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The Maine Interfaith Council  
*for Reproductive Choices*

OCCASIONAL PAPERS NO. 1

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s a Christian ethicist who teaches human sexuality, I give a resounding “two cheers!” to Bishop Joseph Gerry for his recent pastoral letter to Catholic young people entitled “Learning to Love in the Lord.”

The Bishop, clearly concerned that many teens feel strong cultural pressure to become sexually active prematurely, has called for a dialogue, especially with younger people, about ethical values and human sexuality.

At the same time, he leaves no uncertainty about his own stance: Only sex within heterosexual, procreative marriage is acceptable. For the unmarried, abstaining from sex is the goal, and accordingly, he proposes a six-step “how to” guide for avoiding sex until a marriage commitment can be solemnized. As he elaborates in his pastoral letter, faith and prayer can aid in “avoiding temptation” and keeping chaste.

I share the Bishop’s interest in furthering dialogue about sexuality and ethical responsibility, but I want to suggest another framework for moral education about these humanly important matters.

By and large, most faith traditions, and here I speak especially of my own Protestant Christian tradition, have not served either teens or adults very well in helping them to come of age as sexual persons. When it comes to sex and sexuality, religious people are, in fact, often at their worst: rigid, judgmental, and inclined to use shame and guilt to “make others behave.” Is it any wonder that so many men and women struggle as they seek to resolve a painful kind of either-or choice: either their faith or sex. This conflict is all the more troubling when we affirm that love of God and love of others, including sexual loving, are all of one amazing piece.

### ONGOING DIALOGUE IS NEEDED

Where has the Bishop been helpful? The first cheer is because yes, young people (along with adults) need ongoing dialogue about human sexuality, its meaning and place in their lives. Productive dialogue requires access to scientifically sound information along with an ethical framework or what the Bishop speaks of as a “moral compass.” Equipping young people for decision making includes addressing how to integrate sexuality into their

whole lives as responsible, self-respecting persons and also exploring the intimate connections between sexuality and spirituality. In the dedication to her book on positive approaches to adolescent sexuality, Peggy Brick, a sexuality educator, acknowledges how young people are often ill served in this regard: “To the young people of this nation who must find their way to sexual health in a world of contradictions — where media scream ‘Always say yes,’ where many adults admonish, ‘Just say no,’ but the majority just say . . . nothing.”

The Bishop has it right: ongoing, candid dialogue is needed that will break the silences, avoid negativities of shame and guilt, and honor the questions, struggles, and insights of younger people.

### A CENTRAL ROLE FOR CONGREGATIONS

A second cheer is because, yes, it is incumbent upon churches, synagogues, and mosques to offer age-appropriate sexuality education to younger people and, I dare say, adults. Most parents want to teach values to their children and be the main source of information about sex and ethical responsibility, but often they need help in this process of moral formation. I agree with the Bishop that congregations are ideal places to offer value-based sexuality education.

Faith-based programs can easily complement what parents do at home. To be worthwhile, a sexual ethic must attend to the pleasures, as well as the dangers of sexuality in this culture and manage to keep both in perspective. When a young person or anyone else is made ignorant about sexuality, they are placed at greater risk of being harmed and possibly of doing harm. Such risks run especially high in this culture because it is saturated with sexualized imagery and because bodies, especially female bodies, are so flagrantly commodified and objectified.

Ironically, even though sex talk is seemingly everywhere, a majority of people remains woefully ignorant of, and sadly misinformed about, their own bodies and about sexual matters generally. A few years ago, the Kinsey Institute and Roper Organization tested for basic knowledge about human sexuality in a random sampling of U.S. adults. What did they discover? Of the nearly 2,000

people who took the 18-question exam, only five percent received an A grade while 82 percent received a D or F. Ours is a sexually illiterate society, and dangerously so.

The Bishop has it right: youth and adults need help, and faith communities have an obligation to promote the kind of education that fosters personal well-being while serving the common good.

Yes, dialogue is in order, and yes, faith communities have an important leadership role to exercise, but when it comes to providing the actual moral compass, I find myself departing ways with the good bishop.

### THE CONVENTIONAL SEX ETHIC IS NOT ADEQUATE

To begin with, I believe that the credibility of religious people on matters of sexuality depends, to a great extent, on our candor — no, on our confession and repentance — that for too long we have promulgated negative attitudes about the body, sexual differences, and above all women. A patriarchal religious tradition has only reinforced the fear, shame, and guilt that many people experience about bodily pleasure (including masturbation) and sexual passion.

Speaking of the Protestant tradition, I witness a widening gap between the church’s traditional teaching — that the exclusive moral norm is heterosexual, marital, and procreative sex — and how most people, including most people of faith, actually live their lives. No doubt a major reason for this gap is our human capacity for sin, irresponsibility, and moral failure. However, things are more complicated than that. My wager is that the church’s conventional sex ethic is itself no longer adequate.

Where religious tradition fails young people (and adults) is by charging ahead without really questioning outmoded assumptions. It is simply not true, if it ever was, that everyone is heterosexual, that marriage is the only place in which people can live sexually responsible lives, and that sex is primarily (or even exclusively) for the purpose of making babies. Yes, we need a moral compass, but we also need to revisit and, when necessary, update the assumptions that undergird our ethic if we are to speak truthfully and if our intention is to genuinely

empower people rather than try to control them.

A contemporary sexual ethic must begin by affirming that sexuality is a broader notion than (genital) sex. Traditional Christian morality has been preoccupied narrowly

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with prohibiting certain acts, and in the process, we've become terribly skittish about making a really joyful noise. A legalistic "thou shall not" approach focuses people's energies on not making mistakes rather than on discovering what is genuinely loving and mutually pleasurable.

Although often fearful of sex, we've become nearly fixated on these matters, especially the sex lives of others. Through it all, we've failed to attend to the things that truly matter, namely the quality of relationships and how people might more fully integrate their sexuality into their lives and values. We've readily policed the sexual lives of single persons but denied how frequently battering and rape happen within marriages. We've been notorious in our reluctance to celebrate how God has created a variety of sexualities, and so we've expressed far too little respect for that rich diversity, much less real delight.

The fact of the matter is that some of us are heterosexual, others are gay, lesbian, and bisexual, and still others are transgendered and transsexual. Some of us are even a-sexual. All the while, each one of us deserves to love and be loved gracefully, compassionately.

### SHIFTING THE MORAL FOCUS AND RAISING THE STANDARD

We need an ethic that appreciates how celibacy and marriage are two options in which people can live out faithful, responsible lives, but they do not exhaust the moral possibilities. Sexually active single persons, both older and younger, may also exemplify moral integrity and spiritual maturity.

Moreover, the ethical focus for gay and non-gay, partnered and non-partnered persons alike should be the quality of respect and commitment in intimate relationships, the distribution and use of power, the maintenance

of health, the avoidance of unintended pregnancy, and especially protection from abuse, exploitation, and neglect. Such an ethic will hold the powerful accountable for their wrongdoing, including the batterer, the rapist, and sexually abusive clergy.

The primary norm will no longer be marriage, heterosexuality, or procreative possibility, but rather justice and love in all intimate connections.

When such an inclusive, grace-filled ethic becomes operative in our families, congregations, and communities, then three cheers will be in order especially if we also commit ourselves to educating all our children, to teaching that abstinence and marriage may be good choices but they're not the exclusive moral options, and to preaching boldly that sex is moral only when it is loving and just and not "simply" procreative.

Do I speak here for all Protestant Christians? Heavens no. Do I also have things to learn, as well as critique to receive about my own viewpoint? Heavens yes.

My deep desire is to invite more and more people and voices into the dialogue so that together we may fashion a contemporary sexual ethic that will raise, not lower moral standards.

We must learn to expect more, not less of each other in terms of what we ourselves deserve and in terms of what we owe others in our intimate connections. The radicalizing, life-giving hope is that, God willing, we'll choose not to settle for less.

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