

Sex: What's It For?

Our society is obsessed with sex. Advertisers, fashion designers, sports teams, film and television producers, musicians and “normal” human beings use sex to titillate and manipulate us every day. Whole communities – both virtual and real – are formed based on sexual preference (using sexual preference as a personal identifier is, by the way, a very recent, and interesting, phenomenon).

Much of what we get from the media or even school regarding human sexual behaviour is often either wrong, or at best only partly true. Most of us like to believe that we're thinking objectively, but in fact most of us only “go with the flow”. If we want to understand this complex, frightening, and mysterious phenomenon called human sexuality we need to answer the question “what's it for?”

The first thing we need to recognize is that none of us has a “reproductive system” – a normal human being has only half of a reproductive system. Whether you believe in blind evolution or that God created us from the dust of the earth, you have to agree that men and women complement each other sexually. Without the complementary union of male and female which we call sexual intercourse the human race would cease to exist.

Which brings us to the most obvious result of sexual activity - children. It's just a matter of fact that when a male and a female human being engage in sexual intercourse, barring any physiological impediments, children are often conceived.

But that's not all. Under normal circumstances people feel pleasure when engaging in sexual activity. In addition to this we know that when people engage in sex they tend to develop feelings of attachment, affection, even love for one another. This is usually called the “unitive” function of sexual intercourse.

So if a man and a woman engage in sexual intercourse, one or more of the following result: children, pleasure, and feelings of closeness or affection. Are all these of equal value, or are any of them more important than the others?

To state the obvious, without sex there would be no sex. If human beings didn't procreate, the human race would die out. So at first glance procreation seems to be a good bet for top of the pyramid.

But we are bombarded with all kinds of propaganda telling us that sex is mainly for pleasure, while others contend that the unitive function of sexual activity is most important.

To deal with the issue of pleasure first, it's just a simple fact that all human physiological activities which are healthy and beneficial result in pleasure. Many people get pleasure by eating. They'll obsess about the best restaurants with the best food and the best wine. We likewise feel pleasure after a session of physical exertion - running, lifting weights, dancing, etc. Forgive me for being indelicate, but if you've ever been on a long road trip and had to go to the bathroom you know how good it feels simply to empty your bowels! So pleasure is a part of all normal healthy physiological activities.

Just as good tasting food encourages us to eat and thereby strengthen and energize our bodies, pleasure in the sexual sphere acts as an incentive to "multiply and fill the earth", which, whether you believe in God or Mother Nature, humans have been doing since the beginning.

The so-called "unitive function" of sex is more interesting. While there are members of the animal kingdom who do mate for life, most seem to be able to engage in reproductive activity without developing any feelings of affection for the other. People who try to function this way, however, often end up psychologically maladjusted, unhappy, and usually cause much heartache to themselves and those around them.

Why is this "unitive function" so important? Human beings, unlike virtually any other member of the animal kingdom, require a long period of growth and development before they come to maturity. Children have the best chance of developing into physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healthy adults if their parents and grand-parents stay together in a loving, supportive relationship. This is especially true in agricultural societies, which is what most societies were till the 19th century, but we're learning that this is no less true in our post-modern western urban world as well.

Looking at things objectively, it becomes pretty clear that the pleasure as well as the unitive function of sex exist to support childbearing. Only child-bearing can

“stand on its own two feet” as the primary reason for sex. Pleasure as an incentive to conceive children and the unitive function as a support to keep the parents together work jointly as a system to insure that children will be conceived and have the best possible chance to reach a healthy maturity.

On the negative side we see that sexual activity which is not grounded in the possibility or desire to have children can easily become destructive.

This is very clear in regards to the issue of sexual pleasure. People who seek pleasure for its own sake (e.g., the pleasure, but not the nutrition, of eating by consuming all kinds of tasty foods, but then inducing vomiting in order to eat more; the drug addict; the alcoholic; etc.) always come to a bad end. Sexually addictive practices such as the use of pornography, self-stimulation, promiscuous behaviour etc., have become very widespread in our society. Experience shows that practices like the use of pornography or sexual promiscuity can easily become addictive, contribute to an inability to have healthy relationships with others, and end up causing a great deal of pain for individuals, families, and communities.

The same thing happens when we try to ignore the unitive function of sex. Take for an example the person who thinks that they can be sexually promiscuous without consequences. They want the pleasure but not the responsibility of sexual activity. They practice “safe sex” (a convenient lie), they’ll even get themselves surgically sterilized so as not to worry about unwanted children. What happens? They engage in sexual relations, but the “unitive function” of sex is still there. They try so hard to deny the feelings of affection and intimacy that sexual intercourse generates that they end up not being able to have a healthy, loving relationship with anyone. They often end up miserable, and can’t figure out why.

Healthy human sexuality functions as a system. The complete system includes male, female, pleasure, childbearing, and emotional attachment. Any complete and fulfilling experience of sexuality will include all these elements, as well as the other human behaviours which support them - chastity, faithfulness, commitment to the partner, and love.

Here we need to say a word about those who, for one reason or another, cannot bear children. It should be obvious by now that while procreation is the main purpose for sex, it’s not the only purpose. While pleasure and the unitive function of sex exist to help with the conception and upbringing of children, we

see that the presence of children supports the unitive function of sex as well (remember, it's a system). This is why people who at 20 or 25 years of age thought that they would never want children decide at 30 or 35 years of age they must have children.

I know many couples who, when they learned that they couldn't have children of their own, adopted. Adoption is a blessed and a noble act. Without exception both the parents and the adopted children that I know are wonderful people. We would never want to say that just because a couple can't have children sexual activity is unnecessary or forbidden, but the experience of adoptive families as well as the existence of a multi-million dollar industry to help childless couples conceive can be understood as a recognition that children are a much desired and irreplaceable part of life.

From an Orthodox Christian standpoint we would simply add the following. Many people believe the Church looks down on sex as something "impure" or "dirty". Nothing could be further from the truth. The Church understands sex to be potentially holy, a means of fulfilling God's commandment to multiply and fill the earth as well as our own personal calling as husbands, wives, and parents. The position of the Church regarding sexual activity - that sexual activity should only take place between one man and one woman in a committed, loving, and blessed relationship for life - is not an arbitrary rule, but a simple recognition of what actually brings the most happiness and love to the most people. The reason sexual activity is restricted to marriage is because it is so precious. You don't leave priceless jewels out on the coffee table, you lock them up in a safe deposit box and only bring them out for special occasions!

In closing I just want to note that most of what I've written isn't original. It's based on a talk by J. Budziszewski, a professor of Philosophy and Government at the University of Texas. He's written a couple of books you might find useful: [Ask Me Anything](#), in which he replies to various types of questions from university students, and [Staying Christian in College](#). One other book that you must read if you wish to be able to understand these issues clearly is [Mere Christianity](#) by C.S. Lewis.

*Fr. Bohdan Hladio
June 2011*