

The Church on sexuality

“Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman. In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion. Marriage bonds between baptized persons are sanctified by the sacrament.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church 2360

“The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honourable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude.”

Vatican Council II, Gaudium et spes, 49; CCC 2362

just to avoid evils but to recapture forgotten goodness. Not eating food for a day helps us remember all those who do not enjoy a daily plenty. Choosing not to drink alcohol for a time reminds us of the many habits that can both pleasure and imprison us.

We all fast regularly in our sexual lives as well. When our spouse is ill, we learn to forgo intercourse for a time. We are sexually attracted to someone, but we fast from this exciting arousal because of other choices we have made. Many celibate people recognise that fasting from genital sharing depends on living a life that is rich with genuine friendship and deeply sensual – graced with music or art or other forms of beauty. To fast from contact because sex is evil is not a Christian choice but an unholy and unhealthy flight from creation.

The *no* inherent in fasting is fruitful only if we have some deeply valued yes's in our life. The arduous work of

fasting complements our feasting: we need something to *fast for*. Without some compelling values to pursue and defend, we have no reason to hold back any stirring or impulse. Maturing Christians learn to recognise and honour the seasons of feasting and fasting in their own lives. Fasting from fear, we learn to be courageous enough to risk loving. Fasting from the impulses of jealousy and envy, we become more generous in our friendships.

Our disciplined efforts of feasting and fasting bear fruit in graceful habits. These habits, which Christians call virtues, grow into reliable, permanent strengths. As virtue befriends passion, we find it easier to trust our instincts and to fast from compulsion and constraint. As our erotic lives become both generous and fruitful, sexuality and spirituality embrace.

James and Evelyn Whitehead are pastoral consultants and spirituality writers in the United States.

Questions for discussion

1. What struck you or surprised you about the ideas presented in this article?
2. The authors suggest that both feasting and fasting are part of a healthy Christian sexuality. While feasting is taken for granted, identify times of sexual fasting in your life. Such fasting could have been enforced (death of a spouse, times of separation, during pregnancy) or chosen (commitment to celibacy, faithfulness to the Church's teaching on sex before marriage, fidelity to one's spouse). What were the benefits of such fasting?
3. How does your Christian belief enrich your understanding of sexuality?
4. What was good/negative about your own formation in Christian sexuality? What message about sexuality would you like to give your children?

Further Reading:

Good News about Sex and Marriage, Christopher West, Freedom, \$18.95

Theology of the Body Made Simple, Fr Anthony Percy, Connor Court, \$18.95

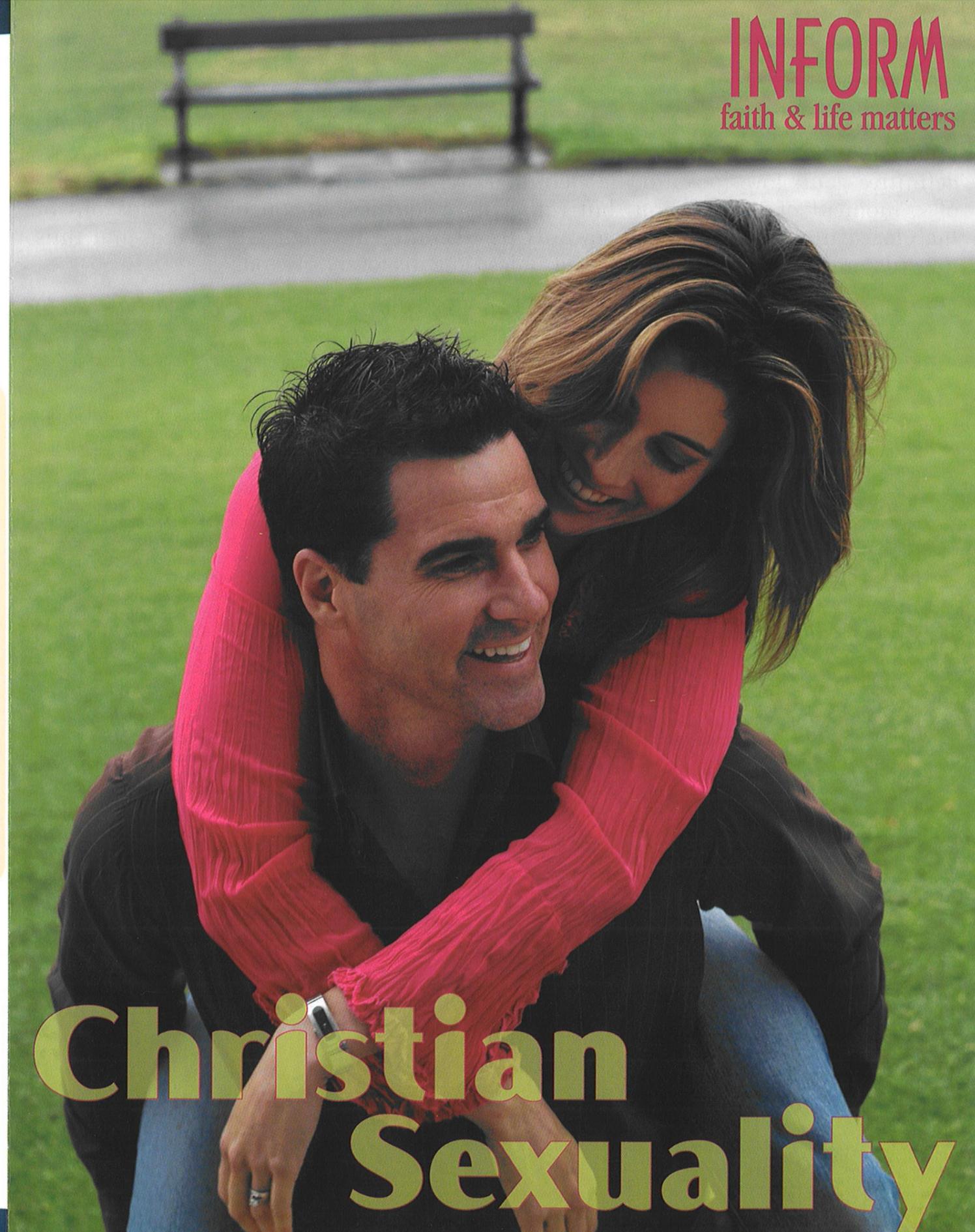
Real Love, Mary Beth Bonacci, Ignatius, \$24.95

Smart Sex, Jennifer Roback Morse, Spence, \$29.95

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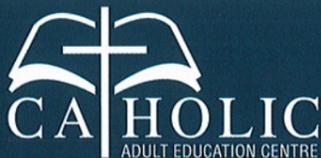
Christian Sexuality

106

For too long the Christian view of sexuality has been perceived as negative and repressive. By using the images of feasting and fasting, **James D.** and **Evelyn Eaton Whitehead** present a more holistic, good news approach. Their perspective is faithful to the Christian tradition and to the best insights of adult psychology.

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“Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed ‘ecstasy’, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.”

Pope Benedict XVI (*Enc. Deus caritas est*, 6)

The good news about sex is that sex is good. The Catholic community’s discussion of sex starts with this conviction, deeply rooted in the religious heritage we share with Jews and other Christians. But quickly the conversation becomes more complicated. Sex, it seems, lies at the heart of the most vexing social problems of our time: rape, incest, pornography, teenage pregnancy, abortion, paedophilia, AIDS. And sex perplexes the personal lives of most of us as well. We find ourselves both excited and confused by our bodies, with their desires and hesitations.

A holistic view of sexuality

As Catholics today, we struggle to reclaim a holistic vision of sexuality. As embodied spirits, we know that all our affections arise within our bodies. Our passionate hopes to be with

others, to make promises, to have our life bear fruit – these aspirations energise both our sexuality and our spirituality. Because bodily passion is not our enemy, we do not need simply to subjugate it. Since human affection is not essentially selfish, abstinence is not our discipline. We need, instead, a discipline that heals the wounds of our erotic life and encourages us to be generous.

For Christians, this discipline includes both feasting and fasting. In each we seek to follow the witness of Jesus. Jesus spent some time at festive meals and banquets – the wedding feast was an image he used to describe the reign of God; he celebrated the last days of his life with a special meal. Others around him seemed more intent on fasting: John the Baptist, for example, lived a life of rigour and restraint in the desert. Jesus himself admitted that

some demons could only be cast out by fasting.

But Jesus was much more interested in feasting. People challenged him on this, commenting: “John’s disciples are always fasting and saying prayers, and the disciples of the Pharisees too, but yours go on eating and drinking”. Jesus’ reply suggests the importance of a rhythm of fasting and feasting in life: “Surely you cannot make the bridegroom’s attendants fast while the bridegroom is still with them? But the time will come, the time for the bridegroom to be taken away from them; that will be the time when they will fast.” (Lk 5:33-35)

In the early centuries of Christianity, fasting became a regular and sometimes extreme practice in monastic life. Feasting fell out of fashion as a religious discipline as Christians evidently judged that the “time to fast” had arrived. The ideal of virginity and the later practice of celibacy prescribed a strict fast from sexual activity “for those who would be perfect”. (cf Mt 19:21) Even the festive gathering of the Eucharistic banquet became gradually more and more restrained by routine and rubric. Christians today, reflecting on the truth of their own sexual lives, see the need for both feasting and fasting.

Feasting

When we feast, we celebrate and give thanks. At a feast, we do not just eat – we show off. We bring out new candles, a special tablecloth, the best wine. The feast celebrates both survival and bounty. We gather at the table to satisfy a nutritional need, but also to nourish other famished desires – especially for play and gratitude. In our feasts we take more time than at our everyday meals; “fast food” is out of place. And since a feast’s major

delight comes in the sharing, we do not feast alone.

At its best, feasting is a self-controlled performance. When we feast well, we try to avoid excess – eating too much, wasting food, excluding others. Often we fail, turning the impulse to feast into an exercise in selfish and conspicuous consumption. Here again we learn the limits of pleasure. But the human impulse to feast remains – and may even be a practice for our sexual lives.

As with food, feasting in our sexuality both satisfies a basic need and celebrates something more. The attitude of feast reminds us that, for humans, sex is not only about the duty of reproduction. Feasting encourages us to enjoy the pleasure of our sexual passion and to give thanks for it. But we must avoid feasting selfishly and feasting alone. Like food, sex can be distorted into abusive consumption. What begins as celebration can turn into compulsive misuse. As a disciplined exercise, feasting refuses both excess and denial. It does not gulp down the fast food of pornography. It does not dine, promiscuously, at many tables. It does not dine alone. And the feast is ruined if we use our sexuality to control or punish other people.

In our sexual experience, feasting is not an abandonment to the flesh. Instead, as a Christian discipline, it is a response to the gift of creation. For those of us carrying wounds in our sexual life, feasting can be a healing exercise. With help and encouragement, we relearn the goodness of our sensuality; we take time to be nourished again by music or massage or even solitude. When our erotic life flowers, this discipline comes naturally. We bring a gift to a loved one; we prepare a special meal for our family or friends; we spend time in healthy physical exercise and

life-giving leisure. We can feast on the wide range of our erotic lives only if we believe that pleasure is good and only if we find our passion to be a friend of our other hopes.

Fasting

If feasting proves difficult for some of us, fasting challenges all of us. Yet fasting is an ordinary constraint of any mature life. When we commit ourselves to a relationship or vocation or ideal, we say an emphatic “yes”. To defend this important yes, we have to say “no” to other inviting possibilities. Thus, we fast everyday. We pass up wine at dinner in order to be more alert for an evening meeting. We turn away from a sexual invitation to honour the commitment we have made to our spouse. Such fasting is not just for monks – it is an ordinary exercise through which we befriend our passions.

Fasting developed its bad reputation in Christian history by becoming a way to punish the body. But this is an abuse of the human impulse to fast. At its heart, fasting is an exercise not in deprivation but in concentration. We fast – from food or sex or conversation – in order to see more clearly and bond ourselves more surely to our values. We do not deny that we are hungry, but we choose not to satisfy this hunger in order to savour other longings of our heart. People who fast find their senses sharpened and their minds less distracted, less buried under the daily demands of life. This is partly due to the simple suspension of the basic routine of eating. Physically emptying ourselves can encourage us to quieten our thinking and emotions and so promote an increased openness to the more subtle stirrings of our spirit.

Fasting, at its finest, is neither punishment nor denial. We fast not

“The Creator himself ... established that in the [generative] function, spouses should experience pleasure and enjoyment of body and spirit. Therefore, the spouses do nothing evil in seeking this pleasure and enjoyment. They accept what the Creator has intended for them. At the same time, spouses should know how to keep themselves within the limits of just moderation.”

Pope Pius XII, Address, 29 October 1951

St John of the Cross

Saint John of the Cross, in his famous poem “Dark Night”, describes in rich sexual imagery the intimate relationship between human beings and God. The poem reminds us of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality: the human person yearns for completeness and for the other – and ultimately for God.

One dark night,
fired with love’s urgent longings
- ah, the sheer grace! –
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled.

In darkness and secure,
by the secret ladder, disguised,
- ah, the sheer grace! –
in darkness and concealment,
my house being now all stilled.

On that glad night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
than the one that burned in my heart.

This guided me
more surely than the light of noon
to where he was waiting for me,
- but I knew so well –
there in a place where no one appeared.

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
the Lover with his beloved,
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

Upon my flowering breast
which I kept wholly for him alone,
there he lay sleeping,
and I caressing him
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

When the breeze blew from the turret,
as I parted his hair,
it wounded my neck
with its gently hand,
suspending all my senses.

I abandoned and forgot myself,
laying my face on my Beloved;
all things ceased; I went out from myself,
leaving my cares
forgotten among the lilies.

