

Telling God the Truth about our Sexuality Bill Barry SJ

I am writing a book about prayer as truth-telling. This approach to prayer follows logically from my belief that God wants our friendship, since friendship is characterized by openness and transparency. One of the chapters is about telling the truth about one's sexuality. In this article I want to use some of the ideas of that chapter as my contribution toward healthier ways of living as sexual beings.

How have you been doing with sexual issues in your own life? Take a few moments to reflect on this question. Have you experienced sexuality as a gift or a problem? What has been your experience of sexuality in relation with God? Have you ever talked openly with God about your sexual identity, your sexual impulses and fantasies, your sexual attractions?

I suspect that many of you are, like me, somewhat conflicted about sexuality. In spite of the sexual revolution that has transformed the landscape of most of the Western world in the past fifty years, many of us are still not really comfortable with sexuality, especially when sexuality is brought into contact with our relationship with God. The discomfort comes from many sources. Not many parents welcomed their children's questions about the differences between girls and boys, for example. Not many were comfortable explaining how babies are made. So, though we were, as children, naturally curious about everything, we quickly realized that sexuality was difficult, if not dangerous, territory.

Religious education teachers often were just as uncomfortable in talking about sexuality. Religious teaching often presented sexuality as a minefield full of perils. In my upbringing I never heard anyone in authority in church or school even hint at God's delight in creating us as sexual beings. Religious teaching on sexuality was about what not to do until marriage. Sexuality was more like a road to hell, it seemed, since any sexual activity outside of marriage was a mortal sin. So whatever knowledge of sexuality we got was picked up in furtive conversations with friends, through surreptitious looks at picture magazines, through cinema, or through reading. We older folks did not grow up comfortable with issues of sexuality.

Since the sexual revolution of the 1960's and thereafter younger readers will have had a different experience of learning about sexuality. You will have to speak for yourselves about how comfortable you are about sexuality, and especially about talking honestly with God as a friend about your own sexual desires, fantasies and conflicts. What contact I have had with the younger generation leads me to believe that there is discomfort with sexuality among them, but that it has different origins and, perhaps, a different nature. Younger people seem to know more about sexuality, and by "know" I mean "have experiential knowledge." Statistics indicate that youngsters engage in sexual exploration much earlier than in my generation and, as a consequence, may be less uptight about sexuality. The media give the impression that sexual expression is taken for granted when two people are attracted to one another. Yet youngsters

are often hurt and bewildered by their experiences of sexual activity. I do not believe that we have yet found out fully what God intends with the gift of sexuality. Thus I dare to hope that even younger people might be helped by this article.

One way to pray is to engage in a dialogue with God as a friend to a friend. That is, one speaks with God as one would speak to a friend from whom no secrets are withheld and from whom one expects some response. This is what I mean by prayer as truth-telling. Someone might say, "Don't we tell God the truth when we confess our sexual sins?" Yes, but that's not the kind of truth-telling I mean here. Few of us, I believe, have tried to tell God the truth about our sexual orientation, desires, impulses and fantasies and listened for God's response. This is the kind of truth-telling I mean. Doing this, I believe, can be a great help, not only to our friendship with God, but also to our becoming comfortable with sexuality and more in tune with God's hopes for us. So let's explore this area.

GOD'S PASSIONATE LOVE

The Song of Solomon or Song of Songs gives us a clue that for biblical authors sexuality is not the taboo subject we have grown used to. If you have not read the book recently, you might want to do so now. It will help you to realize that God is not an enemy of sexual attraction.

The Song is a series of often quite sensual and erotic love poems between a man and a woman interspersed with reminiscences and internal dialogues of the woman, dialogues between her and

the women of Israel, and a few other poems. The lovers describe one another minutely and with graphic images, some of which may make a reader smile while others may begin to rouse an erotic response; these descriptions are sensual and erotic, teasing and flirtatious, but clearly fueled by ardent sexual attraction for one another.

Why this book is in the bible has intrigued Jews and Christian alike over the centuries. The consensus of the tradition has been that these love poems describe the covenantal relationship God wants with the people of Israel. For example, Moses Maimonides, the famous Jewish philosopher of the middle ages, writes that anyone who loves God "is like a lovesick man whose mind is never free from his love for a certain woman and grows in it whether sitting or rising, both when eating and drinking—greater even than this must be the love of God in the heart of his lovers who continually grow more fervent" (cited in Vacek, p. 130). Maimonides then cites the Song of Songs as an allegory on this theme. Maimonides is echoed by many Christian spiritual writers.

While many modern scholars argue that the book is about the human, physical love between a man and a woman, Marvin Pope remarks:

Nevertheless, the instincts and insights that from the beginning led both Christian and Jewish exegetes to relate the language of the Song to divine and superhuman love were based on internal evidence largely ignored by recent interpreters.

.. Sexuality is a basic human interest and the affirmation that “God is Love” includes all meanings of both words.

Pope indicates that the words of the First Letter of John “God is love” include all meanings of the words “God” and “love.” That means the sexual meaning of the word love as well. Let’s try to take him seriously.

In the bible, outside the Song of Songs, there are strong statements of God’s passionate, even profligate love for the world, and especially for human beings. These passages use language taken from human love to describe God’s love for us. To a sinful people God says through Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3); and through Hosea, “Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.... On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband’” (Hosea 2:14, 16). When the people said that the Lord had forgotten them, God said through Isaiah, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands” (Isaiah 49:15-16). The love and fidelity of YHWH is described in terms of human passionate love. Moreover if we are made in the image of God, then sexuality must have some reality in God. I hope that we can discover what this reality might mean by engaging honestly with God about our sexuality.

TALKING TO GOD ABOUT YOUR SEXUALITY

Now, let’s get a start on how we might go about telling God about our sexual desires, fantasies and attractions. First, be aware that God is with you, looking at you, waiting for you to become aware. You might tell God something like this: “I would like to become more comfortable talking to you about my sexuality; please help me.” If you are feeling any discomfort, just say so and see what happens. Do you feel a bit less nervous? Does God seem interested in knowing more about you? Remember that God made us sexual beings. Perhaps God wants us to share this aspect of our lives and to help us to live more fully and with more joy. You might be helped by realizing that Jesus and his mother Mary had to come to terms with their sexuality as they grew into adulthood. Perhaps you can speak with Jesus or Mary more easily about your feelings regarding your sexuality.

Now think of someone to whom you are attracted. Try to tell God what attracts you. You might start by describing the person, giving details that

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you find attractive. Then you could describe the physical attributes that attract you. Just say whatever comes to mind that you can comfortably say. Do you get the sense that God is listening and interested? If you would like to

know God's reactions to your attraction, ask and wait for a response. Once again, you may not hear words, but you may sense something. Just pay attention to what goes on and keep communicating. If you are married, you might want to talk with God about your spouse and your sexual attraction to him or her. This might feel strange, but remember that your sexual union is part of the sacramental nature of your marriage. Try it and see what happens.

If you are not married and are sexually attracted to someone, try telling God about your attraction, about how you feel in the presence of this person, about your dreams about him or her, and, as you get more comfortable in God's presence, about your sexual attraction. Try to be as concrete as possible. It might help to recall that God made you a sexual person with sexual desires and attractions.

If you are celibate, you know that you also have sexual attractions. Try telling God about them, again as concretely as you can. You, too, were created with sexual desires and attractions.

The point is that all of us, no matter our sexual orientation or our calling in the church are called to live responsibly as sexual beings, knowing how to love others for their sakes and not just for our own, one meaning of the much maligned virtue of chastity. But we cannot do this without the help of God. One way to get that help is to be honest with God about my attractions, even the ones that, if acted on, would be sinful for me.

You can also talk with God about your feelings towards your body and your sexuality. Do you like your body, your looks? Is there something about your body or your looks that troubles you? Do you worry about being found attractive by others? Just begin to talk to God about your body and your sexuality and see how it goes. As you become more comfortable, you may find more and more to talk about.

Have you talked with God about your sexual orientation? Why not try it now. Just tell God about your sexual attractions. Don't let shame get in the way. We have not chosen our genetic makeup, our parents, the culture into which we were born, or the kind of upbringing we would get. As you open up with God, how do you feel? Do you get a sense of how God reacts?

TELLING GOD ABOUT YOUR ATTRACTIONS

Now let's explore some more difficult issues. We can use one concrete case from the bible. David, the king of Israel, was at home while his army was off on a campaign. He happened to be on the roof of his palace one afternoon when he saw a beautiful woman taking her bath. He found out that she was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite who was on a campaign with David's army.

David was strongly attracted to Bathsheba. (See 2 Samuel 11 for the details.) This story may remind you of some times when you were sexually attracted to someone and knew that the other person was sexually off limits for you for whatever reason. David impulsively acted on his desires, bringing Bathsheba into his house and

engaging in a sexual relationship with her. When she became pregnant, David brought Uriah back to Jerusalem and tried to get him to sleep with Bathsheba to no avail. Finally, he sent Uriah back to the campaign with a letter to the commander to put Uriah in a dangerous situation and let him be killed.

Suppose that David had talked with God about his sexual attraction to Bathsheba. I suspect that if he had done so, he might have come to his senses. Let's explore the possibility of talking with God about sexual attractions that could lead to sin.

For some masturbation is an activity that is sinful. I know of people who have begun to talk with God about the sexual impulses that usually lead to masturbation. They tell God exactly what is going on in their fantasies and bodies. When they do begin to talk with God, these impulses lose some of their imperiousness. They find themselves, for example, able to sleep after a sexual fantasy begins where before they believed that they could not do so without masturbating. Being open with God about our sexual desires and fantasies is another aspect of our growing friendship.

The same is true when we find ourselves sexually attracted to someone who is, like Bathsheba for David, off limits because of either one's own or the other's prior commitment. We can tell God about the attraction. I mean, tell God about the actual attraction, not how much we may hate ourselves for having such an attraction. David, for example, could have told God how lovely Bathsheba looked and how sexually attracted he was. When

you feel such a sexual attraction, I encourage you to talk concretely with God about what is happening in your heart, mind and body. Don't let shame keep you from being as concrete as you can be.

How are you doing? Are you finding these exercises, these ways of telling the truth to God helpful and freeing? I hope so. If you are feeling more free and comfortable, you have something else to tell God. If you are more tense and nervous, you also have something to tell God. However, in this case I suggest that you stop for now and seek out someone whom you trust about your reactions. Sometimes we need more than an article to be able to talk honestly with God about issues of sexuality, and for that matter, aggression. Remember that the purpose of telling God the truth is freedom, especially freedom from fear of one's sexuality.

GOD'S PATIENT PEDAGOGY

In his monumental work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor makes an interesting observation and then a hypothesis, both of which seem to fit the message of this article. The observation:

"But whether the propensity to violence is biological or metaphysical, this still leaves an enigma that any Christian understanding must explain: how can human nature as we know it be in the image of God?"

In other words, since human beings are propelled to action, often enough, by sexual and aggressive energy, how are we images of God? He then continues with the hypothesis:

Here's a hypothesis from within a Christian perspective: humans are born out of the animal kingdom, to be guided by God; and the males (at least the males) with a powerful sex-drive, and lots of aggression. As far as this endowment is concerned, the usual evolutionary explanation could be the correct one. But being guided by God means some kind of transformation of these drives; not just their repression, or suppression, keeping the lid on them; but some real turning of them from within, conversion, so that all the energy now goes along with God; the love powers agape (selfless love), the aggression turns into energy, straining to bring things back to God, the energy to combat evil (Taylor, p. 668).

In other words, we are descended from the animal kingdom and so are endowed with sexual and aggressive drives that are in need of guidance by God so that we may grow into the human beings we are created to be as images of God. Such guidance cannot be reduced to repression or suppression of the drives, but entails their conversion to God's purposes in creation. We are not born into a world that is totally in tune with God's purposes; our sexual and aggressive energies, along with much else, have been, as it were, hijacked for other purposes than God's purposes by the one Ignatius of Loyola calls "the enemy of human nature." You might say that the third chapter of the

book of Genesis tells the story of how these human energies were hijacked. Human beings succumbed to the temptation of Satan to mistrust God; hence we have tried to use our sexual and aggressive energies and much else to try to gain control of our lives, to save ourselves. Our deepest desire is to want what God wants, but that deepest desire finds itself contending with other desires that have gained a foothold in our hearts, desires at war with the kind of faith and trust in God required to attain what God wants for us and the whole world.

Notice that Taylor presumes that our aggressive and sexual drives are God-given; they are somehow part of the image of God we are. So our tendency to be ashamed of our sexual or aggressive impulses is off the mark; we need not be ashamed of gifts given us by God to live in this world. We are images of God; our aggressive and sexual drives must be part of what God saw was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Yet unbridled aggression and sexual expression are a threat to all that we hold dear; they can destroy families, communities, nations and even our world as we know it. As Taylor makes clear, we have tried to control them through laws, cultural mores, games, repression, sublimation, drugs, religious indoctrination, psychotherapy, etc. without notable effect. These attempts at control of sex and aggression have led at times to a rebellion against all attempts at control with no better results for the human race or the planet. Whatever maturity we have achieved, Taylor believes, has been through God's patient pedagogy, rather than through our bungling attempts to put the lid on or to remove

all controls altogether. I wonder whether it is not time for us to try another route, a route that has not been tried on a large scale in the history of the world. I am referring to an attempt on our part to cooperate consciously with God's pedagogy by bringing our sexual and aggressive impulses into a direct relationship with God. This article invites readers to try telling God the truth about our sexual desires, reactions and fantasies in order to cooperate with God's patient pedagogy.

RECOMMENDED READING

Barry, W. *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2009.

Pope, M. *The Anchor Bible. Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977, 17.

Taylor, C. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007, 668.

Vacek, E. "Religious Life and the Eclipse of the Love for God." *Review for Religious*, 57/2 March-April, 1998: 118-137.