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Sex Education in a Private Secondary School

Julian Slowinski, O.S.B.

INTRODUCTION

An awesome responsibility weighs upon the shoulders of the instructor of sex education courses. Sex education cannot be confined to a short series of technical, instructional talks alone, for the long-range view is far more than the mere communication of facts; it is an education in how to love. True, scientific facts are essential in presenting human sexuality to the student, but this must not be at the expense of treating the human body in a purely mechanistic way. By this I mean an approach in which the idea of the dignity of the human person is separated from the body, with the result that one is dealing with a piece of machinery seeking to find out how to get the most mileage out of the body for one's own use. The mechanistic approach, then, fails to consider the whole person in his relationship to the total human environment.

These opening remarks are the result of personal experience gained from presenting a series of lectures to high school seniors in conjunction with a marriage course at a Catholic prep school for boys in the Eastern part of the United States. The talks came near the completion of the course, after the students had developed a background in the theological, philosophical, and social aspects of marriage. The classes numbered about thirty-five students each, although larger groups did meet because of scheduling difficulties. Student response was very encouraging and lively. Questioning was candid not

only during class but also after school at informal sessions. The following is both a summary of the material covered and the present method of sex education employed at the same prep school.

MALE ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY

The first lecture begins with the study of the anatomy and physiology of the human reproductive organs, using color slides of anatomical illustrations as the point of reference. Since questions are welcomed throughout the presentation, the subject matter is covered in a natural and relaxed way rather than a rapid-fire presentation of factual data.

After a detailed study of the male organs, including the process of spermatogenesis, the physiology of erection and ejaculation is explained. Here it is easy to bring in the occurrence of nocturnal emissions and the problem of premature ejaculation during the marriage act. Sterility in men and its possible causes is brought up during the discussion.

FEMALE ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY

The same detail is employed in discussing the female anatomy. Already mentioned in the sexual development of the male, the importance of the various hormones in the maturation and function of the

female reproductive organs is particularly stressed. The topic of oogenesis, ovulation, and menstruation evokes many questions from the students concerning these functions. The psychological and physiological changes accompanying menopause is also explained in this same area of female sexuality.

THE MARRIAGE ACT

The physiology of sexual intercourse is presented with emphasis on the changes that take place in the male and female body during the different phases of sexual excitement leading up to and including orgasm. The point is stressed that these facts represented a compilation of data culled by research and did not necessarily suggest that each person would experience the exact pattern of involvement cited in the lecture. Questions of impotence and frigidity are examined and many myths surrounding this area of human sexuality are exposed.

PREGNANCY AND BIRTH

The next major topic of consideration is conception and pregnancy. Fertilization of the ovum, the ensuing changes in the zygote, and the nidation of the blastocyst in the endometrium serve as introductory material to the development of the embryo and the embryonic membranes. Explaining fetal development throughout the course of gestation brings out once again the importance of the interplay of hormones necessary to maintain pregnancy. Basic concepts of genetics are explained in the course of the questioning.

The signs of and tests for pregnancy as well as the changes in the woman's body throughout pregnancy initiates questions about the Rh factor and

possible causes of miscarriage. The presentation of the mechanism of labor and birth follow, supplemented by a film of a normal delivery.

From viewing the film, the students are familiar with an episiotomy and see the placenta and its related membranes. They are then told what is involved in breech deliveries and Caesarean sections. An explanation of the mechanism of lactation closes the discussion on labor and birth.

CONTRACEPTION

The final lecture is on the methods of birth control. Few moral implications should be drawn, for the moral questions of contraception should have been covered during the religion course.

Rhythm and the problems involved in predicting the "safe period" takes up much of the class time. The keeping of a basal temperature chart is explained and sample charts distributed to the students.

Many questions arise when the types of oral contraceptives are introduced. The seniors are interested in how "the Pill" actually works, its side effects, and the methods of administration.

Other means of contraception — including the use of condoms, diaphragms, suppositories, jellies, creams, and foams, as well as coitus reservatus, coitus interruptus, and coitus obstructus — make the students aware of the many forms of contraception in use today. Special mention is made of the intrauterine contraceptive device and of the debate over how it actually functions.

Sterilization and abortion are the final topics considered before ending the lecture with a note concerning venereal diseases.

NEW PROGRAMS

As part of the school's new contribution to sex education, a course entitled *Sex and the Christian* is now being offered to the sophomores by the Religion Department. A balanced approach is the aim, i.e., basic biological facts combined with the philosophy of man as a sexual being in the plan of God. It is felt that the additional class time afforded to this course will give it many advantages over the previous program. References to Sacred Scripture, the teachings of the Church, and readings in current literature provide the student with food for thought and matter for commitment as they concurrently assimilate the scientific aspects of human sexuality.

For example, a reading of the second chapter of the Book of Genesis on the creation of man and woman for one another presents the idea that there is something sacred about the union of husband and wife. What is it that causes them to leave their respective families to become one with the other? The question arises: What does it mean to become ONE with the marriage partner? Here is an opportunity for the teacher to explain both the physiological and theological aspects of the marriage act.

Similarly, Scripture is used in talking of other aspects of sexuality. Does the sin of Onan (Gen. 38, 8-10), have anything to do with masturbation? Was Onan's sin that of impurity or impiety? A variety of topics stem from these questions. The Book of Leviticus, 18, 19, speaks of menstrual uncleanness. This passage lends itself

to the attitudes of societies, ancient and modern, towards menstruation.

Other approaches are also used. The teacher will often give the class the opportunity to discuss any topic of sexuality that the students may wish to examine. This is proving beneficial, for it frees the students from the feeling that on a given day they must cover specific material and must stay within defined boundaries of subject matter. Thus there is more room for spontaneity in such an atmosphere.

The students are sometimes asked to write out questions that they wish to have answered. This enables the student to pose questions he may not wish to verbalize before the class. Such inquiries are answered during the same period to the degree that the teacher is capable of responding to them. Questions demanding unusually technical knowledge beyond that of the instructor are answered during the following class after the teacher has obtained the necessary data.

All of the above methods of education are being used presently and each is found to have its own particular value in the classroom situation. Of course, the overall approach is influenced by the fact that the prep school of which we are speaking is a Catholic institution. Therefore Christian principles are introduced whenever applicable to the matter being discussed. Still the course is not unique to the extent that it could not be presented elsewhere than in a private, Catholic, prep school. The essentials of the course are basic and, with accidental changes, would form the nucleus for a similar undertaking at an institution with a different orientation.