


A SENSE OF SEXUALITY

Christian Love and Intimacy

 Evelyn Eaton Whitehead
and
James D. Whitehead

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CHRISTIAN LOVE AND INTIMACY

*Evelyn Eaton Whitehead
and James D. Whitehead*

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A Sense of Sexuality

for
JAMES R. ZULLO
colleague and friend

Books by the Whiteheads

SHADOWS OF THE HEART
A SENSE OF SEXUALITY
THE EMERGING LAITY
SEASONS OF STRENGTH
COMMUNITY OF FAITH
MARRYING WELL
METHOD IN MINISTRY
CHRISTIAN LIFE PATTERNS

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June 1, 1988
E.E.W. and J.D.W.

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Part One
The Possibilities

We are the body of Christ. What are the erotic possibilities of the body Christian? What sense do we make of our sexuality? In Part One we attempt to give voice to the wisdom of Christian experience in its testimony that sex is good, sex is mysterious, and sex makes promises.

The Christian vision expands the scope of love. The gospel brings good news for the body, rescuing sexuality from narrow understandings that limit eros to genital activity. The robust virtue of intimacy equips us for the wider challenges of love and work.

Part One concludes with a meditation on caritas—Christian charity. Here we trace the transformation of affection and passion into those durable charities of justice, reconciliation, and care.

1.

Making Sense of Sexuality

Christians have a sense of sexuality. It is a communal wisdom, rooted in the graciousness of God's creation and shaped by the witness of Jesus' life. For two thousand years Christians have struggled to believe the good news of the gospels—that God is among us, within us. Gifts of a loving Creator, our bodies are not barriers to grace. If we could truly accept this, then we would know God even in the ambiguous delights of our sexuality.

After Jesus died and was raised, his friends sensed that he was still present in their gatherings. "Now you together are the body of Christ" (I Corinthians 12:27), Paul proclaimed. As the body of Christ, the Christian community carries a shared wisdom about sex and love, a wisdom born of our efforts to have God's word shape our sexuality. This communal sense, which recognizes that we are accountable to one another and to the gospel, is not limited to formal pronouncements and received doctrines. Rooted in the daily practical decisions through which we try to love well, this fragile wisdom emerges from our frequent failures and our continuing hopes.

In this book we attempt to give voice to the wisdom of the body. We begin this chapter with four stories of sexual Christians. Then we name the yearning heard in these stories. Finally,

we will look again at the image of the body of Christ. We view this metaphor in terms of an emerging wisdom of the body Christian, a seasoned sense of sexuality to which contemporary believers bear witness in their lives.

Christians and Their Sexuality: Four Portraits

Julie and I were married nineteen years ago yesterday. It seems more like ten years, but our three teenagers remind us that it is almost twenty. The weekend retreat announced in the parish bulletin last month looked like an opportunity to catch our breath and relax. We thought the time away would be a good chance for us to unwind. We thought that until we heard the question from the leader couple: "What was the biggest crisis in your marriage?"

We both knew the answer to this question but were reluctant to return to "the scene of the crime." It wasn't a dramatic crisis like alcoholism or sexual infidelity, but it was still very painful. Five years ago, on a very snowy night, we finally admitted that we had lost touch with each other. Our absorption in two jobs and three children had aided this gradual separation and had also disguised it. We admitted that we hardly talked; we got angry with each other for no apparent reason. We didn't share much of anything; we didn't even make love anymore. To outsiders we may have looked like a wonderful family, but underneath our marriage was dying.

We started seeing a good marriage counselor and began slowly to find our way back together. Old and stubborn habits, especially Julie's sarcasm and my tendency to withdraw, needed to be broken. We began to learn again how to talk about our feelings and fears, without punishing each other. We began to remember to thank each other for little things, to take the time to express affection. As we got to know each other again, we were surprised how much we had changed in fourteen years. We hadn't noticed each other changing, hadn't allowed for it. With the counselor

we began to discover what fidelity means for us: to stay in touch, to nurture the commitment we have—not just for our children but for us as partners.

Some wounds remain from that crisis five years ago. But today we enjoy being together. We still have arguments but they are aboveboard and direct, and we find our way through them without much damage. We even look forward to the days ahead when our three children have flown the coop and we are on our own again. The weekend retreat was no picnic, but it was very good for us. It wasn't relaxing, but it was energizing. We are grateful for the crisis; it got our attention and started us on the task of rebuilding our love.

. . . .

I joined a religious community of sisters twenty-six years ago because I wanted to be a teacher and to become holy. In our early training program we were instructed not to form special friendships. As vowed religious, we were to love everyone, but not to show any particular affection for another individual. In the years that followed this early training (I entered the novitiate at seventeen), I learned to be very restrained in my emotions. I was seeking a deep relationship with Jesus Christ, and I saw the love of others as a hindrance to this goal. Celibacy protected me on this solitary journey.

For two decades I seemed to "forget" my body and my emotions. I don't think I hated my body; I just ignored it and the emotions that resided within it. When I fell in love at age thirty-eight, this well-constructed world disintegrated. Something both terrible and wonderful was happening: I was losing the control that had become the cornerstone of my religious life. I was being introduced to a very different God—a livelier, more affectionate, (dare I say it?) more feminine God.

With the crash of my well-protected lifestyle, I thought that my religious and celibate vocation was over. In time I found that it was not ending, but only changing. Now I have three very

close friends with whom I delight in sharing my heart. With my dearest friend I have been learning—with some awkwardness—how to express affection in ways that respect my vow of celibacy. And I have, happily, become more a friend of my own body—this wonderful, lovely, neglected part of myself. I listen with less panic to its stirring, whether of anger or sexuality; I pay more attention to its hints about fatigue and loneliness. Celibacy is no longer just a way for me to hide from contact. I am aware in deeper ways how this commitment fits me, how my celibacy is a part of my own way of loving well. The affection of friends sustains me on days when I sorely miss being married and having children. In my teaching I feel fruitful. I will never be a parent, but I give thanks for the new life to which my ministry contributes. And I am most grateful for the affection that is such an exciting part of my life these days.

. . .

Dear Alice,

That was such a good talk on the phone last night. Your tough questions rattled me, but in a good way. When I woke this morning our conversation was continuing in my head. Here are some of my tentative responses.

I am able to say, for the first time, that I may not marry. I have been defensive about this until just recently; I think this was part of my curtness toward you last night. I had always assumed I would marry (don't all good girls?), even as I resisted my parents' growing pressure for me to "meet someone nice and settle down." I am becoming more comfortable with myself as unmarried. I like my life and feel that I can make a real contribution as I am. I really don't feel "incomplete."

What I miss most is any support for being single. At work I am seen as either a threat or someone to "hit on." Our parish does not seem much interested in anyone who is not married. It lavishes attention on the teenagers and is doing more for family life. Often I not only feel left out, but that I am, in

some way, dangerous. Surely people don't think I am going to seduce someone's husband or some poor, defenseless youth! (Could they believe that I am really not all that interested?)

As a Catholic I find myself asking the question: What does it mean to be single and sexual? I have not chosen a celibate life. But I do not "sleep around." Is there any ground between these extremes of abstinence and promiscuity? Where can Catholics even have this conversation? Sex is such an all-or-nothing proposition for us. There may be some wisdom in this approach for teenagers (I'm not even sure that's true!) but what about mature adults?

It seems that as a relationship deepens, questions of sexual sharing arise as a natural part of this growth. In my experience this is neither irresponsible nor sinful. I suspect that many single Catholics have these experiences; my regret is that no one speaks about it. Will this ever change?

Thanks for listening to my ramblings. Call or write when you can. Love, Sue.

. . . .

Last Christmas we received the worst possible surprise: our son Nicholas told us he is gay. Our response sounds funny now, but his mother and I tried to talk him out of it! Surely he was mistaken! Not our son! When Nick assured us that he had been aware of his sexual orientation since junior high school, we refused to believe him. There was a terrible scene and our anger drove him out. For a week a thick cloud hung over the house. The two of us spent all our energy avoiding the topic. Finally we couldn't stand it anymore. We went to our good friend at the parish, Sister Ann.

When we gave our embarrassing news, Ann was neither astonished nor alarmed. We were so relieved that we spent the next hour expressing all our feelings of dismay. When we had finished, Ann asked a simple question: "How is Nick different now that you know he is gay?" This confused us both: everything is

different! But Ann pushed on: "Is Nick promiscuous?" No. "Is he selfish, immature, turned in on himself?" No. "Then what is different?" We weren't sure. This was all we could handle that day. As we left, we carried the odd realization that Nick was still the same lovable person—our son—even if he is this new and terrible thing called "homosexual."

The next week Sister Ann had another question for us: "What do you most regret about Nick being gay?" My wife regretted that her son was committing mortal sins. My regret was that he would not marry "a nice girl" and have a family. As we talked, we had to admit a third regret: we were ashamed of what our friends and neighbors would think. We would be looked down on by them because we had failed as parents.

At our third meeting Sister Ann asked another question: "What do you most want for Nick?" At last, an easy question! We both want him to be happy, to have a good life. It is hard to say, but we want him to know love. Beyond that Ann helped us name some other wants: that Nick would "make us proud," that he would give us grandchildren. It wasn't until then that we saw we want these things for ourselves more than for Nick.

All these questions and answers happened a year ago. This Christmas Nick introduced us to his friend, William. What are we to think? We love Nick so much but are still so confused about his life. How can we best love him?

The Yearning

In these stories of Christian lives we hear a yearning. These voices long for a more optimistic and generous view of our sexual lives. The longing takes shape in three hopes. First, we hope to recover the sense of our sexuality as a gift. As Christians, we believe that sexuality is a part of the original blessing of creation; for this we are grateful. We give thanks for our own lives—a gift from our parents' generous sexual love. We give thanks for the gift of those who share with us love's delights. We give thanks for