



---

# **SEX AND SANCTITY**

A discussion of sex before marriage  
by Jason Evert

---



# SEX AND SANCTITY

**“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathens who do not know God” (1 Thes 4:3 – 5).**

Discerning the will of God during college can be a difficult thing. With so many decisions, such as choosing a major or a potential relationship or vocation, it would be convenient if God simply said, “This is my will for you.” Although He doesn’t often do this, there are times in life when God is unambiguously clear about what He wants us to do. The above passage from St. Paul is one such example. God’s will is that we should be holy, abstain from immorality and practice self-control instead of lust, like those who don’t know God.

Unfortunately, knowing what God wants us to do is often easier than actually doing it. This is especially the case when you’re surrounded by others who live a different lifestyle. On the typical college campus, this Scripture passage is inverted. The message seems to be: “For this is the norm on campus, your seduction: that you indulge in immorality; that each one of you be controlled by his own body in lust and dishonor, like the heathens who do not know God.”

How can you practice chastity when you’re immersed in such a culture? For one, it helps to understand why God desires purity from us (and more importantly, *for* us). So, whether you’re in full agreement with the Church’s teachings on sexuality or you have serious questions about them, the following questions and answers offer a basic explanation of God’s plan for human love.

## **What's wrong with sex outside of marriage?**

The Church's teachings on sexuality are pretty simple: Love, sex, babies and marriage go together. That's it.<sup>1</sup> When we separate what God has joined, our lives become needlessly complicated. So, when it comes to sexual intimacy, it's not simply that sex belongs *in* marriage, but that sexual intimacy *is* marital.

Why? Consider what the sexual act says. In his *Theology of the Body*, Pope St. John Paul II spoke about the "language of the body." Not only are we capable of communicating through speech, we also express ourselves through our bodies. In the sexual act, one's body is saying, "I give myself completely to you. I am all yours." It is proclaiming the wedding vows with one's body. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: "In marriage the physical intimacy of the spouses becomes a sign and pledge of spiritual communion."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when a husband and wife become one flesh, they renew their wedding promises in the flesh. In marriage, the total gift of the person corresponds with the total gift of the body; one gift is not given without the other.

However, when a couple expresses sexual intimacy outside of marriage, they are speaking a lie in the language of the body. They may not intend to be lying to one another, and even if their decision to be sexually intimate is mutual, they are not being sexually honest. In fact, the pleasure they experience often masks their discontent. In his book *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II noted, "A woman and a man, if their 'mutual love' depends merely on pleasure or self-interest, will be tied to each other just as long as they remain a source of pleasure or profit for each other. The moment this comes to an end, the real reason for their 'love' will also end, the illusion of reciprocity will burst like a bubble."<sup>3</sup>

These teachings aren't only declared by the Church—they're written

into our own bodies. For example, during sexual arousal, the brain releases a hormone called oxytocin.<sup>4</sup> It works like human superglue because it causes a great emotional bond, increases trust, and makes you less critical of the other person.<sup>5</sup> Such blinding and binding helps married couples to persevere through tough times. But outside of marriage it can be dangerous. One might consider it a memory airbrush, and this partly explains why it's difficult to convince your friends to leave harmful sexual relationships.<sup>6</sup> In her book on the female brain, Dr. Louann Brizendine noted: "If high levels of oxytocin and dopamine are circulating, your judgment is toast. These hormones shut the skeptical mind down."<sup>7</sup> But when you're choosing a spouse, you want your critical thinking abilities to be functioning at 100%.

### **What if we really love each other?**

Chastity not only frees individuals to love, it also frees them to know if they're being loved.<sup>8</sup> To understand why this is the case, "love" must be defined. Emotions and attractions are part of love, but they're just the beginning stages. Authentic love goes deeper: It means that you do what is best for your beloved. This isn't simply about doing what's best for the other person in this life. It also means doing what's best for them in the next. In other words, if one person claims to love another, but is unwilling to lead him or her to heaven, their relationship is not based on love.

Consider what St. John Chrysostom said young husbands should say to their wives: "I have taken you in my arms, and I love you, and I prefer you to my life itself. For the present life is nothing, and my most ardent dream is to spend it with you in such a way that we may be assured of not being separated in the life reserved for us [heaven]."<sup>9</sup>

This kind of love unites couples, while sin only divides. When a couple is capable of self-control, they are able to make a gift of themselves to each other within marriage. But if they cannot control their own desires, the other person becomes an object to be used rather than a person to be loved.

**But how can we know if we're compatible if we don't sleep (or live) together?**

The simplest answer to this is that sex is not a test drive. If the other person fails to live up to your expectations in the bedroom, would you love that person less? If so, you can be certain it was never love to begin with.

In terms of being “compatible,” consider where the word comes from. Its origin is a pair of Latin words (*com pati*), which means “to suffer with”! This is not to say that relationships ought to be filled with anguish, but that suffering is a part of love. With joy also comes tribulation. No matter how intense a couple’s feelings may be toward each other, the day will come when their “incompatibility” becomes obvious. The future of their love depends upon whether or not they are willing to struggle together to work out those differences. So, rather than searching for perfect compatibility, if you want to know the potential of a relationship, it’s sometimes more helpful to look at how you resolve your incompatibles.

If you want to eventually marry, cohabitation will not strengthen your marriage. In fact, couples who cohabit prior to marriage have higher rates of divorce, infidelity and abuse. One reason why living together undermines marital stability is because the partners are essentially saying to each other, “I’m not so sure about you. I want to be with you, but I want to make sure I can escape if I change my mind.” This isn’t a great foundation for lifelong love. As a result, many

people today live together not because they are deeply committed, but because they are afraid of commitment. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "Love seeks to be definitive; it cannot be an arrangement 'until further notice.'"<sup>10</sup>

Even if you are not sleeping together, living under the same roof presents two problems:

First, it's a cause of scandal to those who see you. Anyone who recognizes you from church will assume you aren't living out the faith you profess. For those who do not know you're Christian, it will only reinforce their assumption that there's nothing wrong with cohabitation and sleeping together. After all, who would assume you're spending nights together while practicing abstinence?

Secondly, it's an occasion of sin. If your living arrangements are the same as a husband and wife, it will become even more difficult not to behave like you're married. There are enough temptations to battle in the world; we don't need to come home to them every night.

On a more positive note, waking up in the same house daily is a gift that should be reserved for the uniqueness of shared life within the sacrament of marriage.

### **What if we know we're going to get married anyway?**

When two people are in love, they cannot envision a future without the other. We all do this, and it often leads to people getting emotionally married before they're even engaged. In fact, the whole culture seems to consist of single people who act like they're dating, dating people who act like they're married and married people who act like they're single. It's time to get things back in order.

As a single person, it is important to remember that the intensity of one's feelings is not an indication of one's destiny. God alone knows the future, and we must leave it in His hands, rather than grasp at it. If you do feel called to marry a particular person, you should feel all the more responsible for their soul and keeping it in a state of grace.

Marriage preparation is a serious matter, and one that Pope Francis said should begin "at birth." It's not something you begin after the proposal. So, how do you prepare for marriage before you're even engaged? Look at the virtues that make marriages last: faithfulness, self-control, patience, forgiveness, trust in God, patience, and also patience. Did I mention patience? You'll need a lot of that in marriage. So, begin practicing it now by waiting to receive your spouse on the day God gives them to you as a gift in the sacrament of marriage. This isn't a pointless act of self-denial, but rather a profound expression of sacrificial love that will equip you to be a better husband or wife.

No matter how committed a dating couple might feel, they are not yet husband and wife. However, within marriage, the two make a commitment before God and the Church to belong completely to each other. They then receive the grace not only to live out the sacrament in their own relationship, but to become a visible sign to the whole world of Christ's love for the Church. In the meantime, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls them to "reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love."<sup>11</sup>

### **How far can we go, then?**

If you had a new car, would you ask how far you could get before driving it off a cliff? Odds are, because you value it, such a question would not enter your mind. In the same way, this question about sexual purity is the wrong one to ask. If we truly value our bodies and souls (and those of others) we ought to be asking how far we can

go to keep our relationships pure. Until we truly desire to know the answer to that question, our hearts are not in the right place.

But even for couples who want God to be at the center of their relationships, purity is a struggle. To help clarify where they should draw the line, they could ask themselves questions such as: “How far would I want someone else going with my future spouse?” or “How far would I want someone to go with my daughter or son one day?” or even better, “How would two saints have expressed their affection toward one another when they were courting?” These aren’t easy questions to ask because the answers are demanding. But do not be afraid of the demands of love.

### **What if we’ve already gone too far?**

Start over. It does not matter what you have done or what has happened to you. God promises that He can make all things new (Rev 21:5). If you’ve sinned, go to the sacrament of reconciliation and begin again. In the meantime, do not allow yourself to become isolated from those who truly love you: your friends, family, campus minister, priest — and especially God. You need that accountability not only to remain strong, but to help you discern if this relationship is part of God’s will for you.

Also, have an open and honest conversation with your boyfriend or girlfriend about setting new boundaries. If they are not in agreement on keeping God at the center of the relationship, then the relationship is unfortunately not worth keeping. Chastity is challenging enough when both people agree with it. You deserve someone who will not only wait for you, but will wait *with* you.

### **How do we live all this out?**

Aside from community life, learn more about God’s plan for human

love by reading some of the resources listed below. But keep in mind that chastity is not about human willpower alone. Purity is a gift from God, and we must ask for it. All too often, we fail at chastity because we're too self-reliant. Remember that St. Paul says in the verse above that those who know God live out their relationships differently than those who have not encountered His love. It's not enough to know about God; we need to know Him and have a living relationship with Him through prayer and the sacramental life. It is through this union with Jesus Christ and His Church that we can have the power to overcome any temptation and love as God loves.

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1. What part of this article challenged you the most and why?**
- 2. How would you say our culture views the relationship between sex and marriage?**
- 3. As described in the article, feelings of love and love itself are not the same thing. How are these things different? How are these related? And how can sex support or hinder real love?**
- 4. The article mentions several reasons why sex should be reserved for marriage. What aspects of the Church's teaching on sex before marriage are you still wrestling with?**
- 5. How do you think God is asking you to grow with respect to this teaching?**

**Additional Resources:**

*Men, Women, and the Mystery of Love* by Dr. Edward Sri  
*If You Really Loved Me and How to Find Your Soulmate without Losing Your soul* by Jason and Crystalina Evert  
*Good news about Sex and Marriage* by Christopher West  
ChastityProject.com

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See CCC 1601–1666 for a more detailed explanation of the Church's teaching on marriage.

<sup>2</sup> CCC 2360.

<sup>3</sup> Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Carmichael, et al., "Plasma oxytocin increases in the human sexual response," *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* 64:1 (January, 1987): 27-31; Murphy, et al., "Changes in oxytocin and vasopressin secretion during sexual activity in men," *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* 65:4 (October, 1987): 738-741.

<sup>5</sup> Kosfeld, et al., "Oxytocin increases trust in humans," *Nature* 435 (2005): 673-676; Heinrichs, et al., "Selective amnesic effects of oxytocin on human memory," *Physiology & Behavior* 83 (2004): 31–38; Bartz, et al., "The neuroscience of affiliation: Forging links between basic and clinical research on neuropeptides and social behavior," *Hormones and Behavior* 50 (2006): 518–528; B. Ditzen, "Effects of Social Support and Oxytocin on Psychological and Physiological Stress Responses during Marital Conflict," International Congress Of Neuroendocrinology, Pittsburgh, PA: June 19 – 22, 2006; Crenshaw, M.D., *The Alchemy of Love and Lust* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> A. Bartels and S. Zeki, "The Neural Correlates of Maternal and Romantic Love," *NeuroImage* 21 (2004): 1155–66.

<sup>7</sup> Brizendine, *The Female Brain*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> For more on Chastity, see CCC 2337 –2363.

<sup>9</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Hom. in Eph.* 20, 8: PG 62,146–47, as quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2365.

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1646.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2350.



---

## **FOCUS Equip**

'FOCUS Equip' is based on Ephesians 4:12 "for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ." These materials seek to equip you for lifelong Catholic mission. We would love to hear your feedback at: [focusequip@focus.org](mailto:focusequip@focus.org)



# SEX AND SANCTITY

