outlined in *great* detail, it would be most appropriate to examine these teachings in light of Pope John Paul II's theological reflections on the body and the meaning of marriage. Why would the Church place restrictions on intercourse once a couple has committed themselves to marriage until death? I am sure many couples would like to have this question answered, and I will proceed to do so. However, I would like to pose this question (that will be answered in the conclusion): Who *really* places restrictions, or belittles, sexual intercourse... spouses or the Church?

The Catholic Church teaches that God created man and woman in His image and likeness—and are created for love and communion.^[11] God Himself is a communion of persons;

therefore, the sacrament of marriage is modeled after the perfect union of the Trinity.^[12] To summarize one of the key points from John Paul II's Wednesday audiences on this topic, West describes the Trinity as follows: "God is in himself a life-giving *Communion of Persons*. The Father, from all eternity, is making a gift of himself in love to the Son... And the Son, eternally receiving the gift of the Father, makes a gift of himself back to him. The love between them is so real, so profound, that this love is another eternal Person—the Holy Spirit."^[13] In other words, the love of the Trinity can be summed up as free, total, faithful, and fruitful.^[14]

During the Sacrament of Matrimony, the couple commits to a free, total, faithful, and fruitful union that should strive to imitate the perfection of the Trinity. Therefore, sexual union should mirror and reinforce the sacramental promises. If a couple decides to engage in oral sexual activity to the point of orgasm, what are they saying with their acts and their marriage? How does this particular action speak of love? Certainly, this is not a free and total gift of oneself to another, but merely a partial and incomplete gift. Secondly, this form of sexual activity will be closed to the possibility of new life. So, the Church tries to help couples make their marriages the best that they can be. At the same time, these teachings point out the ways that sexual union is most fulfilling. Oral sex can never bring as much fulfillment as the total giving and receiving that happens in conjugal love.

When couples choose to engage in oral sex, they also run the risk of seriously harming their marriage. Sexual pleasure naturally seems to be the physical and psychological goal of oral stimulation that ends in orgasm. As a result, one's spouse becomes the object that gives pleasure... the means to gratification. Instead of elevating each other as in the conjugal act, one person becomes subservient to the other. Over time, spouses can develop a lack of respect for each other as a result of their sexual cravings and the way in which they are satisfied. Even though John Paul II does not specifically talk about oral sex in *The Theology of the Body*, he makes it clear that when spouses merely satisfy the sexual needs of the other, they damage the communion that exists in marriage...

It can happen that one of the two persons exists only as the subject of the satisfaction of the sexual need, and the other becomes exclusively the object of this satisfaction. This does not correspond to the union or personal communion to which man and woman were mutually called from the beginning. On the contrary, it conflicts with it. Moreover, the case in which both the man and woman exist reciprocally as the object of satisfaction of the sexual need, and each on his or her part is only the subject of that satisfaction, does not

correspond to this unity of communion. On the contrary, it clashes with it. This reduction of such a rich content of the reciprocal and perennial attraction of human persons in their masculinity or femininity does not at all correspond to the 'nature' of the attraction in question. This reduction extinguishes the personal meaning of communion, characteristic of man and woman.^[15]

So once again, who places restrictions on sexual intercourse... spouses or the Church? As one can see, the teachings of the Catholic Church speak of sex in its ideal form... desiring it to be all that it can be. Sexual union within marriage is best when it is free, total, faithful and fruitful. The Church also realizes that men and women are created differently and oral stimulation is allowed before the conjugal act so that the husband and wife may climax together as a deep sign of their total self-gift to one another. There is nothing dirty about the goal of mutual climax when we speak out of respect for both spouses and manifest their equality. Christopher West describes it as follows: "The climax of the sexual act shouts loudly and clearly, 'Take me. I'm totally yours. I'm holding nothing back.' That ecstatic moment reflects the unreserved surrender of our persons and unreserved receptivity of the other. To the degree that we knowingly and intentionally reserve any part of ourselves from our spouse in the sexual act, we cannot speak of a total self-giving."^[16]

After hearing this message, many people may say that the Church's teachings are naïve, utopian, and unachievable... but they cannot deny that the goal is a fantastic challenge! In the midst of divorce, adultery, and sexual dissatisfaction within marriages, the Church tells spouses to respect one another, communicate more deeply, and be self-giving... not selfish. In other words, make sex the beautiful gift that it was intended to be! When human beings reduce sex to something accomplished with one part of the body instead of the whole body, it seems clear that they are the ones who are guilty of restricting sexual freedom, not the Catholic Church.

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[1]CCC, 564.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., 562.

[4]Christopher West, *Good News about Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000), 88.

[5]Ibid., 90-91.

[6]Vincent Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love: Catholic Morality and Human Sexuality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 242-43.

[7]Nicholas Halligan, *The Ministry of the Celebration of the Sacraments*, vol. 3, *Sacraments of Community Renewal: Holy Orders and Matrimony* (New York: Alba, 1974), 199.

[8]West, 92.

[9]Ibid., 93.

[10]Genovesi, 243.

[11]CCC, 560.

[12]West, 19.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., 47.

[15]John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 152.

[16]West, 90.