

**SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY IN CHRISTIAN MARITAL LIFE :  
A PASTORAL -PSYCHO-THEOLOGICAL APPROACH**

By

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**Abstract**

*Sexuality is not just a power a man/woman has but rather the incarnate mode of expression as male or female who is a person. The paper examines the meaning of such terms as sexuality, sexuality in Roman Catholicism, premarital sexuality, sexual intercourse and intimacy, intimacy between pastoral Care Giver and parishioners/client, intimacy as a source of strength in marital life, ingredients for achieving intimacy in Christian Marital life, marital life as a religious process, and sexual maturity in Christian Marital life. The goal of the paper is to provide an understanding of the Pastoral-Psycho-Theological dynamics of intimacy that can help in illuminating the personal and religious meaning of Christian marital life. The paper ends with a conclusion and recommendations.*

**Keywords:** Sexuality, Intimacy, Christian, Marital Life, Pastoral, Psycho-theological

**Introduction**

In our contemporary society, several people see sexual intimacy as an exciting form of recreation, and thus totally push the Church's teaching on spousal significance of genital sexual behaviour as outmoded. They forget or ignore the sense of being used, the trauma of unexpected pregnancies which are sometimes followed by abortion. This idea is buttressed by several authors who from time immemorial contended that it is only in marital situation that marital sexual intimacy can take place. Irrespective of how one may view it, personally gratifying genital sexual intimacy outside the context of marital life is objectively morally wrong and should not be encouraged in any form.

**CLARIFICATION OF TERMS**

(A Publication of the Augustinian Institute in collaboration with AATREPSCHOLARS)

*Sexuality*

Sexuality is an enduring aspect of individual's life, it is not simply romance. As a resource of the personality, sexuality contributes empathy, energy and warmth to the wide variety of ways individuals have of being with all other people. Sexuality is not just for the youth. No! Studies of adult development and aging brings to mind that sexual interest and sexual experience continue into the mature years as an important part of a good number of the elderly individuals. Besides, sexuality is not simple. As far as Nigerians' are concerned, and perhaps, African culture, it stands as a puzzle, a perennial question of personal life and problematic issue as far as social experience is concerned. The aim of this study is to discuss the multifaceted issue, sexuality in relation to a larger psychological category -- that of intimacy. The goal here is to provide an understanding of the psychological dynamics of intimacy that can help in illuminating the personal and religious/theological meaning of marital life. It is our ardent hope that this understanding will serve as a working knowledge, as information that can influence attitudes and shape individual's behaviour.

Sexuality is not just a power a man/woman has, but rather the incarnate mode of expression, as male or female, of who s/he is as an individual. In 1975, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith published a "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics" (Persona Humana) which talked to the ethical issues surrounding premarital sexual activity. The Document clearly prefaces its presentation by stating that sexuality is "one of the factors which give each individual's life the principal traits that distinguishes it. In fact, it is from sex that man/woman receives the characteristics which, on the biological, psychological and spiritual levels, make that person a man or woman, and thereby largely condition his or her progress towards maturity and insertion into society."<sup>319</sup>

Sexuality includes, but it is not limited to, genital expressions and procreative capacities. Broadly speaking, it is man/woman's way of being in the world as male or female individuals, including different experiences and understandings of sex roles, sexual affectional-orientations, perceptions of one's own

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<sup>319</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics, December 29, 1975(Washington D.C. : USG Publications, 1977)no.1,3.

embodiedness and that of other people and capacity for sensuousness, emotional depth and interpersonal intimacy. Christian ethics, Pastoral Theology of sexuality attempts to interpret the meaning and expressions of sexuality in the light of the Bible, Christian tradition and contemporary thought. Besides, it is also important to understand the ways in which the sexual experience and perceptions of Christians give shape to their understanding of Scripture, tradition and the present life of faith.

## **SEXUALITY IN ROMAN CATHOLICISM**

All through the centuries, Roman Catholic theology has been ambivalent about sexuality. Despite the fact that sexuality was viewed as good because God was its source and anything created by him cannot be bad. It was also typically seen as both inferior to the life of the spirit and as a primary field or arena for individual's sin. Right from Christian history, two alienating sexual dualisms have been present. One of this is in Protestant life while the other is in Roman Catholic. The first is spiritualistic or Hellenistic dualism. It is called so because it reflects the body-spirit split that pervaded Greek thought at the commencement of the Christian era. The other is sexist or Patriarchal dualism which marked Jewish culture and of which Christians are inheritors. The two dualisms intertwined as men/women assumed that the superior aspects (spirit and male) were intended to discipline and govern the inferior (body and female).

Traditionally, Catholic teaching saw the natural purpose or end of sexual expression to be procreation and viewed sexual ethics as governed by natural law, knowable through reason.<sup>320</sup> While the "unitive" or relational purpose of sexuality was recognised, it was considered secondary to procreation (the latter including not only the producing of offspring but also their nature). On this natural law basis, it was possible to derive clear moral/pastoral judgments about different sexual acts. If procreation was the natural purpose of sexual expression, then masturbation, homosexual intercourse, bestiality, and artificial birth control which are all non-procreative violated the natural order. Despite the fact that heterosexual, incest, rape, fornication and adultery did not violate the procreative possibility, they were judged sinful because they denied the nature of offspring.

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<sup>320</sup> Hunter Rodney, J. (Ed.) , Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling(Bangalore: Theological Publications, 2005)1154.

In recent years, this traditional view has been criticized by some Roman Catholic moral/pastoral theologians on a variety of accounts: its static, non historical view of man/woman's nature; its judgments of sexual morality based upon the physical contours of acts rather than upon their relational meanings to individuals; its legalistic and sex-negative tendencies; and its disproportionate focus upon genital sexuality.

A change from traditional view point received some Ecclesiastical endorsement with the Second Vatican Council and its document, *The Church in the Modern World*, in which the unitive, relational meanings of sexuality were given equal standing with the procreative. This notwithstanding, a number of Americans Catholic Theologians have pressed the analysis of sexuality further into the centrality of the relational wholeness of man/woman, the Vatican's recent pronouncements have tended to retreat from the Council's statement back toward an emphasis upon procreative primacy.<sup>321</sup>

However, changes in Catholic theological thought still continues. They can even be seen especially in attitudes toward homosexuality and status of women. A good number of Catholic Theologians now refuse to label homosexual acts as intrinsically evil. While such acts are viewed as "essentially imperfect" compared to the heterosexual ideal, they are to be evaluated on the basis of the meanings and moral responsibility of the specific relationship. It should be noted that the official view of the Roman Catholic maintains that homosexual acts are essentially disordered, against the general law, and contrary to Scripture. Consequently, it can never be approved by any right thinking man/woman.

To help us understand the area of our discussion, it will be good to explain such issues as extramarital sexuality, sexual intercourse and intimacies.

## **PREMARITAL SEXUALITY**

The Christian tradition/story disclosed the spousal significance of the body, as could be seen in Books of Genesis as God's plan "from the beginning." Hence, we read: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them becomes one body" (Genesis 2:24). The total giving of a person to another is expressed through the genital act. Genital union is not just

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<sup>321</sup> Gustave Thils, *Christian Joy and Holiness*(Allahabad, 1988) 167.

the momentary sharing of mutual passion and pleasure. It points to transcendent goals and values that go beyond the individuals involved, including the possibility of procreation. The genital act, as a personal expression of an individual's self-hood, requires a lifetime commitment. Consequently, the Vatican Declaration confirms that "Experience teaches us that love must find its safeguard in the stability of marital life, if sexual intercourse is truly to respond to the requirements of its own finality and to those of human dignity."<sup>322</sup>

Nowadays, the argument is heard that premarital sex is morally justifiable in cases where a couple are already engaged and truly committed to one another, or where the celebration or marital life is impeded by circumstances. Some Pastoral and Moral Theologians would argue that such intimate sharing is not premarital, but rather only pre-ceremonial. This notwithstanding, irrespective of how firm the couple's intention may be, genital union alone cannot guarantee the fidelity such an act both expresses and requires. The transcendent nature of genital intimacy makes it a social reality, which demands the public commitment of the marital covenant in order to protect the relationship from an individual's whims and caprices.<sup>323</sup>

"Outside this, 'definitive commitment of life' call marital life, however, personally gratifying or well-intended, genital sexual intimacy is objectively morally wrong. Relational misunderstandings and break-ups, the senses of being used or betrayed, the trauma of unexpected pregnancies, sometimes followed by abortion, constitute some of the real personal harm that can result from sexual intimacy expressed apart from bonds and fidelity of marital life."<sup>324</sup> In a culture and society where the stress in our contemporary world is on the self and the self's needs, where young individuals fear commitment, where physical sex is a way of proving one's emotions and feelings toward another or is considered merely as an exciting form of recreation, the Church's teaching on the spousal significance of genital sexual behaviour is easily pushed aside.

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<sup>322</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faiths Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning sexual Ethics, *Personae Humanae*, December 29, 1975) no. 7.

<sup>323</sup> CCC, 2390-2391.

<sup>324</sup> Gerald D. Coleman, *Human Sexuality: An All-embracing Gift* (New York : Alba House, 1992)242.

Some Psychologists such as William F. Kraft, maintained that “Only a marital situation can offer the proper time and place for healthy genitality to emerge.<sup>325</sup> Robert N. Bellah, however, points to a basic “therapeutic attitude” that pervades the practioners and clients of modern psychotherapy, and resonates much more broadly in the American middle class. “This therapeutic attitude,” he contends, “begins with the self rather than with a set of external obligations... [which], whether they come from religion, parents, or social conventions, can only interfere with the capacity for love and relatedness.”<sup>326</sup>

In its pure form, it denies all forms of obligation and commitment in relations. Only full, open, honest individuals is what matters for personal development and health. Thus, “living together” and “open marital life” becomes the norm. Here, obviously the contemporary secular story of individual independence and self-realisation crashes head-on with the Christian story of a faithful committed love, within which dependence and independence are deeply related.

At the time when Jovinian made virginity equal to marital life and professed that one cannot exalt the former without debasing the latter, St. Augustine<sup>327</sup> himself took up the challenge and fixed there the lofty traditional teaching that St. Thomas would later take up. The man who enters into marital state, say the Doctors, accepts the *tribulatio carnis* of which the Apostle speaks, that is to say, involvement in exterior concerns. Besides, in addition, the man’s choice is a good one; there is nothing disordered there, his reason is not surrendered. He follows the law, not of matter, but of the spirit if he accepts the bonds of marital life in view of very pure spiritual ends, which his reason, enlightened by faith, shows him and toward which he will be urged by the divine power of the sacrament of marriage.

Theology, since the period of St. Augustine, calls the spiritual ends the “goods of marital life. The first and foremost of these is the child, on whom depends, in part, the growth of the Body of Christ here below and the increase of the number

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<sup>325</sup> William F. Kraft, *Sexual Dimensions of the Celebrate Life*(Kansas City, Kan : Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1979)53

<sup>326</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*(New York : Doubleday, 1998)98.

<sup>327</sup> De bono conjugali, against Jovinian, De nuptiis Concupiscentia, against the Pelagians and the Corresponding passages from the Retractiones.

of elect'.<sup>328</sup> The second is the mutual complement that the common supernaturalised life brings to Christian couples. The third good is the real, concrete, visible image-through a state of life- of the inseparable union between Christ and his Church; more intimately, it is the image, by a visible society of spouses, of that marvellous love where egoism is unknown, where sacrifice makes the law. Finally, the Church's Doctors teach that marital life is a remedy for the concupiscence that the original Fall unleashed.<sup>329</sup>

### **SEXUAL INTERCOURSE AND INTIMACY**

Marital life implies first and foremost a series of manifestations of an amorous, sensible and sensual nature. To be truly testimonies of love and affection, of help and protection, of confidence and trust; the right measure of these manifestations depends tremendously on the temperament, the character and age of the two individuals involved. It is impossible to give concrete, predetermined norms in this paper. At one time or the other there could be disorder through lack of use or if these manifestations are not spontaneous, numerous, or meaningful enough, in regard to what either one of the individuals might reasonably expect from the other.<sup>330</sup>

Sexual intercourse within marital life is licit and worthwhile. Christ himself referred to it. "Some Pharisees came to him and to test him they asked, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause? He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female', and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:3-6); Cf also Genesis 1:28; 2:24; 1Corinthian 7:3-5; 1Timothy 2:15; 4:3; Hebrew 13:4).

The conjugal act is the expression of love between the couple, which is compared to the love between Christ and the Church. Vatican II asserts on this very point: "The actions within marital life by which the couple are united intimately and chastely are noble and worthy ones. Expressed in a manner which is truly

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<sup>328</sup> Charles Cardinal Journet, *Theology of the Church* (San Francisco : Ignatius press, 2004)266.

<sup>329</sup> Charles Cardinal, Journet, *Theology of the Church*, 266.

<sup>330</sup> Gustave Thils, *Christian Holiness*(Allahabad, 1963)417.

human, these actions signify and promote that mutual self-giving by which spouses enrich each other with a joyful and a thankful will".<sup>331</sup>

Whenever one partner asks for the conjugal act, the other partner is bound out of justice and love to render it, as long as the petition is reasonable. serious and just. "The husband should give his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self control" (1Corinthian 7:3-5).

## **INTIMACY**

The word intimate is derived from Latin *intimus*, which means the person or thing that is innermost, most familiar, or internal. In relationship it marks, one most closely associated or acquainted<sup>332</sup> The opposite side of the scale, distance, in Latin *distare*, literally means to stand apart from, to be separate. It is utilised to measure increments of both time and space. For the purpose of effective pastoral care and counselling, the pastor does not usually relate as an individual most intimate to the client or parishioner. He/she is also not completely apart.

According to the Bishops at Vatican II, marital relationship is to be an intimate one.<sup>333</sup> Intimacy is closeness. It is being dear friends. In marital life, it is being friends, who are always there for one another. The 1917 Code of Canon Law spoke of marital life as the exchange of the permanent and exclusive rights of one's body for acts of sexual intercourse that were suitable for procreation.<sup>334</sup> The spirituality/ingredient required to fulfill that definition was quite minimal: remain married, do not commit adultery, and respond to each other's "request" for sexual intercourse (or, as the pre-Vatican II Moral Theology books put it, "render the debt").

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<sup>331</sup> Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, 49, (Cf. in 'ed. Abbot) 252

<sup>332</sup> M. C. Madden, "Intimacy and Distance" in Hunter Rodney (Ed.) *Pastoral Dictionary of Pastoral care and Counselling* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 2005)504.

<sup>333</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) 48.

<sup>334</sup> T. Lincoln Couscaren and Adam C. Ellis, *Canon Law: A Text and Commentary* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1957) Canon 1081.

Once an individual accepts marital life as a call to a unique type of intimacy with his/her partner, the horizons of individual's marital spirituality are dramatically expanded. While the demands of the Code's definition can be easily delimited, the challenge to grow in intimacy has no bounds. The pursuit of marital intimacy brings an individual into direct confrontation with man/woman's sinfulness.<sup>335</sup> Sin involves alienation from God, from other individuals and from the entire universe. God's redemptive grace through Christ calls men and women to a new union with the Divine, and with one another. The person who resists marital intimacy is the same as that which resists personal relationship with God and others.

This resistance is rooted in self-centredness, lack of generosity, fear of facing up to truth, and fear of the loss of self. Those barriers to intimacy are broken down only by dying to those pockets of darkness and narrowness that reside deep inside individuals and hinder the type of mutual self-communication needed for personal closeness. By dying to these barriers that stand in the way of authentic marital love and by surrendering oneself in faith, hope and love to one's partner, one also opens oneself up to God and to Christ who communicate the gift of their own presence and love through the uniqueness of their marital intimacy.

### **INTIMACY BETWEEN PASTORAL CARE GIVER AND PARISHIONER /CLIENT**

Usually a pastoral care relationship will take place somewhere between the extremes of intimacy and distance, one being close enough to promote sharing but with a reasonable amount of distance to enable the client /parishioner have some space when needed.

#### *1. The Need For Balance in Pastoral Care Relationship*

There is a sense in the saying that too much of everything is bad. Applied to the situation at hand, it can equally be said that too much intimacy puts the minister in the category of close friendship. Extreme intimacy either loses some objectivity, or makes the client feel that objectivity is sacrificed, whether or not this is actually the case. The intimate counsellor is resented for over-identification with the client. The client wants to identify with the pasturing

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<sup>335</sup> William P. Roberts, (ed.) *Exhilarations of The Theology of Marriage* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist press, 1987)110.

person as a model, not to be made too soon into a model for identification. The distance counsellor or pastor is resented because this creates barriers the part of the client. The pastor who stands too far on the side of objectivity and distance will often fail to get permission to be a meaningful counsellor.

## *2. Factors that Influence Intimacy and Distance*

The pastoral role will permit an easier intimacy for individuals who have had good relationships to pastors in their own various histories. The role will give distancing to those whose relations to pastors have been negative or unfruitful. Distance may be utilised by a client to conceal awkwardness or lack of relational or verbal skills. A psychological factor that creates distance is unresolved childhood pain or grief. These are usually repressed to the degree that the individual seeking counselling /help has little awareness of his/her power or presence. Crises in relationships such as marital life can leave the couple with a fear of getting too close, or perhaps the inability to do. Intimacy comes easier where there are parallel areas of interest, common goals or common frustration between client and counsellor. It should be noted that pastoral counsellor is in the paradoxical position of dealing with the most intimate matters of the clients' life without asking to be intimate with the client. It is as though the counsellor is allowed to see into the living and intimate space of the client without actually walking into that space.

This privilege of seeing without partaking means that an adequate distance needs to be maintained so that the counsellor can vacate the intimate zones when this is required. This permits/allows the client the knowledge of having been understood without the feeling of having had one's space violated.<sup>336</sup>

## **INTIMACY AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH IN MARITAL LIFE**

Intimacy is a capacity, an ability, an abiding competence of adult maturity.<sup>337</sup> It is the strength which enables a person to commit himself/herself not to individuals in general or to idealised movements, but to a particular person in concrete relationship-aware of the limitation and incompleteness that are involved. Intimacy resources are drawn upon again in living out these commitments. Relations are not static. Individuals change and relationships develop over time. Some developments will bring fulfilment; others will make demands for

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<sup>336</sup> H. G. Zerof, *Finding Intimacy*(London, 1978) 99.

<sup>337</sup> Patrick Chigbogwu, *Christian Life Patterns* (New York: Double-Day, 1979)77.

accommodation, for understanding, for tolerance and forgiveness. A well developed capacity for intimacy enables an individual to sustain the adjustments and compromises life with others, without jeopardy to one's own identity. A flexible identity, an empathetic awareness of others, an openness to continued development of self--these strengths of intimacy make the creative commitment of marital life possible

### **INGREDIENTS FOR ACHIEVING INTIMACY IN CHRISTIAN MARITAL LIFE**

At this juncture, one may ask, concretely, what does achieving such intimacy involve?

We shall here concentrate on only a few elements that are essential for intimate relationship between husband and wife.

Christian religious tradition is rich in a wisdom of generous love. This heritage can provide a sound basis for the un-self-centred devotion that must undergird marital life. However, "right attitudes" are not simply enough to sustain the long-term commitments of marital life. Attitudes must be translated into appropriate behaviour. Couples must be able to express, in the give and take of marital life, their desires to be close, to share and co-operate. In addition, to the attitudes of intimacy, couples must develop the skills of intimate living. It is possible to "get better" at being married individuals. Couples can learn more effective ways to express and to receive the gift of self that is at the centre or core of their intimacy in marital life. Interpersonal skills especially important to intimate living are self-disclosure, empathy, and confrontation.<sup>338</sup> Each involves both an attitude and a set of behaviours. To share oneself with another entails that such a person must be psychologically/pastorally disposed, able to overcome the hesitancy suggested by fear or suspicion or shame.

This notwithstanding, once the inhibition is overcome, such a person must be able to share-to disclose himself/herself in a manner that is appropriate for him/her and for their relationship. Appropriate self-disclosure can be complicated. However, the individuals involved are not limited to their current level of success. They can become more skillful, learning better means of expressing their needs, ideas, feelings as well as values.

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<sup>338</sup> Greard Egan, *Inter Personal Living*(Monterey CA : Brooks, Cole, 1976)109.

This is equally true of empathy. An essential psychological strength undergirds a person's ability to stand with another, emotionally and intellectually. However, the basic strength may not be enough. An individual's capacity for accurate empathy can be enhanced by his/her development of a range of behavioural skills. An accepting posture, attentive listening, and sensitive paraphrasing. Each of these can contribute in no small measure to couple's effective presence to each other.

Confrontation also makes a critical contribution to intimacy in marital life. Confrontation is not limited here to its negative and narrow connotation as interpersonal conflict. An ability to confront involves the psychological strength as well as the special grace of God to give (and receive) emotionally. Significant information in a way that leads to self-examination rather than simply to self-defense. To do this, couples need to be skillful in communicating non-judgmentally, in dealing with anger in themselves and in other person and offering each other emotional support even in times of disagreement between them..

### **SELF-REVELATION**

Personal unity is built on self-revelation. God brings individuals into communion with the Divine by revealing himself to them and by empowering them to respond. Christ comes to reveal in human terms who he is for them by revealing himself to them as the One sent by God. Individuals are made in the image and likeness of God and marital life for Christians is a sign of God's love, of Christ's love. The intimacy any couple achieve is found on their mutual self-revelation.

This communication of self to the other takes place by being willing to surrender some of one's protective wideness and take the risk of sharing what is on one's mind and in one's heart. By sharing ideas, the couple does not only get to know the deeper side of the other but also learn from one another. Couples share feelings so that each can participate more deeply in the lived experience of each other: their joys, sorrows, and depressions, their dreams, hopes and fears, their love and hurts, their satisfaction and disappointments. Being close to another is being comfortable in expressing how 'I, as person feel, knowing that the other will accept me as I am'.

This type of communication demands humility, that is being honest in touch with oneself. Individuals must own their convictions as men/women, and admit the way they feel. Such communication also requires an inner security that makes taking risk that the other might not understand or might not accept one's ideas or feelings possible. The revealing of one's inner faith and prayer life, could be more difficult than sharing ideas and feelings. Faith sharing here, refers not just to telling each other about religious dogmas one believes in but to reveal something about the way an individual relates to God.

The sharing of prayer is far more than simply reciting prayers together. When a couple pray together spontaneously in their own words and style, each gives the other a glimpse into one's faith-filled heart and soul. This type of sharing assists in sealing the intimacy experienced in so many of the other moments of marital life.

## **LOVE**

Becoming personally intimate in marital life involves a process whereby the couple evolve from having fallen in love to growing in love.<sup>339</sup> Falling in love is something that happens to the couple. Growing in love takes place as a result of the couple's willful intent to commit themselves to become increasingly one in mind and heart. It should be borne in mind that while falling in love is effortless, growing in love demands determination, dedication and hard work.

To love is to be sensitive to another: to be aware of who the other is; to understand what it is like "to put oneself in the shoes" of the other; to be able to feel with the other. To love is to be responsive to the needs and desires of the other; to be willing to put oneself out in order to help the other grow intellectually, psychologically and spiritually.

Authentic spousal love brings the couple together in oneness that enhances, rather than negates, the individuality and identity of each. It binds them in an interdependence that leaves each independent. As they grow in love, they belong increasingly to each other, without either owning, possessing or dominating the other.<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Christopher C. Reilly, *Making Your Marriage Work: Growing in Love After Falling in Love* (Mystic Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989)6ff.

<sup>340</sup> M. Scott, *The Road Less Travelled* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1978)110.

### **BIBLICAL BASIS FOR SEXUALITY AND MARITAL LIFE**

Strange as it may appear, it is difficult for one to assume that individuals in our contemporary society do understand the right/proper definition of “marital life” and “the family”. It is not merely a sad observation on the impact of same-sex activist on our contemporary society; it also portrays how the culture’s memory of the Biblical tradition on which it is mainly based is fading sporadically and fast. Biblically, what is marital life?, and what is sexuality?

Sexuality and marital life have been distorted in our contemporary culture due to false religion which produces self-centred, self-gratifying perversion. However, true Biblical faith will lead to a proper, fulfilling and other-centred view of sex within marital life which reflects the beauty, sanctity and joy of God.

The agents of a revived paganism have their incendiaries laid within the public school curriculum, the medial, the entertainment industry and throughout the corridors of political power and cultural life. Adultery, fornication, co-habitation, homosexuality and an ever-expanding list of other perversions are the norm. Aborted children are offered as “sacrifices” to the sacred feminine who demands complete emancipation and self-realisation. ‘50 Shades’ of the pornographic is everywhere marketed, trapping the young people in debilitating addiction. Gender identities are multiplied exponentially in homage to any sexual predilection, just as the new sexual sacrament for the re-envisioning of God and individual’s identity. Christians are cast as ignorant bigots, or mentally ill resisters of this ‘new’ liberation from moral restraint and persecuted.

Frequently the terms sexuality and intimacy are utilised interchangeably with sexuality taken to mean genital expression and intimacy functioning as a “polite” synonym. The terms will be utilised more precisely here: genital, sexuality and orgasm are part of the larger experience of sexuality life of adults. This larger category, sexuality, includes individual’s awareness of him/her self as male or female along with his/her experience of affection, emotional attraction as well as physical responsiveness. Intimacy as an even larger category in adult experience, refers to various ways in which a person is brought “up close” to other individuals-not just in romance and sexuality, but in friendship, in co-operation and competition, in planning and collaborative efforts, in conflict and negotiation.

Marital life involves couples with each in all ramifications (every level). They come “up close” to each other as sexual partners, as friends, as colleagues in the day-to-day efforts of marital life. They also experience each other “up close” in the experiences of conflict, completion and compromise that are inevitably and expectably part and parcel of living together.

It should be noted that conflict and hostility are not goals of marital life, to be certain. They are indication that couples’ marital life is “on the rocks”. This notwithstanding, conflict is a normal, expectable ingredient in any relationship-irrespective of whether it is marital life, friendship or team work – that engages individual’s at the level of their significant values and needs. The challenge is not to do away with all signs of conflict, or worst still, to refuse to admit that conflict comes/arises between couples from time to time. Instead, couples can attempt to learn ways to recognise the potential areas of conflict and handle the issues and feelings in manners that strengthen instead of destroying the bonds that exist between them.

### **MARITAL LIFE AS A PROCESS**

Historically marital life was thought of as a state -- “the holy state of matrimony”. In our contemporary world, individuals are conscious of marital life as a process, path pursued, a journey which includes both expected and unexpected events. There is a tremendous transition from ‘I’ toward ‘we’, as two individuals move from the strengths of independent identity toward creating and holding a life-in-common. The challenge here is to create a “we” that is an expression of both “I”, where the identity of each is tested and expanded, but certainly not destroyed. There are new expectations of mutuality today in this “we” of marital life. It is less and less acceptable among women(as, to be sure, among several men) that the “we” of marital life be achieved mainly through the absorption of the wife into her husband’s identity and life-ambition. Today, the process of marital life involves the more difficult-and more rewarding effort to create a “we” that bears the stamp of both couples, a “we” that moves beyond each into the larger reality of their life-in-“we” that moves beyond each into the larger reality of their life-in-common.

A second transition in today’s marital life is from romantic love to committed love. Over the course of history and cultures, several criteria have been utilised to determine who shall marry whom: family background, parents decisions and the advise of matchmakers. The dominant norm of marital life in Africa/Nigeria

today is self-selection based on the criteria of romantic love. The process of maturity in marital life requires the movement from the exhilarating but largely passive experience of “falling in love” to the experience of love as a chosen and cultivated commitment. This is the movement from romantic love to the love of mutual devotion, strong enough to sustain commitment through the strain and confusions that are inevitably associated with continuing close contact; that intimacy, the selflessness of joined devotion, which anchors love in mutual commitment”<sup>341</sup>

### **MARITAL LIFE AS A RELIGIOUS PROCESS**

The religious passage of marital life involves several stages, each with important challenges as well as invitations to intimacy. Current efforts in the Church to strengthen its pre-Cana ministry witness to couple’s or marital growing realisation of importance of this early stage. It should be noted that as soon as two Christians become engaged -- as they move beyond casual acquaintance and the early experience of dating to genuinely take hold of each other -- an important period of growth in intimacy is said to have started. During this stage, significant information about each other -- strengths and weakness, hopes and apprehensions -- needs to be shared, so as to test the viability of a life together. Increasingly pastoral ministry to marital preparation recognise that a ministry of exhortation, urging the partners to love one another, is more effective if it is complemented by a ministry to the skills of intimacy -- helping the partners to learn the practical ways in which they can support and challenge one another as they move toward a life-in-common. Efforts to recover the historical notion of betrothal -- a period of serious but final commitment-- may add weight and focus to this crucial stage of growth into marital life.

### **SEXUAL MATURITY IN MARITAL LIFE**

Sexual maturity in marital life is a process through which the couple together learn how to contribute to what is, for them, mutually, satisfying shared sexual experience. In addition, the couple for this mutually satisfying experience can be expected to differ tremendously from couple to couple. In this respect, as in most other criteria of maturity, to be “normal” does not necessarily mean to fit some sort of external criteria of performance. The patterns of a couple’s sexual sharing-patterns of frequency, of time and place, of initiation and response, of affection and ardour, of seriousness and fun -- all these take their most important clue

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<sup>341</sup> Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: Norton, 1964).

from the couple's developing sense of what is appropriate or what works for them.

Sexual maturity in marital life is reached as the couple's capacity for intimate sexual sharing is developed and stabilised. As Erikson clearly puts it, "such experience makes sexuality less obsessive."<sup>342</sup> "Before such genital maturity is reached, much of sexual life is the self-seeking, identity-hungry kind; each partner is really trying only to reach himself/herself. Or it remains a kind of genital combat in which each tries to defeat the other".<sup>343</sup> The experience of sexual play and orgasm in marital life can contribute to individual's willingness to risk himself/herself, to let down his/her defenses in the presence of another. Consequently, sexual intimacy opens out into a larger psychological resource for intimacy.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

To conclude, the paper reiterates that marital life is a remedy for the concupiscence that the original Fall unleashes, that marital life implies first and foremost a series of manifestations of amorous, sensible and sensual nature. That once an individual accepts marital life as a unique type of intimacy with his/her partner, the horizons of individual's marital life/spirituality are dramatically expanded. Finally, that any resistance in marital intimacy is the same as that which resists personal relationship with God and others. Consequently, the following recommendations are proffered:

1 .In times of conflict and confrontation in marital life, a partner should not transfer the intimacy between him/her and the other partner to the Pastor/ Counsellor.

2. Couples should develop the capacity for intimacy that will help them sustain adjustment and compromise life with others without jeopardy to their own identity.

3. Couples should pray together and build their life on authentic love which brings couples together in oneness that enhances, rather than negates, the individuality and identity of each person.

4. The sharing of prayer is far more than simply reciting prayers together. Couples should, therefore, pray together in their own words and styles in order

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<sup>342</sup> Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).136.

<sup>343</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 137

to give the other a glimpse into the one's faith-filled heart and soul thereby sealing the intimacy experienced in various moments of their marital life.