

Four Secrets of Sacred Sex

Why Catholics Do It...Infallibly

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Most people believe that Catholics take a rather dim and ignorant view of sex. I used to be one of them. Growing up, it seemed to me that there were two prevailing schools of thought among Catholics. The first I call the "Keep God Out of My Bedroom" school. This is the more Mediterranean, must-leave-morning-Mass-early-so-I-can-have-breakfast-with-my-mistress, *laissez-faire* relationship between faith and fornication. The second is the "Aunt McGillicuddy's Antique Urn" school. This group grudgingly admits that sex is beautiful (in a somewhat grotesque, gothic sort of way) but more importantly, sex is *holy*, and therefore must be handled *delicately*, *cautiously*, and ideally, *infrequently*; like Aunt McGillicuddy's antique urn. "Don't ye be fussin' with *that* now Missy! We only touch it if we have to dust it, and then only once a month er soo!"

But both of these misconceptions melted away as I learned what the Church actually teaches about sex. The truth is, Catholics do not fear sex, we esteem it. Sex is holy, but not in the "Aunt McGillicuddy" keep-it-at-arms-length sense. It is holy in the context of the Incarnation.

The Eastern Fathers spoke of the Incarnation as having "Divinized our Nature." Sex is holy because it is the most profound way of communicating that divinized Nature. Sex is holy in that it has the power to unite two souls and co-create life. Sex is holy because it is one of the most apt metaphors for understanding what it is like to be in the presence of God. Christian spiritual masters have often alluded to the orgasmic nature of intimate contact with God. The Imitation of Christ refers to God as a "Divine Lover," and saints who have experienced theophanies didn't call it "being in ecstasy" for nothing.

Finally, for the Catholic, sex is holy because when shared between a husband and wife, it plays a role in our sanctification. The Church teaches that when a married couple makes love, they are celebrating the Sacrament of Matrimony. But sacraments are chiefly concerned with salvation. What could sex possibly have to do with getting ready for Eternal Life? Besides participating in the mysteries already described, when I die I am going to stand before the Almighty and all His Glory—in all my glory (so to speak.) Every blemish, wrinkle, crease, and bump of my physical and spiritual being will be—for all eternity—exposed to His penetrating gaze, vulnerable to His pervasive touch.

Under such circumstances, for me to experience anything other than the sheer terror of Hell, I must be able to stand confidently in the presence of that gaze, like Adam and Eve while they still enjoyed their Original Innocence. What better way to prepare myself for this awesome responsibility than to challenge whatever vulnerability or shame I may feel when my wife gazes upon me in my nakedness and makes love with me? It is this unique power of sexuality to challenge shame and expand vulnerability at the deepest level that, in addition to its power to unite two people and create new life, makes lovemaking a spiritual exercise, first and foremost.

Here are four ways you and your spouse can foster a truly fulfilling and sacred

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sexual relationship

Approach lovemaking joyfully.

Catholics are encouraged to celebrate the sacraments frequently and joyfully. Marriage is one sacrament you should not have too much trouble celebrating in such a way. Sex is not a duty, a chore, an extra, or even a “nice thing” to do when you have the energy. If you are married, then lovemaking is the foundation of your vocation. It is God’s first commandment to all of humanity. (When God said, “Go forth and multiply,” He wasn’t giving math homework.)

A major obstacle to a joyful sexuality is that too many Christian husbands and wives think that they must be ashamed of their sexuality. Shame causes us to hold back just where we are called to be generous. It prevents sex from being the “self-gift” that Pope John Paul II said that it ought to be. Our sexual and bodily shame is a direct descendent of the shame Adam and Eve encountered after the Fall, standing before God in their nakedness. If we are ashamed of being exposed and vulnerable before a mate, how will we ever tolerate standing exposed and vulnerable before our Divine Lover? Challenge your fears of vulnerability, of “losing control,” and you will find amazing joy in the arms of both your earthly beloved and your Heavenly one.

Maintain a responsible openness to life.

For sexuality to be truly spiritual, we must learn to balance the virtues expressed by a responsible openness to life. On the one hand, openness to life helps us develop trust, generosity, vulnerability, selflessness, and identify with the Fatherhood of God, among other things. On the other hand, practicing this openness responsibly (as the Church’s teaching encourages us to do) gives us an opportunity to develop a different set of virtues; chastity, self-discipline, honesty, temperance, etc. Both sets of virtues are equally important to our Christian identity, but they can be hard to balance.

The best way to strike this balance in marriage is to practice Natural Family Planning (NFP), a deeply spiritual, profoundly rewarding, and imminently practical form of family planning. If you don’t use it, I encourage you to at least learn more about it by contacting your Diocesan Family Life Office. Experience for yourself the richness it will afford your spiritual and sexual life.

Approach each other in prayer.

Some people sniff at the notion of joining prayer and lovemaking as if it serves the same function as reciting baseball statistics. But prayer is absolutely essential to a spiritual sexuality. Mine goes something like this: “Lord, let me kiss her with your lips, love her with your gentle hands, consume her with your undying passion that I may show her how precious and beautiful she is to us.” Develop your own “lover’s prayer” and see if the Lord doesn’t help you become a more generous, loving, and attentive partner.

Guard each other’s dignity.

The virtues mentioned, especially vulnerability, cannot flourish except in a marriage where the couple are fierce guardians of each other’s dignity. Spiritual sexuality cannot exist in the face of cruel humor, blunt criticism, name-calling, neglect, abuse, or other affronts to one’s personal dignity. The most definitive research on marriage tells us that for a couple to be happy there must be five times more affection, generosity, and kindness, than criticism, nagging, arguing, or expressions of contempt. Moreover, it has been my experience that this 5:1 ratio is only the beginning point of spiritual sexuality. If a couple exhibits a solid, sacred sexuality, then it is more likely that their positive to negative ratio is 7:1, or even 10:1.

If you want to achieve a spiritual sexuality, then the only answer is to love. Love more, love better, love everyday. Not necessarily because your spouse deserves it, but because your Christian dignity demands it.

The secret is out. God gave sex to the Godly, and its time for us to take it back.

Well, what are you waiting for?