

Sexuality, Intimacy and Celibacy

From Ch 3 in *Sex, Priestly Ministry and the Church* by Len Sperry

(Accordingly), a major challenge facing the Church today, and particularly those in ministry formation, is to better understand and articulate the relationship between sexuality and celibacy as well as that among sexuality, celibacy, and intimacy.

...intimacy researchers do "agree with the following premise: individuals have needs for both belonging and autonomy, and the challenge of balancing these two needs is the basic challenge in intimate relationships" (Carlson and Sperry 1999:xx).

Unfortunately, boundary violations are common in those who have problems with intimacy and engage in sexual misconduct. Reflecting on their many years of treating troubled clergy, Drs. Wayne Fehr and Don Hands note that "clergy who manifest sexual misconduct or transgress boundaries generally are impoverished as far as intimacy with self, others and God is concerned" (Fehr and Hands 1993:43).

This chapter highlights one of the book's basic premises: **the integration of sexuality and intimacy is the endpoint of psychosexual development.** Since the priesthood requires celibacy, this sexuality-intimacy integration must necessarily include celibacy. Accordingly, **the chapter explores the relationship among sexuality, intimacy, and celibacy.** It begins with discussing what intimacy is and what it is not. Next, it describes various types, levels, styles, and barriers to intimacy. Then it turns to the topic of celibacy and the developmental stages of celibacy, the meaning of celibate intimacy, and the relation of celibacy to intimacy, sexuality, and spirituality.

A Context for Thinking about Intimacy

To answer the question about the meaning of intimacy it is useful to have a context for conceptualization of this complex, multifaceted phenomenon. Before proceeding, it must be clear what intimacy is and what it is not. We begin by saying what it is not.

What Intimacy Is and Is Not. Intimacy is not sex, love, passion or certain kinds of relationships. First of all, intimacy is not sex or sexual activity. Neither is intimacy the same as love, although love is an element of intimacy. Neither is intimacy the same as passion—an intense emotional state of various and sometimes confusing feelings. Neither is intimacy a collegial relationship; nor is it a casual or fair-weather friendship.

On the other hand, intimacy is a special kind of relationship that reflects a fundamental survival need for attachment. Attachment is the emotional bond that develops between infant and mother or caregiver (Karen 1994). Disruptions or

failures in the mother-infant attachment bond have dire consequences in the short run and the long run. In the short run, infants without some human connectedness fail to thrive and eventually die. In the long run, severe disruption of this attachment bond has dire consequences for the development of true intimacy later in life. Such consequences include sexual and marital problems, divorce, and various psychiatric and substance disorders. This need for intimacy is developmentally “a more mature, differentiated and advanced manifestation of the universal biological need for physical closeness, connection, and contact with another human being” (Bagarozzi 2002:7).

A very basic definition of intimacy is that it involves both promoting closeness or bondedness and the experience of warmth or affection in a human relationship. The sense of closeness can include emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual bonds. However, not all close relationships would be considered intimate. For example, while you may work closely with a colleague, the relationship would not be considered intimate unless the second component, i.e., the experience of warmth and personal sharing, is present.

Mature vs. Immature Intimacy. Intimacy can be further conceptualized as mature and immature. While there may be a close, warm mother-infant bond, the bond would be considered immature since there can be no equal sharing of power or respect for each other’s boundaries, since the infant has not yet developed those capacities. Needless to say, adults without these capacities can only experience immature intimacy. On the other hand, mature intimate relationships involve both a sharing of power as well as mutual respect for the other’s personal boundaries. Furthermore, mature intimacy can be thought of as a close, familiar, and often affectionate personal relationship with another person that involves an in-depth knowledge of the person as well as a reciprocal expression of one’s thoughts, feelings, and sentiments. Such closeness in friendships or in romantic relationships inevitably entail ambivalent feeling, both positive and negative, which can coexist. Accordingly, mature intimacy involves learning to live with this ambivalence, both the exhilaration and the strain that comes with being close.

Pseudo-Intimacy. It is important to differentiate mature intimacy from pseudo-intimacy, which is a form of immature intimacy. Pseudo-intimacy is a relationship that appears to involve intimacy but does not. In pseudo-intimacy an intense sexual feeling typically substitutes for genuine intimacy and the true nature of a relationship is kept secret in order to maintain a fiction and to avoid confrontation. Pseudo-intimacy is a game of pretense which “allows both parties to pretend that what is happening is not really happening” (Lothstein 1990:39). At its best, only a partial relationship is formed. For example, an adult may establish a relationship with another adult who cannot share deeply or be emotionally available because that person is already involved in committed relationship or is a workaholic and utilizes

work and busyness to avoid the risks of relating. Or, an adult may believe that he or she has formed a close, deep intimate relationship with a child, when, in fact, the child is not developmentally ready to share power in a relationship that is one requisite of mature intimacy. Such relationships are psychologically safe for the adult because one does not need to risk a total sharing of one's self, particularly one's deepest hopes and fears. On the other hand, when such a relationship involves sexual abuse great harm can result.

Pseudo-intimacy is not uncommon in ministry today particularly because of the prevalence of both dependency and narcissism in priests and other ministers. Individuals with significant dependent and narcissistic features are capable of little more than pseudo-intimacy. For the narcissistic individual, intimacy means nothing more than being admired or adored and basking in the glow of another. For the dependent individual, intimacy means relating to another person who will take over responsibility and provide approval for his or her immature behavior (Masterson 2000).

Sex and Intimacy. What is the place of sex in intimacy? Sex may or may not play a role in intimate relationships, just as intimacy may or may not accompany sexual activity. The expression of sexuality in intimacy can range from gentle touch to genital intercourse. The next section further amplifies sexual intimacy as well as other types of intimacy.

Types of Intimacy

For many, intimacy typically connotes physical or sexual intimacy. In actuality, intimacy comes in a variety of flavors or types. This section briefly describes and differentiates several types of intimacy. These distinctions are essential background for a informed discussion of the relationship of intimacy, sexuality, and celibacy.

Sexual intimacy refers to the sexuality in an intimate relationship in all its variations, ranging from gentle touch to genital intercourse. It is eroticized intimacy and thus can be distinguished from noneroticized or physical or nonsexual intimacy.

Nonsexual intimacy refers to various types of intimacy without genital expression. **These include emotional intimacy, intellectual intimacy, social intimacy, psychological intimacy, and spiritual intimacy.** Table 3-1 provides a capsule description of these seven types of intimacy along with celibate intimacy.

Table 3-1: Eight Types of Intimacy*

Sexual Intimacy

communicating, sharing, and expressing feelings, thoughts, fantasies, and desires of a sexual nature with a significant other. It includes physical closeness, contact and interactions intended to be sexually arousing, stimulating, and satisfying; but it may or may not lead to sexual intercourse and/or orgasm for one or both parties.

Physical (Nonsexual) Intimacy

engaging in physical closeness and body contact with a significant other, hugging, giving a back rub or other nonsexual touching, that is not a prelude to genital sexual activity.

Psychological Intimacy

communicating, sharing and disclosing personal information and feelings about oneself with a significant other. It may include disclosing one's hopes and dreams as well as one's fears, concerns, and insecurities. True psychological intimacy presumes a secure base of trust in the relationship.

Intellectual intimacy

communicating and sharing important ideas, thoughts, beliefs, etc., with a significant other. It presumes the capacity for role-taking, i.e., to understand the world from the other's frame of reference.

Emotional Intimacy

communicating and sharing all of one's feelings, both positive and negative, with a significant other. It presumes empathy, i.e., the capacity for putting one's self in another's place *and* feeling what the other is feeling without identifying with or feeling sorry for the other, i.e., sympathy.

Social Intimacy

engaging in enjoyable or playful activities and experiences with a significant other. Can include sharing one's daily experiences, discussing current events, or sharing meals, etc.

Spiritual Intimacy

sharing one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences about spiritual matters or concerns with a significant other, as well as God. May include religious practices, rituals, experiences of nature or deep personal spiritual experiences.

Celibate Intimacy

sharing a deep friendship without being married and without violating chastity physically or psychologically. For a priest, this form of intimacy is considered by some to be a gift and a grace.

*informed in part by Bagarozzi (2001)

Levels and Styles of Intimacy

Besides specifying types of intimacy it is useful and necessary to further describe the depth or level of intimacy as well as the particular and favored patterns or styles of intimacy manifested in committed relationships. This section describes various levels and styles of intimacy.

Levels of Intimacy

Both clinical observation and research suggest that intimacy is not a skill that most

individuals and couples exhibit or possess the capacity to consistently experience it. This is not to suggest that intimacy is an all-or-nothing phenomenon wherein certain individuals can rather consistently experience it, while other individuals never experience it. There is also a group of individuals who are capable of occasionally experiencing it such as in times of crisis such as funerals or following a serious accident. Rather, it appears that there are discrete levels of relational functioning that have been noted in individuals and couples. It is postulated that intimacy can only be sustained at higher levels of relational functioning. Following are descriptions of three different conceptualizations of levels of relational functioning.

The Spiral Model of Intimacy: L'Abate (1986; 1997) has proposed a developmental model of interpersonal competence which highlights intimacy and its determinants. He defines intimacy as the sharing of joys, hurts, and fears of being hurt. Research indicates that such sharing leads to committed, close, and prolonged relationships, while inability to engage in such sharing results in relational dysfunction.

Three prerequisites for intimacy are equality, commitment, and reciprocity or mutuality in the relationship. From these flow six processes that produce what L'Abate (1997) calls the "spiral of intimacy": communication of personal values, respect for personal feelings, acceptance of personal limitations, affirmation, sharing of hurts and fears of being hurt, and forgiveness of errors. The sharing of hurts represents the ability to be independent or separate and dependent or together simultaneously. It requires the strength to join another in sharing hurt, while being separate enough to be available to the other without the demand for perfection, solutions, or performance. L'Abate also notes that crying together is the ultimate demonstration of sharing hurts. Unconditional love is demonstrated by the ability to be available, which is defined as the ability to be available to share hurts or cry together. Consequently, individuals who do not possess sufficient resources to share hurts can only love conditionally, resulting in limited intimacy.

In other words, there are two levels of intimacy: "intimacy" and "non-intimacy." The intimacy level includes six progressively related sublevels: communication respect acceptance → affirmation —, sharing of hurts forgiveness. Note that, just as sharing of hurts requires four requisite skills or sublevels, true forgiveness requires all five requisites. The non-intimacy level is notably deficient in one or more of these sublevels.

Levels of Relational Stability: Based on extensive research, Gottman (1993; 1994a; 1994b) describes intimacy in terms of levels of relational stability. While this research was primarily based on committed couples, the findings are applicable to committed friendship relationships as well. The key finding is that lasting and satisfying intimate relationships depend on both individuals' capacity to reasonably cope with conflicts that are inevitable in a relationship. Gottman has described two levels of

relational stability: stable and unstable. Stable relationships involve relational styles marked by efforts to cope with occasional conflict and the capacity to maintain intimacy. Such behaviors are predictive of relational satisfaction, personal growth, and the continuance of the relationship.

On the other hand, unstable relationships involve relational styles marked by ongoing conflict and the inability to maintain intimacy. Not surprisingly, such behaviors are predictive of increased dissatisfaction and noncontinuance of the relationship. By definition, individuals in stable relationships are more likely to exhibit and experience intimacy than individuals in unstable relationships.

Styles of Intimacy

A corollary to Gottman's research on levels of relational stability is research on differing styles of intimacy. Gottman conceptualized intimacy styles in terms of stylistic ways or patterns in which individuals engaged in conflict resolution or problem solving in their relationships. Five different styles of conflict resolution were observed: Validating, Volatile, Conflict-Avoiding, Hostile, and Hostile-Detached. The first three of these styles were noted in stable relationships, while the last two stylistic patterns were observed primarily in unstable relationships. Table 3-2 describes these five styles of intimacy with regard to two levels of relational stability.

Gottman (1994b) observes a culture bias in America regarding the validating style. Since the validating style is more compatible with a romantic view of life as well as a client-centered view of psychotherapy, many assume that this style is the ideal for which all relationships should strive and the unspoken criterion on which relationships are judged. Specifically, the media and therapists idealize relationships in which individuals can compromise, work out problems calmly, and accept the other's unique differences. Despite the fact that research indicates that the volatile and conflict-avoiding styles are also stable and satisfying ways of relating intimately, these relational patterns tend to be viewed as less than ideal. Needless to say, the implications of this bias—not only for relationships but also for clinical practice, therapist training, and research—are immense.

Finally, Gottman views couples' relationships from a behavioral exchange–balance theory perspective. He has operationalized effective relational functioning of the couple system in terms of the ratio of positive feelings and interactions to negative feelings and interactions. Using a variety of measures—laughter, touching, facial expression, physiological measures, and frequency of fights—Gottman found that a ratio of five or more positive interactions to one negative predicts relational stability, while a lesser ratio predicts relational dissolution. In fact, this ratio can predict relational success with 94 per-cent accuracy.

Gottman (1994a) has also identified four warning signs that the relationship is failing. They are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. *Criticism, i.e., ad hominem*, involves personalizing, blaming, and character attacking. *Contempt* involves devaluation as well as the desire to hurt, demean, or insult the other. As a result, feelings of closeness and the capacity to compliment and support the other are lost in a flurry of sneering, eye-rolling, and name-calling. *Defensiveness* involves feeling hurt, victimized, and responding to deflect blows by making excuses and refusing any responsibility for change. Finally, *stonewalling* involves emotionally withdrawing from the other in the face of conflict or demands in an attempt to decrease the conflict. Unfortunately, in the long run, this strategy actually increases relational distress and disharmony. While these four negative affects are prominent in unstable relationships, they can occasionally be seen in stable relationships as well.

Table 3-2: **Levels and Styles of Intimacy** (Based on Gottman 1994b)

Stable

relational styles marked by efforts to cope with occasional conflict and the capacity to maintain intimacy

Validating

characterized by their capacity to compromise, to work out problems calmly, and to accept their partner's unique differences

Volatile

characterized by occasional intense disputes, and may be defensive and act critically toward one another. Nevertheless, they seem to enjoy their intensity, which is followed by a renewed sense of commitment and an increased sense of individuality.

Conflict- Avoiding

characterized by avoiding disagreements, minimizing them or engaging in solitary activities to handle or relieve tensions. Despite their distancing of conflict, these relationships are relatively happy and satisfying.

Unstable

relational styles marked by ongoing conflict and the inability to maintain intimacy

Hostile

characterized by intense disputes that involve criticism, contempt and defensiveness. These disputes are neither followed by a renewal of the relationship nor an increased sense of individuality but rather to eventual dissolution.

Hostile- Detached

characterized by a pattern of intense disputes that involves an increasing

criticalness and contempt in one individual that predictably prompts an emotional withdrawal by the other. This pattern fosters defensiveness in both individuals and eventually increases the probability of dissolution.

Barriers to Intimacy

Barriers to intimacy refer to specific behaviors, skill deficits, or dispositions that effectively block or prevent an individual from forming or maintaining a close bond with another. These include failure to distinguish sex from intimacy, lack of trust, lack of empathy, a sense of specialness and self-entitlement, poor boundaries and fear of engulfment, homophobia, lack of self-esteem, and impaired communication (McGlone 2002; Kenel 2002). In and of itself, the presence of a character or personality disorder, such as the narcissistic or anti-social personality disorder, is also a major barrier to intimacy. Table 3-3 describes eight such barriers.

Table 3-3: **Barriers to Intimacy**

Failure to Distinguish Sex from Intimacy

equating sexual activity with intimacy can result in a limited capacity for developing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships

Lack of Trust

lacking the capacity to believe in the honesty and integrity of others limits one's willingness to expect an other to keep confidences and not betray or undermine one's efforts in and outside interpersonal relationships

Lack of Empathy

lacking the capacity for thinking and feeling what an other is thinking and feeling interferes with the development of emotional intimacy

it Sense of Specialness and Self Entitlement

narcissistic traits such as specialness and entitlement, i.e., the unreasonable expectation of having all one's needs met and given favorable treatment, and a lack of empathy are incompatible with relationships based on equality and reciprocity

Poor Boundaries and/or a Fear of Engulfment

the fear that one will be psychologically engulfed by an_ other because of poor boundaries, difficulties setting limits, or problems managing one's own sexual arousal, anxiety, or anger

homophobia

an irrational fear of or bias against homosexuality or homosexual individuals in a male which can lead to difficulty in establishing close friendship relationships with other men

Lack of Self-Esteem

the inability to view and accept oneself as worthwhile and loveable delimits the

likelihood of communicating an attitude of self-acceptance, self-approval, and self respect to others

Impaired Communication

a limited capacity to listen actively and to respond appropriately with empathy and assertiveness seriously impairs the development and maintenance of intimate relationships

Celibacy

Priestly celibacy is a way of life characterized by continence or renunciation of marriage for the sake of the reign of God. Related to celibacy is chastity, “the virtue by which human sexuality is ordered to its proper purpose. . . . More than continence, it is the virtue that pursues the integration of the true meaning of sexuality and intimacy, whether one is married or not” (McBrien 1995:302-03). Unfortunately, these concepts appear to be little understood or respected by some—including the media—who insist that clergy sexual misconduct is attributable to celibacy.

Celibacy can be likened to a journey that is conditioned by personality factors, institutional expectations, and the immediate context that impact individuals. Bonnot (1995) offers an astute observation. He contends that every person who commits to a celibate life experiences several different celibacies. He means that as a person matures he or she negotiates various developmental stages of celibacy.

Stages of Celibacy

These are based, in part, on Erikson’s stage theory of psychosocial development. Like stage theories, Bonnot (1995) proposes a stage model in which each stage has a distinctive challenge that is prominent at one time and recessive at other times but nevertheless impacts an individual. Each stage demands and requires the resolution of a specific challenge or dilemma, and requires specific strengths, for its resolution carries through into subsequent stages with varying degrees of influence. More specifically, each stage of celibacy demands and requires the resolution of a specific challenge or dilemma and requires specific strengths for its resolution and cultivates specific virtues. These virtues “enable the challenge of celibacy to be lived thereafter with success and satisfaction” (p. 19).

Table 3-4 characterizes these four developmental stages.

Intimacy, Sexuality, Celibacy, and Spirituality

This section discusses and clarifies the relationship between intimacy and celibacy. Both intimacy and celibacy are closely related developmental lines of psychosexual development. Accordingly, the developmental endpoint of psychosexual development and emotional maturity can be conceptualized as integration, unity, or union. In *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, Donald Cozzens describes intimacy as

the innate longing or desire for union with another.

Table 3-4: Developmental Stages of Celibacy*

Adolescent

This stage extends from puberty into the late twenties and can be thought of as the stage of physical celibacy. *Physical celibacy* refers to the capacity to be fully human without either being sexually active or frustrated and distracted. Resolution of this stage presumes one has forged a vision of celibacy as a worthwhile lifestyle choice. This stage approximates Erikson's stage of identity.

Generative

This stage extends from the late twenties into the middle thirties and can be called generative celibacy. *Generative celibacy* refers to the capacity to be productive and responsible without becoming a parent nor feeling deprived and incomplete. Resolution of this stage requires assuming responsibility for the community as a whole, for the life and well-being of the next generation. This stage approximates Erikson's stage of generativity.

Intimate

This stage extends from the mid-thirties to the late fifties and is called intimate celibacy. ***Intimate celibacy refers to the capacity to be a life-sharing friend without being married, as well as not violating chastity physically or psychologically.*** This is the most challenging stage of intimacy and one of the most difficult to accomplish within current structures of the Church. Resolution of this stage presumes acceptance of the intimacy of companionship as enhancing one's life and ministry. This stage approximates Erikson's stage of intimacy.

Integral

This stage extends from the late fifties to retirement and death and can be thought of as integral celibacy. *Integral celibacy* refers to the capacity to maintain meaning and hope about one's contributions to life in the face of retirement and declining health and to find reasons to carry on as one's friends and peers retire or die. Resolution of this stage presumes acceptance of the decisions and experiences of one's past life without despair or regret. This stage approximates Erikson's stage of wisdom.

*based on Bonnot 1995 *Sexuality, Intimacy, and Celibacy* 59

Celibate Intimacy. Celibate intimacy is the capacity to share a deep friendship without being married and without violating chastity physically or psychologically. Developmentally, it is the third of the four stages of celibacy (Bonnot 1995). For a priest this form of intimacy is considered to be a gift and a grace and is most likely to be realized in emotionally mature priests (Cozzens 2000).

As previously noted, **emotional maturity requires a high degree of psychosexual development.** Such maturity is the foundation for authentic

spirituality and inevitably involves the capacity to initiate and maintain healthy relationships. Without such maturity, priests are likely to be underdeveloped spiritually and intellectually and experience increasing longing and emptiness in their lives. Many priests attempt to relieve this emptiness, a reflection of the basic desire for union, with possession, prestige, or power. Unfortunately, such relief is only temporary and the inherent longing for union only increases. Without a few really close and intimate friends the priest's hunger for romantic or sexual relationships may become overwhelming (Cozzens 2000).

Unmet intimacy needs "have led countless priests to think they could find true fulfillment only in marriage or, in the case of the homo-sexually oriented priest, in a sexually active relationship with another man. Whatever the orientation, the priest gives serious thought to leaving the priesthood in order to meet his soul's desire for union" (Cozzens 2000:31). He adds: "The real question is not whether to leave and marry, rather it is to discern if he and his beloved can commit to a celibate friendship. In other words, is he experiencing a vocational crisis or an intimacy crisis? . . . crises of intimacy sometimes lead to exploitative relationships with a number of women or men" (p. 32).

Sexual Celibacy. A somewhat similar formulation of celibate intimacy has been described by Donald Goergen (1974) in *The Sexual Celibate* as sexual celibacy. **Sexual celibacy is an expression of sexuality that is centered on friendship and which strives after nongenital intimacy.** Goergen explores the terrain of intimacy and celibacy along the continuum from genital to nongenital intimacy. Not surprisingly, he considers the implications of genital sexual activity, particularly masturbation, in the development process of celibacy.

Masturbation involves self-stimulation of the genitals to achieve erotic gratification. Traditionally, masturbation was always considered self-abuse and thus harmful and sinful. Today, when viewed from a developmental perspective, a more differentiated understanding emerges. In this perspective infantile and adolescent masturbation is viewed more as exploratory behavior, while occasional masturbation in adulthood may serve as an outlet for tension. Nevertheless, abusive or compulsive forms tend to be viewed as harmful or sinful. With regard to masturbation and celibacy, Goergen insists that while "masturbation is not a sign of perfection we as celibates strive to live, neither is it sin. It is simply imperfection—that which we all are and yet strive to overcome. . . . Masturbation points to unfinishedness of the process of spiritualization."

Sexuality, Celibacy, and Spirituality. Sexuality can also be viewed in relation to spirituality. Among the many ways of describing Christian spirituality is a patterning of life around the experience of God in a faith community centered in Christ and the embracing of the life of the flesh. Furthermore, being created in the

image of God to seek and enjoy union is a basic human striving reflected in our psychological development from birth (Friberg and Laaser 1998). Since psychological development inevitably includes sexual development, spirituality and sexuality are integrally related. Finally, spirituality can also be related to intimacy, such that spiritual intimacy is described as a sense of closeness and bonding with God.

CONCLUDING NOTE

Just as sexual development proceeds through stages from less mature and integrated to more mature and integrated, so does intimacy and celibacy. Different views of the development or levels of intimacy were described as were the various types, styles, and barriers to intimacy. Similarly, the stages of the development of celibacy were de-scribed. This developmental perspective on intimacy and celibacy was a prelude to a discussion of the relationship among sexuality, intimacy, and celibacy, as well as spirituality.

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