

Sexuality and Faithfulness

Last May 25 (2016) there was a “Day of Study” at the Gregorian University in Rome. For various reasons, some people believe that there may have been a lack of wisdom in the way some topics were handled.

Some of the topics covered were:

1. the importance of the human sex drive
2. sexuality as basis for a long-lasting relationship
3. how, with the lengthening of lifespans, the borders of fidelity are also changed

These are important topics, because anything about sexuality bears directly on the vocation of motherhood and family. Therefore, I would like to address these three topics in relation to Panksepp’s discussion of seven specific circuits of emotion in the brain.

1. Sexuality, like other human experiences that have a fundamental history in our non-human ancestry, is undoubtedly important. Nevertheless it is also thoroughly transformed by the human context, by the nature of thought, of person, and of the depth of choice that comes with a rational and personal nature. Referring to human sex as a “drive” therefore, certainly invites radical confusion. A literal drive is something we have to respond to in order to live. Even a metaphorical drive is something we must respond to for a satisfying life. Sex is neither of these. It’s a drive in animals, but an option in human relationships. Many people have had satisfying relationships, even satisfying pair relationships, even occasionally happy marriages (“Josephite”) without sexual experience. Furthermore, many people who have had satisfying sexual experiences in marriage, have gone on to periods in life, periods of sickness especially, where a once-sexual relationship continues without sexual exchange; and many people have reported that this experience was enriching. This is important; sex in human persons is not a drive.

In his discussion of depression, Panksepp says that either the play or the seeking emotional circuits can undercut depression. I think it likely that other circuits can similarly be interrupted, including the sexual circuit, with no harm to the individual. That is, play, discovery, and even affection are all *different circuits*; we can activate them instead of fear or anger, and even instead of sex. It is something to consider. Get off the “sex is inevitable” train of thought. The human person always has options.

2. Gender difference makes a strong and essential contribution to the marital relationship, and sexuality is one dimension of gender, a dimension that normally identifies gender and directs its path, not to mention provides children to enrich its path! However, sexuality cannot provide a *basis* for long-lasting relationship. Particularly if, by sexuality, you mean orgasmic sexual exchanges, sexuality is simply on the sidelines, but even if you mean this particular circuitry in the brain, it’s still not

central to a relationship. It part of a relationship when it is part of a relationship, but the foundation of a personal relationship is in a personal encounter, and we can afford no confusion about this.

Again, Panksepp provides an interesting sideline: the specific care that mothers give is the foundational experience behind human bonding, behind one of the seven emotional circuits he describes. Sexual experience is something entirely different; it is not a development of the care circuit; it's different.

Moreover, if Marnia Robinson and Gary Wilson are correct, sexual exchanges actually have, in themselves and as sex, very little bonding power, and all too readily go into bonding-reverse. Sexuality can make a special contribution to a long-lasting relationship but the basis has to be elsewhere.

3. Exactly what is meant about the “borders of fidelity” being changed by lengthening lifespans, I can only guess, but it sounds like a crock. Average lifespans are lengthening, but lifespan itself has not changed much; only more people are experiencing it. Those Tibetans with 140 lifespans are still those Tibetans with 140 year lifespans, and we're not catching up. If you want to know how to deal with it, go where it has been happening for a long time and ask around. What you will find is fresh air, hard work, and extensive supporting relationships. Sometimes you find prayer and fasting.

The veiled suggestion that people can be “faithful” for 30 years but not 60 reveals a confusion about faithfulness and also about age, perhaps, since time passes differently in later years. Aside from that, one of the things that happens as we age is that we become weaker. Where the weakness hits is different for different people, but it always hits, and when it does, burdens that were bearable in youth may come to seem unbearable. Some of these burdens are physical, but some are emotional. Memories and inclinations that we were able to bury or sidestep when our lives were busy and challenging become intrusive when life slows down.

What are you going to do about this? Changing your house-mate or your bed-pal can introduce some distraction, but it won't make you younger.

So, yes, we can say a longer lifespan does challenge the borders of faithfulness, but the issue is inside. Being unfaithful means you get to deal with it in Purgatory instead of on earth. Those who should know say that's a bad bargain. Even outside Christianity, those who talk about karma would not encourage such a bargain.

The reality about the border of faithfulness is that you have an invitation to participate in the salvation of the world by uniting your sufferings to those of Jesus who “for the joy set before him” (Hebrews 12:2) endured the cross and its shame... “For the joy.” Not the gritted teeth. Long faithfulness is a joy. If you don't think so, something needs to change, but are you sure it's the faithfulness and not something else?

Long life means long faithfulness. You are called to consider the meaning of that vocation at the beginning of your journey. You will receive help along the way, but make some decisions today: grow up. And consider this: there are three positive ways besides sex to keep yourself emotionally afloat: affection, play, and discovery.

This is not to leave grace out of the discussion, but merely to say that God has given us our lives in a world ordered to holiness and maturity as two sides of the same coin. There is no opposition. The meeting in the Gregorian seemed to suggest that holiness, or at least Church law, might be causing us to be blind to our humanity. No, blindness to our humanity is generally the result of sin, and the way out of that blindness is very deep — and very narrow.

Are you living your full vocation?

If you think the grass is greener
on the other side of the fence,
maybe you are tramping the fence-line.
Try grazing the middle of the field.