

LAY MISSION HANDBOOK SERIES -- VOLUME 4 NUMBER 4

# Sexuality and Intimacy

Luisa M. Saffiotti, Ph. D



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Every individual is called by a relational God to be an instrument of and a witness to God's love through the quality of service extended in daily life and, more importantly, through the quality of relationships one establishes with others. This chapter will consider several dimensions of relational living, specifically, issues around sexuality and intimacy. When avoided, misunderstood, or feared, these issues are often at the root of the struggles experienced by lay missionaries and their formators. When embraced, explored and integrated, these issues constitute the foundation of a deeply enriching and growthful experience of service and community life.

In this chapter we will consider the following aspects of relational living as they apply to the lay missionary setting: defining and broadening understanding of sexuality and intimacy; revisiting one's psychosexual story; exploring boundaries and cross-cultural issues, especially in the context of dating; and fostering a contemplative stance as the root of healthy, integrated ministry.

## II. SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY: CLARIFYING CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

The word "sexuality" comes from the Latin word "secare"—to cut, divide. Something is intentionally separated in God's plan so there is a longing to be reunited, connected, not just in a genital way. Without sexuality, which in its fullest sense is our energy for life and communication, we would be stuck in ourselves, with no need to reach out toward others, to care for them. The power of bonding, compassion would be gone from the earth. Thus, sexuality is far more than genitality, which is often what it's reduced to in public images.

*Sexuality is the entirety of our energy for being alive and for being in relationship with others.* It is what ignites longing for God, joy in the beauty of the world, desire for friendship, readiness to serve others. Sexuality is what brings a volunteer to be trained for service and what brings formators to their work of training others. Begin thinking of sexuality as *relational energy*, as the energy we have for being alive and connected to others and to God.

Given that we have within us this relational energy, this "program" to connect, to relate, we need some skills for making this happen effectively. This is where *intimacy* comes in. According to developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, intimacy involves a *cluster of personal strengths* that support our efforts to draw close to one another. It involves a set of

skills, therefore, that include the capacity to commit oneself to particular individuals, in relationships that last over time, and to meet accompanying demands for change, in ways that do not compromise one's personal integrity.

Theologian Joan Timmerman defines intimacy as the "experience of being wholly and deeply touched by others," and describes it as a "mark of maturity and a fruit of the Spirit."<sup>1</sup> Psychologist Harriet Lerner describes an intimate relationship as one in which "neither party silences, sacrifices, or betrays the self, and each party expresses strength and vulnerability, weakness and competence, in a balanced way."<sup>2</sup>

Intimacy is not a way of being that comes automatically or even easily to many of us, but rather one that involves gradually developing the skills necessary to overcome our own inner obstacles to relating effectively. When our experience of growing up has nourished us, provided models of effective intimate relating, and spared us serious emotional deprivation or trauma, we generally develop the ability to relate to others without too much struggle or too many problems. When, however, our experience has failed to provide good relational models or has inflicted serious emotional injury on us, then we may grow up lacking the intimacy skills necessary for relating effectively to others—even to those closest to us.

Of course, there is no "perfect" developmental trajectory, and all of us need to work at building into our relationships the kind of intimacy described above. Sometimes, despite our best efforts to relate, we find ourselves constantly struggling, feeling frustrated, misunderstood, even isolated, and cannot understand why this is. In those situations, it is helpful to revisit our own relational story in order to discover the way our experiences and the messages we received influenced our ability to relate freely and effectively with others.

### III. REVISITING YOUR OWN PSYCHOSEXUAL STORY

In their book, *Your Sexual Self*, Fran Ferder and John Heagle (1992) point out that our "psychosexual story" is not only the story of our genital activity or absence thereof, the story of our feelings of guilt, of "sin", of deprivation. Rather, it is the *story of our becoming relational people*. And thus, it is a story essential to becoming the healthiest, most vital, and most effective ministers possible.

*Your* psychosexual story is:

- The story of your growing and developing, of your journey toward friendship and human communion...
- The story of your physical, emotional and spiritual awakenings, of your desires, your dreams...
- The story of your enthusiasms, of soaring feelings, and broken hearts...
- The story of your desires, dependencies/attachments, your embarrassment and

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Timmerman in chapter in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, edited by James B. Nelson, (complete reference forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Joan Timmerman (1994), "The Sexuality of Jesus & the Human Vocation," in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, James B. Nelson & Sandra P. Longfellow, eds. (p.100).

shame, your reciprocity. The story of your *becoming deeply relational, capable of loving and of suffering in relationship.*

It is essential both as formator and as candidate in formation to *revisit your psychosexual story*, discovering new and less familiar aspects of it, parts that had previously remained in the shadows. It can be very difficult to embark on this kind of journey, especially if there have been significant disappointments, hurts, traumas. It is an act of *courage, trust, and openness.*

Ferder and Heagle point out that, as you review your psychosexual story, it is important to:

- *approach your story with respect and reverence* whatever it may be;
- *listen to your story with trust and do not judge it:* it has very important messages to communicate to you;
- *identify and clearly name the messages about sexuality and relationality you received over the years;*
- *re-integrate, re-image your story with hope.*

It is essential to reach a certain degree of comfort with one's psychosexual story, especially as formators and as pastoral ministers, to reduce the risk of unwittingly projecting onto others (particularly people being formed or ministered to) one's own discomforts, anxieties, frustrations, pain and fears, that are not worked through. If you know yourselves well and can reconcile yourselves to your story, you will be much better able to help those entrusted to you for formation or pastoral care, and to encourage them to do their own work with their own stories. If you have not confronted and come to know your own story, you run the risk of complicating things for others, and to have your own unworked issues affect the nature of your pastoral work with others.

I recommend that formators spend time revisiting their own psychosexual story as preparation for the important and delicate work of forming others for relational ministry. I also recommend that individuals preparing for a lay missionary experience be asked to revisit their own psychosexual story as part of their early formation, so that they become better aware of their own relational issues and the ways these might affect their work and experience in a missionary setting. Of course, it is important for both formators and trainees to have access to skilled and sensitive listeners (spiritual directors, counselors, therapists, formators, friends) as they revisit their stories and address the issues that surface there.

#### IV. SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY: ISSUES PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO MISSION SETTINGS

Mission settings can surface one's unfinished business

Any time we enter into a new life situation, particularly an interpersonally intense one like a

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Lerner (1989) *The Dance of Intimacy*, p. 3.

missionary community, our core relational issues come to the fore. These include our interpersonal needs and fears and the basic dynamics we set up with those around us. Some of these issues we will recognize as familiar sources of struggle and inner work; others may still be out of our awareness, causing us to struggle without really realizing what old dynamics are being played out in the new situation. The more we are aware of ourselves and our issues, the less likely we are to be tripped up by them. When we are aware, the issues invariably present themselves, and we can address them constructively rather than being stymied by them.

The "hothouse" atmosphere that often arises in the first few weeks in a mission setting can easily spawn problems and complications typical of rushed-into relationships and "instant intimacy". Bringing together a group of enthusiastic and energetic people in a new and often foreign setting, and encouraging the intense sharing that is typical of the first days and weeks in community, can lead to strong feelings of closeness and camaraderie and can lead people to rush into relationships in order to seek a sense of security, to fill an affective void, or to compensate for affective deprivations and wounds from the past.<sup>3</sup> It is normal to experience a period of both loneliness and excitement in a new mission situation, and normal and healthy to reach out to others and begin building new relationships. The potential problems arise when individuals rush into connections that become too intense too quickly.

Typically, lay individuals embark on a volunteer missionary experience at one of two times in their life. Either when they are quite young and just out of college, or when they are a bit older and at a time of transition (usually around relationship or career). Both of these are times of moving through shifting contexts and, one hopes, times of intense integration work.

Individuals seem to be particularly vulnerable if they have embarked on the missionary experience on the rebound from a failed relationship, from career uncertainty, or from other experiences that have left them feeling at loose ends, in search of "security" in some form. These people are especially vulnerable to overinterpreting infatuations, seeing them as the "solution" to their questions and problems.

The experience of living with or near fellow volunteers, of contact with a new culture, new mores, new guidelines governing relationships among people, *will* inevitably raise questions about one's sexuality and one's skills for connecting with others. One may need to redefine and reassert one's femininity or masculinity in the new setting. One will necessarily have to explore what it means in that setting to be relational, to establish friendships, to fall in love. All of this can be exhilarating and rich in learning, or it can be frightening and confusing.

### **Relational Deficits**

Previously unaddressed and unworked relational deficits are potentially one of the biggest

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<sup>3</sup> Wilkie Au (in his article "Particular Friendships Revisited", *Human Development*, 7, 1, 1986, pp. 34-38) describes similar dynamics occurring in religious novitiates.

sources of difficulty for individuals joining missionary communities. Insufficiently developed communication and intimacy skills, unrealistic expectations of others, unhealthy or frankly pathological personality dynamics, lack of understanding of one's own interpersonal issues and vulnerability to visiting one's own unfinished business on others, can all create significant problems for volunteers and for formation staff as they relate to each other and to local people. It is essential for formators to assess the relational skills and capacity of volunteers in order to help them grow in this area when necessary and to reduce the likelihood of significant difficulties and struggles within the community and between volunteers and the people they serve.

### **Attitudes in the volunteer community**

The attitudes found in the volunteer community, both among volunteers and, especially, among formation staff, can be a significant help or hindrance in building the capacity for appropriate, healthy intimacy among volunteers, formators, and local individuals. The first questions must be asked of the formation staff: To what extent are formators comfortable confronting their own struggles with intimacy and sexuality? Are they carrying unaddressed or unfinished relational business of their own that is interfering with their roles as formators and staff? Do they foster and model mature psychosexual intimacy in community living?

I also invite each reader to think about the attitudes he or she (as a formator or as a volunteer) brings to the group. What comments do you make, what tacit messages do you convey—to peers, to volunteers, to staff, to others? Are you contributing to a climate that encourages the building of trust, respect, compassion, genuine intimacy, or to a climate that encourages silence, fear, isolation, exploitation?

The mission situation presents an invitation to both formators and volunteers to grow and mature through struggling with their full self. The situations they encounter on a daily basis (in community and ministerial settings) will continually confront them with their own issues—and this will be particularly true for formators, as they witness/accompany the struggles of new volunteers-in-training. The invitation to examine and work through their own unfinished issues will continue to present itself. The challenge will be to take it up and be willing, day after day, to patiently continue the ongoing work of integration and growth.

### **Obstacles to healthy intimacy**

Certain conditions or situations create obstacles to the development of healthy intimacy in people's lives. As it is particularly important for formators to be aware of these obstacles in order to help individuals develop the capacity for appropriate intimacy and relational living, I list several of the more problematic potential obstacles. If formators recognize these obstacles, they should sensitively work with individuals to help them overcome the obstacles en route to building a healthy capacity for intimacy.

### Obstacles to Intimacy:

- Confusion as to what genuine, mature intimacy is. Lack of models of what intimacy is and is about.
- Poorly developed communication skills. Cultural differences creating obstacles to communication.
- Confusion in personal identity (including confusion around sexual orientation issues). A stable core identity is a prerequisite for truly intimate relationships with self, God, and others.
- Negative self-image, excessive tendency toward self-deprecation.
- History of interpersonal trauma (particularly sexual, physical, emotional abuse, as well as serious neglect or abandonment) that has not been worked through. History of difficult interpersonal relationships, especially in the family of origin, and especially when these have involved marked emotional and behavioral unpredictability (as is often the case when there is an alcoholic family member). This kind of history can lead to fear of relating with others later in life, lest one be hurt again.
- Fears:
  - of dependency
  - of losing one's identity if one gets close to others
  - of appearing weak if one needs to be close to others
  - of rejection, abandonment
  - of wanting a good relationship and of not getting it and being disappointed
  - of feeling embarrassed, awkward as one tries to reach out and connect
  - of taking risk
  - of homosexuality (of one's attempts to connect being read as sexual advances).
- Difficult personality dynamics/personality pathology.
- Other significant psychopathology (depression, anxiety disorders, etc., severe enough to interfere with one's attempts to connect).
- Not taking personal responsibility for relationships—expecting others to do all the work.
- Needing to maintain the illusion of being in control of relationships at all times.
- Being dishonest (with God, others, self).
- Being excessively self-centered.
- Addictions (to alcohol, drugs, food, money, work, sex, etc.)
- Excessive stress, tiredness, poor health.
- Lack of discretion.
- Excessively frequent relocations/reassignments (interfere with establishing enduring connections that can foster intimacy over time).
- Generational/cultural differences (especially in communities).

### How to grow in intimacy/relationality

Given the importance of healthy intimacy in our lives, what can we do to enhance our capacity for intimacy? We can begin by noticing whether we need to address any of the obstacles mentioned above. In addition, we can open ourselves to the six attitudes or stances



described below, which will allow for a deeper degree of intimacy in our lives.

1. *Cultivating a willingness to be influenced* by others, by situations, by God. This can only happen when we start being open to the possibility of change, of letting go of some of the defensive "armor" with which we surround ourselves, particularly our need for "perfection" and for control.
2. *Learning to accept and love the person you are now.* Intimacy does not happen immediately: It only starts being possible when we accept who we are at this moment, are comfortable sharing that, and can start being that person with others, without fear of rejection.
3. *Accepting the incarnate reality of our bodies and our feelings* and ceasing to think that our reality is only a mental/intellectual/spiritual disincarnate one. This enables us to start being fully present and available to relations with others.
4. *Cultivating the ability to give up something.* Truly intimate relations always require us to give up something that matters a lot to us, for example, certain favorite privacies, shynesses, weaknesses, habits. It requires a leap beyond our usual way of defending our personal territory, opening ourselves to contact with others. And thereby opening ourselves to meeting God in a deeper way.
5. *Cultivating healthy asceticism.* Healthy asceticism is crucial to building healthy, intimate relationships. This is not the old-fashioned asceticism based on excessive privations and self-punishment which often led to scruples, isolation, and unhealthy self-focus, but rather a relationally-motivated asceticism, pursued in order to make more space for God, to gain greater freedom for relationship with God and others (and not to chalk up points for being "tough" on oneself). This kind of healthy, relational, Christ-centered asceticism involves, for example, resisting excessive self-indulgence (including indulgence in excessive practices of self-deprivation or mortification) and nurturing a spirit of healthy sacrifice and of discipline. Psychiatrist Gerald May talks about *asceticism as an act of love*, a willing, wanting, aching venture into the desert of our nature, loving the emptiness of that desert, sure that God's rain will fall.
6. *Becoming aware of the models of perfection you carry.* The beautiful Gospel verse, "Therefore be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect..." (Mt 5:48) is probably one of the scripture verses most often quoted out of context. This verse actually follows a description of a God that makes the sun rise on the good and the bad, who causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. A God for whom it is not enough to love one's neighbor and hate one's enemy, which is as much as tax collectors and pagans do. Over the years, the misinterpretations of this verse as an invitation to strive for the unattainable perfection of never making a mistake—more *perfectionism* than perfection—have contributed to many struggles and problems. This misinterpretation of perfection certainly tends to work against healthy psychological and psychosexual integration. The word "perfect" in this context is a translation of the Greek word "teleos," which means "fully complete." When taken in

context, then, the point of the admonition to "be perfect" is to be compassionate in a way that treats all others fairly, equally —and that treats all parts of oneself with equal care and compassion, particularly those parts with which we struggle most and which cause us the most discomfort.

In seeking growth in healthy intimacy, it becomes valuable to ask yourself the following questions. What are your models of perfection? Are they ones that encourage you to integrate, to grow, to grapple with what causes you struggles? Or are they ones that cause you to have to cut off, push into shadow, ignore and hide the areas of difficulty, struggle? As formators, what are the models of perfection you implicitly and explicitly propose to those you are forming?

## V. BOUNDARIES AND CULTURAL ISSUES

All the issues related to sexuality and intimacy that have been discussed thus far are played out at the boundaries (particularly of roles and of tasks) which, along with cultural issues, define the parameters for understanding behavior.

### Boundaries

Boundaries are limits marking the distinction between two realities (of space, time, role, etc.). In the present context, we will focus on sexual boundaries, which define appropriate and inappropriate interactions between individuals and which are defined by the individuals' respective roles and by the power differential between them. Virtually everyone has a sense of what constitutes appropriate interactions between people in most circumstances. Age, family relationships, professional (including pastoral) relationships, dictate to a large extent what is culturally acceptable. There is considerable overlap across cultures concerning this.



In order to properly understand boundaries, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the concepts of transference and countertransference. These are the dynamics that emerge between a significant authority figure (e.g., a minister, teacher, formator, or therapist) and the person who turns to this authority figure for help. They are the dynamics of transferring feelings, expectations, and behaviors from earlier parent-child relationships to current "pseudoparental" relationships with other authority figures. For instance, a young man who learned early on that he could not trust his mother is likely to have difficulty later on trusting any woman to whom he gets close.

Transference and countertransference are both potentially blinding, as people often fail to realize the impact of their actions on others. Transference and countertransference typically involve intense emotions, which often translate into sexual feelings. Feelings of loneliness,

⑥ The following discussion on boundaries + boundary violations draws significantly on Becker + Donagan's (1975) thorough + insightful work on these issues.

vulnerability, tenderness are especially likely to stir one's sexual longings.<sup>4</sup> Thus, volunteers and formators alike should expect to encounter sexual reactions in themselves and in others in the course of their work. This is natural—it is not a sign of failure or of a problem. One's degree of health is actually measured by how well one is tuned in to what is happening and how well one refrains from acting on one's feelings in destructive ways.

*Boundary violations* happen when individuals *act on* the feelings (often sexual ones) occasioned by transference and countertransference. When boundary violations occur, individuals get hurt and experience betrayal, sometimes in profound ways, and, in a pastoral situation, significant damage is often done to the pastoral objective or message.

Two clear guidelines can help avoid boundary violations:

- The minister/authority figure is *always* the responsible person in the relationship, the one who must draw the lines and set clear guidelines as to what is acceptable—regardless of requests, pressure, seductions from the other person.
- Sexual activity between a minister/authority figure and a person being served/formed is *always* abusive to the latter—regardless of the circumstances in which it occurred. At a transference level, the relationship between a minister and a person being served, between a teacher and a student, between a supervisor and a volunteer parallels the relationship between a parent and a child. Thus any sexual activity between the two parties has a quasi-incestuous dimension.

When are individuals vulnerable to perpetrating or being the victim of boundary violations?

- When there is a lack of awareness of one's own sexual dynamics, needs, unresolved sexual or relational issues.
- When there is a lack of awareness of how one's emotional behavior is perceived by others.
- When there is a lack of awareness of seductiveness in others' behavior and in one's own behavior.

All of us have sexual feelings, reactions, and attractions, including to people who are, in some way, in authority over us or subordinate to us. This is normal. The challenge is not to ignore this reality, but to accept it and remain alert to one's own dynamics, in order to make the most appropriate choices in each situation. In order to know oneself as well as possible and be able to be aware and behave appropriately, it is useful to know the answers to the following questions:

- How comfortable and confident am I about my sexuality?
- What is my sexual orientation?
- What are my sexual attractions, turn-ons?
- How much does alcohol weaken me?
- When am I most vulnerable to getting into inappropriate situations? (When I am lonely, tired, afraid, stressed, angry, hurt, intoxicated.....?)

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<sup>4</sup> See also Jane F. Becker and David I. Donovan, "Sexual Dynamics in Ministry Relationships," *Human Development*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Fall 1995.

- Where do I find the emotional support and appropriate intimacy to keep myself healthy?
- How much do I respect myself? Enough to say "no" even if an authority figure (boss, supervisor, formator, etc.) is being seductive?

Remember: It is crucial to *always* stand up to and refuse sexual advances from authority figures, even if they are flattering, or make one feel special and important. These advances are *always* inappropriate, and if the authority figure is not healthy enough to act responsibly, it is crucial for the other person to not let herself/himself get hurt. It is very important to develop the ability to set one's own boundaries very clearly and to prevent others from trespassing over them. Even if the person in authority threatens the other person, the latter individual should not feel compelled to comply. Rather, s/he should report the inappropriate advances immediately, seek support and assistance, and, whenever possible, see that the situation comes to the attention of those who are able to provide help to the authority figure, who clearly is unable to manage his/her behavior appropriately.

### Cultural Issues

Boundaries, particularly those that govern interactions among people, are defined differently in different cultures. There are considerable cultural variations in the interpretation of interpersonal interactions. It is crucial to be aware of the meanings of interpersonal behavior in the cultures where you are ministering, as these may be quite different from the ones typical of your home setting. Ignorance of these differences can lead to problematic situations that can lead to misunderstandings and compromise of the missionary message at best, and serious harm or even death at worst. It is essential to become a good student of the culture to which you are assigned and to quickly learn the meanings and interpretations attached to various types of gestures (of support, warmth, affection), of interactions (meeting with local men, women, or children, alone or in a group), of activities (what it means for you to be engaged in certain tasks with certain people).

The experience of several veteran missionaries suggests it is especially important to be well aware of the meaning attached to being *alone* with a local individual (male or female). For example, in certain contexts, if a male missionary is known to have met alone with a local woman, even if this occurred in the context of her coming to the mission asking for medicine or other assistance, he is expected to marry her and failure to do so would expose the woman to shame and the man to loss of credibility and authority to minister and to likely reprisals. Similarly, there are often significant consequences if a female missionary is known to have met alone with a local man, regardless of the purpose of the meeting. It is also important to know the local rules governing friendship relationships, and to be aware of the implications of having friends among the local people. Volunteers should make an informed decision whether to have friends among other volunteers or among local individuals, and not simply follow their sympathies of the moment in making friendship choices.

Married couples volunteering as missionaries face some particular challenges. Primary among these is the risk of harassment or violence against women in certain turbulent areas. A

true story recently recounted by a missionary priest provides an illustration. A couple was volunteering in a rural area of a region troubled by considerable political and tribal strife. The wife was raped by a local man. Upon finding out what had happened to his wife, the distraught husband immediately ran out and castrated and killed the first local man he met, who was innocent of any wrongdoing and completely unconnected to the rape. To forestall further bloodshed, the man and his wife were obliged to leave the mission immediately. Other married men in the missionary group said they would probably have reacted similarly to the sexual assault of their wives. This story points to the necessity for married couples considering mission work to reflect carefully on how they would cope with possible violence and aggression and to consider the extent to which they would be able to cope in ways consistent with a Christian context.

## Dating

It is natural and quite common that sexual attractions develop between individuals in mission settings. Of concern is not the fact that they develop, but the way they are handled by the individuals involved. Several issues are particularly important:

- (1) Understanding and interpreting the attraction appropriately in light of the context, the individuals' roles, and their primary purpose for being on mission.
- (2) Correctly understanding the feelings and dynamics characteristic of infatuation and distinguishing genital urgency from the need or desire to build emotional intimacy.
- (3) Considering the consequences of the sexual attraction/relationship on the quality of one's presence and availability in the mission community and on one's effectiveness in the mission work.

As psychologist Thomas Tyrrell (1994) points out, all experiences of infatuation or falling in love are a call to deepening intimacy in one's life, and thus are valuable occasions of grace. Most infatuations, however, do not develop into enduring love relationships, and so it is essential, especially in a mission setting (almost always temporary), for individuals not to rush into commitments that later prove impossible to sustain.<sup>5</sup>

Depending on the role of each person in an existing or potential dating relationship, certain issues are particularly salient. Consider the following types of relationships: between supervisors/formators and volunteers, between two volunteers, and between a volunteer and a local man or woman. Sometimes intense relationships develop *between a supervisor/formator and a volunteer*. Even when such a relationship feels "normal" to the individuals involved, the clear differences between them in role, status, and power mean that they are not peers in the mission context and that a dating relationship between them is not appropriate while both people are in that context and, if pursued, would, in fact, constitute a boundary violation. As mentioned above, in a situation involving a supervisor and a volunteer, the burden is on the supervisor to hold appropriate boundaries while functioning as a supervisor. But it is also important for the volunteer to be aware of what behaviors are and

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent discussion of infatuation, falling in love and related issues, see Thomas J. Tyrrell, (1994), *Urgent Longings: Reflections on Infatuation, Intimacy, and Sublime Love*.

are not appropriate and why and to take an active role in ensuring that boundaries are respected in interactions with the supervisor, being ready to speak up if they are not respected.

Dating relationships *between two volunteers* are perhaps those that develop most commonly. These relationships, between peers, are not necessarily problematic in and of themselves and do not typically involve any boundary violations. However, the individuals involved need to consider the impact of their relationship on the rest of the group and on their ministry. Specifically, they need to become aware of the extent to which the relationship may be affecting their availability to the group as a whole, and their commitment to the mission work.

Volunteers also need to become aware of the degree to which their relationship is being driven by the urgent longing, in a foreign environment far from home, to experience intense intimacy with another person. People easily mistake their shared excitement over the mission experience and even their shared (often nearly immediate) genital intimacy for genuine relational intimacy. It is not uncommon for lay missionaries to fall in love on mission and quickly get married upon returning home (or even before returning home), only to discover that the relationship does not survive the change in context and ends in painful separation and divorce. One veteran missionary, who has worked with many lay volunteers over several decades, encourages couples who are eager to marry to wait at least one year after returning home before making a serious commitment to each other and then to wait a further several months before actually marrying. He has found that when couples actually take this time to readjust culturally and to reflect on their relationship in light of the new context, the relationships that lack the elements to endure outside of the mission context quickly dissolve and the others are strengthened and deepened in genuine intimacy over the "waiting period."

Regarding relationships *between volunteers and local men and women*, it is helpful first to consider some insights from the area of group relations. The study of group relations teaches that individuals in a group are always at risk for unwittingly engaging in behaviors that recapitulate the behavior of larger groups (e.g., society at large, or a societal subgroup), some of whose characteristics are represented in the membership of the small group. For example, a group with members of different genders, races, and religious affiliations often unconsciously interacts in a way that plays out gender, racial, and religious biases typical of society at large. The individuals may not personally endorse any of the biases that get played out unconsciously in the small group, but the power of group dynamics (particularly when individuals are unaware of them) is such that those individuals may actually behave in ways that others in the group experience as sexist, racist, or otherwise prejudiced. It is sobering when one realizes the extent to which one is vulnerable to re-enacting these powerful (often negative) dynamics when one is acting as a member of a group.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> My experience in the area of group relations suggests that it would be highly valuable for all those engaged in missionary work that unfolds in a group context to familiarize themselves with basic principles of group relations, in order to be more aware of their own behavior and of the impact of it on others. Several readings in this area are listed at the end of the chapter.

I introduce this issue of group relations and individuals' vulnerability to unwittingly enacting negative dynamics because the dating situation in a mission context presents a particular risk for this kind of unintentional replaying of some of the harmful dynamics that characterized historically earlier interactions between "foreigners" (usually colonizers) and local individuals. Specifically, there are many instances in which a volunteer becomes romantically/sexually involved with a local individual, and then, upon returning home, realizes there is no future to the relationship and breaks it off. This situation risks unconsciously (and thus *unintentionally*) recapitulating some aspects of the "plunder and leave" behavior characteristic of colonial powers.<sup>7</sup>

It is thus clear that there is a special need for care, caution, and sensitivity concerning dating relationships between volunteers and local individuals. Even when no harm or exploitation is intended on anyone's part, unconscious dynamics beyond anyone's awareness are extremely powerful, and there is a real risk of people being hurt. Having said all this, it is, of course, possible at times for healthy, life-giving enduring relationships to develop between volunteers and local individuals. But relationships across cultural boundaries always require particular attentiveness and sufficient time to honestly determine their long-term viability before permanent commitments are made.

## VI. THE CONTEMPLATIVE STANCE AS ROOT AND SUSTENANCE OF AN INTEGRATED, RELATIONAL MINISTRY

In conclusion, a few thoughts on the value of cultivating a contemplative stance in one's life as a way of deepening one's capacity for intimacy—with God, with others, and with oneself—and as a crucial source of nourishment to sustain one through the challenges of relational ministry. The words "contemplative" and "contemplation" easily evoke images of monastery cloisters and remote communities of men or women living in silence. Actually, the contemplative stance is not the exclusive—or even primary—domain of isolated monastic orders. It is a personal attitude anyone can cultivate, an attitude of attentiveness and awareness to the present moment in its many dimensions, a willingness to slow down long enough to notice what is happening, what others are really trying to communicate, what one is really trying to say, where God is present in this moment. The contemplative stance also involves a willingness to become aware of one's own feelings, including the yearnings, desires, pain and grief that one may be carrying. Cultivating a contemplative stance involves a willingness to begin attending to the quality of one's *being* (and its impact on the quality of one's interactions and relationships), rather than becoming completely engulfed by *doing*.

Cultivating an attitude of awareness, attentiveness, and inner freedom requires that we open ourselves to change in our lives. It requires that we become willing, each day, to let go of old

<sup>7</sup> For additional discussion of the ways group dynamics function, leaving individuals vulnerable to re-enacting harmful interactions, see an article by Marvin R. Skolnick and Zachary Green (1993), "Diversity, Group Relations and the Denigrated Other" in *Transformations in Global and Organizational Systems: Changing Boundaries in the 90s*, Solomon Cytrynbaum and Susan Lee, editors. Jupiter, FL: The A.K.Rice Institute.

ways of being and acting that are no longer life-giving and to gradually open ourselves to new ways of being in life. This will be difficult, since, as human beings, most of us struggle with the idea of change, especially when we are the ones who are invited to change! When we refuse to change, we refuse to grow. And as Gregory of Nyssa observed in the fourth century, "sin" is simply the refusal to grow. Fostering a contemplative stance also involves embracing the poverty of letting go of certain favorite ideas and prejudices which are comfortable and familiar but which keep us from genuine inner freedom and availability.

Begin to create regular spaces of quiet and attentiveness in your life. They will become sources of nourishment for your relationships—with others, with God and with yourself. Formators, create the taste for the contemplative dimension in those you form. When persons (even very busy ones) are grounded in and sustained by a contemplative attitude, whatever unresolved struggles they may carry are gradually addressed and integrated, and the quality of their presence becomes genuinely intimate and life-giving for all those they encounter. Finally, the contemplative stance brings us to increasing intimacy with and trust in God, and thus to an increased capacity for gratitude, even in difficult situations. The many relational challenges of mission work can then be taken up with greater strength and confidence, and can be turned from potential sources of pain and frustration to occasions of growth and integration.



### *Some Questions for Personal Reflection*

- What were some of the “messages” about life, especially about relationships, that you received along your journey of growing up? What were some of the positive ones, some of the negative ones? How have these affected your way of relating to others over the years?
- What were some of the “messages” you received about sexuality as you grew up?
- Become aware of any anxieties or fears you may be carrying that might make it difficult to really listen well to your psychosexual story and to your experiences of growth and healing.
- What would you like to reinterpret or reimagine regarding your attitudes toward sexuality?
- Reflect on the experiences in your life that may have produced “blocks” or obstacles to your psychosexual growth and integration. To what extent have you worked through these obstacles and been able to move beyond them?
- What are some of the positive resources (within yourself, in others, or in the situations around you) that have helped you in your process of psychosexual integration?
- Have you experienced any situations that involved a boundary violation? Try to identify what the vulnerabilities (yours and the other person’s) were in the situation, and what you could have done differently.

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