

THE JOURNEY INTO SEXUALITY



Michelangelo Buonarroti,
The Temptation, Sistine
Chapel Ceiling, Vatican City,
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If you are a Christian, you can either shrug your shoulders, or get your hairs raised by the title—the reaction may depend on your age. Maybe you react differently, with a “What now!” or “Yea, yadda yadda;” or even see Scripture verses running through your forehead, blaring admonitions or cautions.

Who knows? You may just be the type to imagine scenes from the *Songs of Solomon*, you climbing fruit trees, or running to your lover like a gazelle...

Sexuality is never easy to decipher...it’s complex. Some would even say “complicated.”

Whatever sex *is*, we Christians have had a historic love-hate relationship with human sexuality, seeing it either as the damning tool of humankind from grace (didn’t *she* tempt *him*—you know, with, *er*, her seductions?); or, as a romanticized gift that unites man and woman into the one flesh ideal.

But I want to take on our sexuality from a different angle—one that helps us to acknowledge the instrumental part of it: The part that helps us understand ourselves better (if we pay attention); and the part that also helps to define us, irrespective of social gender constructions.

Our sexuality is indeed a gift, not necessarily the wayward child we make it out to be. Although, like any part of our being, it can in fact *become* wayward. But it doesn't *start out* wayward, or carrying the "sins of Adam." As a matter of fact, our sexuality is a calculated gift from God through our parents—of which, Dad, you are the predominant giver of that X or Y so essential to our differentiation.

We begin there. With our Xs and/or Ys, *and* with an ensuing plethora of hormones from our developing glands, all of which combine to make us *males, females*—or sometimes, *intersex*.

What did I just say? Yes, sometimes intersex.

Let's not forget that. Regardless of your position on human creation, The First Two Humans are products of an incredible, divine creative act generating humankind.

Everyone thereafter, however, is procreated. And that means genetics and hormones take the wheel. So yes, sometimes these result in an alternative, and the person becomes *intersex*. Intersex persons can have different combination formats: genitally, internally, or even appear totally normal until tested genetically.

It's important to understand this, both for science and for our theology.

For science, it's simple: Genes and hormones are variables, and they do cause variations, even if irregularly so. Genes also *mutate*. (If that word, "*mutation*" scares you, then call it "*change*.") Fact is, about 1.5-2% of the human population is at any time *intersex*. That seems a small number to make a ruckus about; but it's really not. The percentage translates to about **71 million humans which are born intersex**. I believe these should be noted in our understanding of procreative results: male, female, *and intersex*; not just *male and female*!

For theology, well, that's another matter, since history proves that we've discounted anything but the "original creation," and stick to the notion of just male and female. Not taking into consideration what happens *after* Momma Eve and Papa Adam do their sexy thing, and *procreate*, is a theological error of great proportion—one which we continue to repeat. **Intersex persons are thus invisible to the Church.**

But, shouldn't they also be included in the count? Aren't they worthy of *imago Dei*? Let's counter that ideology, which continues to declare the famous duo as the *only model*; and of others as "aberrations due to the fall" (!) Not so. They are part of the chain of human life, thus, "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in secret" (Ps 139:15).

Our journey into sexuality begins here, in earnest! We now know there are more results than Adam and his Eve. We count their intersex progeny! We recognize *imago Dei* in their being as well!

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There are two other aspects of sexuality that I want to explore with you: These have to do with *how we understand our sexed body*, and *what we do with it*. Tough segments!

Our physical sexual body becomes the initial template for our understanding of ourselves. All children, boys and girls alike, learn “from their body” (and of course from parents, peers, and everyone else), what sex they are. It happens early: Did you know that by age 3, most boys *know they aren’t girls*? And, most girls *know they aren’t boys* (and even that early *don’t want to be boys*—although later these will certainly bemoan boy power.) **Coding starts early, and just grows from there.**

And here’s the point: We understand our sexual selves even before the buzzing hormones of puberty do their thing to distinguish *us* from the ‘*other*.’ Granted: some of what we understand is social fabrication; but a lot is not: The body itself is telling you “the sex of you” early on.

Go ahead, taunt that little boy by asking the inhospitable question: “*How do you know you are a boy?*” – and see if he doesn’t point to “down there.” Certainly by 4, he should!

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And so, we grow into “being men” or “being women,” most of us semi-consciously swallowing, then performing, roles and expectations. Men become “dudes,” and women become, well, “women.” (Yes, I get that there are shifting sands now, and that this is sounding pretty stereotypic. For another post...for certain.)

The point is: We grow into our sexuality based on *both* our body signaling as well as our absorption of social roles and expectations.

These begin to define us—and here’s the self-part:

What definitions of your self-sexual have *become* you? How do you see yourself through your sexuality and the roles it invokes? They’re not hard questions, but ones we seldom ponder in earnest.

Men: Have you become *a man* and learned to hide emotions, because these are *feminine attributes*? Have you early on defined yourself based on how you *don’t really need* other male friends? And, how about how you define yourself based on your sexual proclivities? You know, the culture that surrounds you *still* makes it a near-requisite that you use sex to define your self (note the two words here)—that each *hookup* speak *something* about you, masterful or woefully under par. How *masculine*, how *hot*, do you have to be, to be?

Women: How much, *how much* the culture wants to *mold* you—*still*—into a brand of femininity that ultimately strip you of power and voice! How much of that have you swallowed? How *feminine* do you have to be, to be?

I tell a story that often hits home: My daughter (now adult, but still my daughter), kept me waiting one day when we were going out for a lunch together. I sat in her living room, while she was finishing up getting ready. I called out, “Hey, what’s taking so long?” only to hear back, “Wait! *Am putting on my face.*”

Now I tell you: I have *never* heard a man say *he* has to *put on his face* before he goes out,...

It is a conundrum for women, and we of the behavioral sciences know that only too well. It’s a coin toss, being *feminine*, or *not feminine enough*, or *too feminine*. It can hardly be a win-win. It all enters the self, and sadly the self-esteem.

If you are a Christian reading this, don’t think you escape with your faith unscathed.

Christianity has its own, perpetual list of masculinities and femininities it preaches, and not subtly so.

You say, “*It’s changing, Vince*” – and yes, I hear you. But there’s still a lot out there that is sexual role dependent; that we slight-of-tongue still get into sermons, and pithy Mother’s Day accolades, etc. Same for men. Only the culture still reserves reverence for the latter.

It’s high time we tackle even greater changes to our sexual roles and by extension, how we see ourselves as males and female (and intersex!)

How to do that is to address the multiple burdens of our heritage *as men* and *as women* that tell us we are indeed two different species; that patterns out communications so differently we speak to each other as if from different planets (don’t agree to this!) That makes hierarchies instead of equalities. That make friendships so different for men and for women! You can start by addressing these *in yourselves*; **in your theology**; and if you have small children, **by rearing them to be as androgynous as Christ himself was**. Remember, Christ broke more stereotypes for his day and age than anyone.

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Finally, we get to the **behavioral part**. And again, if you are Christian and reading this, you well know that the Church teaches significantly on the *behavioral* components of everyone’s sexuality! For the most part it is a dichotomy.

Here it is: Sex is good and lawful within marriage, and that is taught to be, again, Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve or Eve and Eve. . . (I tried spelling Eve backwards, but guess what?) The church teaches that all else sexual (including thoughts) that don’t

convey the sanctity of marriage and what's "lawful" within it, are out of grace. Some continue to preach that masturbation is sinful (I think repeating the old mantra from the turn of the 19th Century, that it is a weakness and causes mental problems.)

While I'm not here to contest doctrine, I *am* making a point to *point out* that this dichotomy leaves out the *inherent good* that sexuality brings to the individual's life, not just the conjugal couple. The church recognizes sexuality as God's good gift; but it frames it only within the context of marriage, leaving out what I just mentioned: Sex being good *in and of itself* for the *person*.

That doesn't mean sex as masturbation, or sex in hook-ups; it means *sexual energy and sexual desire* as natural parts of what not only makes us human, but draws us to another.

I had a graduate professor that said, rightly, "*You are a sexed creature, and not to feel sexual means that you are dead.*" Correct, since I just read an article about a retirement community: It calculated that there was more "sex going on," and more Viagra prescriptions in that tiny enclave than in the remainder of their city! Sexuality may decline with old(er) age, but the energy of it can remain a vital part of life for a very long time. Certainly, sex doesn't die in the mind when the body ceases to respond!

But I falter here. The underscore is that sexuality is an integral part of the animating principle. How we understand and *direct that energy* is, of course, what all of us are interested in, and particularly so, the Church. So let's get to it...the ending coda here!

How do we manage our sexuality? How do we understand its draw?

First things first. We've all experienced many "coding instances" where our body has responded to a stimulus—in childhood, in adolescence (especially), and even in our adulthood—and etched that feeling in our brain as a *chemical memory*. Hence, the body "reacted" (erections, lubrications, sensations) even when we didn't will it to do so! Eventually, these get entered into our *erotic script*. We determine much of its power when we have *reasoning* and *norms* and *ethical learning*. But, for some coding, its power remains alive despite our best intentions.

What this all means is that "managing our sexuality" means "understanding its coding" and determining what is OK, and what is not for us individually. I don't buy into the idea of "*born this way,*" or "*can't help this (or that),*" since science disproves any automatic sexual behavior outcomes. It's not our genetics that is the bad genie. As adults, especially, we have discretionary power on what we think about (OK, dwell on!), and what we allow *as behavior*. We have been made with decision-making power.

How we negotiate those decisions is dependent on how much we understand. **What we control, instead of vice versa, is a product of our will to enter into dialogue**

with our sexual selves, our imprints, our maturation and our learning. Our relationship to God, of course, enters in at fundamental levels all along the way.

Can we change the script? Maybe in some cases, certainly (there is such a thing as “erotic plasticity,” look it up). **Can we erase some of the unwanted imprints?** Often, no.

That doesn’t mean, however, that we need to *self-define through them*, which is the mistake many make who haven’t delved deeply into a self-understanding of their sexuality. **I advocate “no labels” in such instances,** since once we use a label, there is the tendency to have it become a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

For the Christian, Jesus can “undo anything.” Of course! But, managing your sexuality at the personal level is *your responsibility, not Jesus’.* It means understanding how sexuality has composed itself in you. Then, you can look to Scripture and determine what parameters you should draw for your own life. **I won’t be the judge on that here.** But *you* need to be. “Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he/she should ask our generous God, who will give it to you” (James 1:5).

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As an end to this now long post, let me reiterate that understanding sexuality is paramount in directing its energy.

The take-away for Christians is an understanding that sexuality is God’s good gift for more than procreation and union; it is part of your life-energy and body wellness! This is not the monster it has been made out to be; neither is it the end-all, be-all of fulfillment. (“This too, shall pass.”)

Engaging it by *knowing it* means helping yourself to ***explore its history***, rightly ***directing it to fulfill the best of you***, and I hope, God’s plan for your life.

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