

SEX, LANGUAGE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By Gabriel Moran

The Catholic Church's official view of sex is widely treated today as a guilt-inducing scold or as material for late night comedians. However, what is still on the books and is insisted upon by church leaders for over a billion people deserves serious treatment. Perhaps most older people have made up their own minds about these teachings and most younger people have never bought into church teaching on the subject. But even the fact that the teaching is ridiculed is a sign that there is something important still there. After seeing a play that consisted of altar boys telling tales of clerical misconduct, I said to my companion: I can't decide whether this play means that the Catholic Church is in its death throes or whether the Catholic Church is still one of the few institutions that are powerful enough to generate passionate attack.

Catholic Church leaders are hardly alone in not knowing how to talk about sex but they do not seem much interested in learning or in trying to make a few useful distinctions. Many of our words for sexual activity were invented in the 19th century. How did anyone before that time talk about such things? For the most part they didn't or they assumed that anything different from what they knew was obviously a sickness or a sin. One example is the term homosexual, a clumsy half Greek and half Latin word invented in 1870. Before that there were no heterosexuals or homosexuals. There were just normal people (like us) and perverts, sickos or queers. Despite what is regularly asserted, the Bible does not condemn homosexuality; the authors could not condemn it because they did not have either the idea or the word. The Bible literally says nothing about homosexuality.

The first problem of language is the word sex itself. One can mean almost anything by "sex," whose basic meaning is found in biology. "Sex" directly refers to whether an animal is male or female. Sex is not a problematic term in biology. But when the word is applied to human beings – animals who are not only animals – things get complicated.

A half century ago a newly fashioned word, gender, borrowed from the world of grammar, was introduced to distinguish biological sex from a social role. I doubt that at the time anyone foresaw that a distinction between sex and gender would many decades later generate a somewhat weird discussion of public bathrooms. People who have unimaginative views on sex get impatient with such discussions but these new questions are actually revealing how little the human race still understands about sexual diversity and the existing range of sexual practices. Pope Francis' recent comments on trans-gender showed that he does not understand the difference between the terms sex and gender.

The distinction between sex as a biological characteristic and gender as a social category has been so helpful that it seems incredible that the distinction had not previously been made. For example, in political discussions of equality, it is much more accurate to talk about gender equality than sex equality. Males and females are not equal (nor unequal) but payment to women and men for the same work should be equal. The term sex would best be used only for the restricted purposes of biology. And at the least, the adjective sexual provides more flexibility than the noun sex. "Sexual" describes characteristics that are primarily attributed to the male or female but whether these characteristic are exclusive to either sex depends on extensive study.

Another helpful invention of language a half century ago was “sexual orientation.” The term’s significance is not immediately obvious but the term is indispensable for describing how a person’s sexual desires are stimulated. The term was introduced to establish the fact of homosexual identity. Unfortunately people seem to assume that only gays and lesbians have a “sexual orientation.” Just as courses called “gender studies” are unfortunately bracketed as referring only to women, so “homosexual orientation” does not make sense unless there is “heterosexual orientation.”

It seems incredible now that until the middle of the 20th century “homosexual” meant both sexual acts between people of the same sex and people whose orientation is gay or lesbian. Alfred Kinsey, an early student of human sexuality, found that 40 % of men have engaged in sexual acts with other men. Of course, the lack of clarity for what is meant by “sexual acts” may inflate that figure. But it is clear that many heterosexual men engage in same-sex activities and their behavior should not be described as “homosexual.” Much of the behavior in our outrageous prison system is often described as homosexual and some of it is; but more of it is better described as heterosexual rape.

The language used for sexual and gender matters shows the human race’s talking about something while at the same time hiding whatever they are talking about. Sometimes there is no knowledge of how to describe something; at other times there is a deliberate attempt to cover up what people are embarrassed about. A famous example is Bill Clinton’s statement “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

The Clinton sex scandal broke in the morning and he had all day to prepare what he would say in his first interview that evening. He obviously chose his words very carefully. I guessed exactly what he was hiding when he said “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.” Jim Lehrer, the interviewer, was perhaps too delicate of speech to follow up Clinton’s answer with a more precise question, such as: “Yes, Mr. President, but did she Most people think that Clinton lied – or more precisely most older people think he lied. A survey showed that most younger people thought he was telling the truth in denying that he had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. For them, oral sex does not come under the heading of “sexual relations.”

Bill Clinton’s actual and rumored escapades may have ushered in a new era of sexual speech. More likely it was not Bill Clinton but the Internet that in recent years suddenly made public what had been said and shown only in private. The Internet was certainly a condition if not the major cause of an avalanche of sexual material being available. What up to the 1960s could get you arrested is now routinely available in every family’s living room even without a credit card.

The Republican platform of 2016 contains a dire warning that pornography is a “public health problem that is destroying the life of millions” (no word on guns), a warning that perhaps bears examination. “Pornography” is one of the few sexual words that have a long history. No doubt pornography has been around for centuries but even compared to a few decades ago, “pornography” does not refer to the same thing.

The golden age of pornography is said to be the 1970s. At that moment, laws of censorship were still in place but were being pushed to the limit. Pornographers had to use some skill in getting around the laws while staying out of jail. They were continuing a tradition going back to the 1940s when mainstream film makers had to use their imagination to circumvent the Hays Code which had the powerful backing of the Catholic Church. An example of the code's long list of rules was, "Passion should be so treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and base element."

When practically all censorship disappeared, pornographers were let loose to show anything they wanted but that was not good news for the quality of movies. Hollywood annually produces 10,000 porn films and 500 mainstream films. It is estimated that almost one third of Internet activity is pornography. That says a lot about the viewing public but is it a sign of the success or failure of pornography. One reason that there is so much pornography is that it is so boring. The film makers have to keep churning out the stuff because no one cares about quality and no one looks twice at the material. Makers of pornography have either forgotten or never knew what is erotic. Not much imagination is shown in ninety minute films that are produced in two hours. You would think the producers would just show a little effort in their work instead of repeatedly making the same movie. The pornography business is actually not doing well financially.

A Republican war on pornography is not likely to succeed. They could lessen the amount of pornography by calling for higher quality in pornography (some Republican lawmakers would surely like better pornography although they would not say so publically). The repressed world of the 1950s is no model for eroticism. But pity the young people of today who are overwhelmed by a sea of sex talk and crude imagery before they can begin to figure out their own interests and imaginations.

Pornography is closely connected to the practice called masturbation. That word was invented in the 19th century as a pseudo-scientific term. I never actually heard the word throughout my childhood although its condemnation was the center piece of every church retreat and mission for boys. After a few days of drowsy response to the preacher, all ears were attentive when the big topic arrived. Everyone knew what was being roundly condemned as a grievous sin although the preacher never quite said what he was talking about. Every adolescent boy in the congregation could have supplied one of a dozen names for the activity.

In the Vatican's 1975 document on homosexuality, masturbation is named as a violation of natural law because it "contradicts the finality of the faculty." Every act of masturbation is said to be a mortal sin qualifying you for hell. That statement is just plain cruel to every adolescent trying to figure out what is happening in his or her body. The statement is a painful example of the inability of Catholic Church leaders to come to terms with the fact that sexual activity has a range of human meanings that are separate from generating babies.

There have been sects that equated the "spilling of seed" with murder. They reasoned that if "semen" (seed) is the beginning of life then any interruption of the life process is murder. In our enlightened age, we have come to understand that the woman has a part in the production of a baby (a brilliant discovery) so the "beginning of life" is said to be fertilization. But it is not known when during pregnancy a baby comes into existence (which was acknowledged in

Catholic Church teaching until the mid-twentieth century) and I doubt that there ever will be agreement. But Catholic Church teaching should be clear that sexual self-pleasuring is not an interruption of the life process, and abortion in the earliest stage of pregnancy is not murder.

The young desperately need guidance but who is going to provide it? The need is for education but there is not even a proper name for that. A century ago there was invented something called “sex education.” The name is not very revealing. “Sex ed” has been the name of a course or a curriculum unit in the public schools. A school subject differs from a “sexual education” that should begin in infancy and continue into old age. “Sex ed” has passionate supporters but also severe critics, not only right-wing opponents of anything including the word sex, but some thoughtful and open-minded people.

Of course, “sex” is just one of those things that are so important in life that we bury it in a school course for children. The “sexuality educator” in a public school is asked to do all the educating that should be done by a range of society’s institutions starting with the family. The school teachers do the best they can but they often restrict discussion to biological facts in an attempt to avoid controversy. That can provide an antiseptic and distorted view of human sexuality. If the “sex ed” teacher tries to do something closer to reality, the classroom can be embarrassing and the teacher can be in trouble.

“Sex” is not the name for a course in school; it is an aspect of everything in a school and elsewhere. The children need help but so do all the schoolteachers as well as the parents of the children. Opponents and attackers of “sex education” should just stop and admit that we first have to agree on some better terms in which to talk about human sexuality. That might be a first step toward intelligent debates about everyone’s need for sexual education and society’s need for some regulations. We might start by responding calmly and truthfully to the questions of six-year olds and maybe then they would be better prepared for adolescence which now seems to extend from ages seven to thirty.