

Premarital Sex

Premarital sex is any sexual act performed before marriage. Behaviors range from “hooking up” with someone you’ve just met to intercourse with the person to whom you are engaged. This broad range of behaviors reflects a similarly broad range in level of affection and commitment, from “one night stands” (with no affection or commitment) to long-term but premarital relationships (with greater affection and commitment). Premarital sex also refers to a wide variety of sexual acts, including oral sex, anal sex, mutual masturbation, and full sexual intercourse.

Premarital sex is quite common, and those who engage in it are getting progressively younger. One often hears, “Everyone is doing it, so what’s the big deal?” In some circles, to be a virgin after a certain age is considered freakish: “What, you haven’t done it yet? What’s wrong with you?” Secular society, the media, and many educators convey the message that it is all right to have sex “as long as you are responsible.” “Responsible” usually means using a condom or other contraceptive device; thus “safe sex” has come to mean responsible (and by extension, moral) sex.

At the same time, a growing number of young people are committed to “saving themselves” for marriage. Some are virgins. Others have renewed their commitment to chaste living, often after a negative experience or a religious awakening. The truth is that not everyone is “doing it” and there is nothing wrong with a person who chooses not to engage in premarital sex.

Premarital sex, like any sexual behavior, at its most base level can be treated as a contact sport, something to do when you are bored or when you want to release sexual energy.⁸ It can be exploitative and even commercialized. At a higher level, it can be seen as a sign of love or some level of commitment to another person. Ideally sexual intercourse should not be simply a *sign* of a couple’s love and commitment, but the *sign and the fruit* of a relationship that is permanent, exclusive, faithful, and sealed by the public declaration of the couple’s love for each other.

When we speak of love, we are not talking about mere affection or physical attraction. Rather, we are talking about the kind of love that is rooted in a respect for the other as a person, and in a willingness (for love is more a matter of choice than natural attraction) to be with this person “for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, until death do we part.” This kind of love presupposes, and is an expression of, a commitment that is permanent, exclusive, and faithful. It is the kind of love found only within marriage.

Space limitations do not permit an extended discussion of what marriage is and what it requires. Instead, we simply note that the key issue is commitment. Marriage is a commitment on the part of a man and a woman to love, honor, and be faithful to each other, made in the eyes of the community, the Church, and most importantly God. Sexuality is the physical sign and fruit of this committed relationship. In marriage, a man and woman give themselves completely to each other in body, soul, mind, and heart. Sexual intercourse is the physical sign of this total gift of oneself, it is “the fullest self disclosure one person can offer to another.”⁹ This is why the Catholic Church teaches that sexual relations are only to be experienced within marriage.

The problem with premarital sexuality is that it is not, nor can it ever be, an expression of the full self-gift of one person to another. Without the free commitment of one’s whole self to another given through the marriage vows, it is impossible to experience the fullness of what sexual relations entail. The *Code of Canon Law* speaks to this by describing the requirements of a valid marriage. The exchange of vows initiates marriage, intercourse consummates or completes it. No matter how many times a couple has had intercourse before exchanging vows, the marriage is not consummated until the



couple's first act of intercourse after the vows have been exchanged. The reason for this is simple: one cannot complete what has not been initiated.¹⁰

Because it does not embody the commitment, permanency, exclusivity, and faithfulness inherent in marriage, premarital sex brings with it a host of serious risks. There are physical risks, including pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. There are emotional risks, too, for intercourse is not simply a matter of commingling flesh; it is the full giving of one's self to another with all the physical, emotional and psychological vulnerabilities this entails.¹¹ In this sense, premarital sex is always in some way flawed. It always involves some lack of love, some inability or unwillingness to give oneself away in love, or some refusal to commit oneself permanently to another person. This deficiency of love makes it impossible for sexual intercourse to embody the meaning that it was meant to have by God's design. To underscore this point, listen to the words of former students speaking about their own sexual experiences: I know that society and the media had a lot to do with my sexual decisions. Everyone was doing it so it was ok for me to do it. I was doing it even though I did not want to do it. I guess I thought I was missing out because sex was everywhere I turned. Emotionally I felt empty when I engaged in premarital sex. I never committed myself to the person I was with, even when we were in a "committed" relationship. I always knew I could just leave. I gave my body, but never my mind and soul. I could not see myself having kids with some of my partners, and there were some whom I could not even introduce to my parents. If I can't introduce someone to my family and friends, why was I having sex with him? Overall, saving yourself until marriage is a good idea.

Whatever the level of affection or commitment that a couple may have, one is not capacitated to engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. What does this mean? No one denies that most individuals are capable of performing a sexual act on the biological level, but biology does not qualify or otherwise capacitate a person to engage in intercourse. Consider the following analogy. Suppose that on the day before his ordination to the priesthood, Rev. Guevin decided to hear confessions. He may be physically able to hear them and physically capable of saying the words of absolution, but these features do not qualify him to administer the sacrament. He must first be ordained to the priesthood and receive the faculties from the bishop. Without these, there is no absolution (forgiveness of sin) because there is no sacrament. In a similar way, one may perform an act of intercourse without the exchange of marital vows, but this act is neither the sign nor the fruit of the genuine love that can be found only within the marital union.

Endnotes

8. For an eye-opening examination of the sexual mores and practices of American college students, see Donna Frietas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford, 2008).
9. Patrick McCormick and Russell Connors, *Facing Ethical Issues: Dimensions of Character, Choices and Community* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 164.
10. See the commentary on Canon 1061 in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, ed. John P. Beal et al. (Mahwah, NJ: Canon Law Society of America / Paulist Press, 2000), 1257.
11. See Thomas Lickona, "The Neglected Heart: The Emotional Dangers of Premature Sexual Involvement," in *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, ed. Kieran Scott and Michael Warren, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158–68.

Excerpted from *Catholic Ethics in Today's World*, Revised Edition, by Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin, OSB (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011). Copyright © 2008, 2011 by Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.

