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The Hook-Up Culture and Catholic Universities: Are Catholic Values Still Significant?

The twenty-first century and the arrival of the Millennial Generation onto the university and collegiate scene has helped to bring significant changes to the traditional campus culture that exists as a daily reality on American collegiate campuses. The Millennials have brought with them a basic change in how campus life functions, integrating new social models and technology into everything from classroom interaction and studying to dating and relationships. One of the largest changes that has arisen amongst Millennial aged college students is a fundamental shift amongst the way sexuality and intimate relationships are perceived and pursued. Traditional dating models and more “old-fashioned” ideas of sexuality and intimacy are in competition with the rising idea of the “hook-up culture.” The trends of sexuality and intimacy embodied in the “hook-up” culture are an ever present force in the daily reality of American college students in all types of universities from Evangelical private school to large public universities. However the point of this paper is to examine the private Catholic universities and their respective form of campus culture.

This paper will ask and address the following question; what is the influence of post Vatican II Catholic social teaching on sexuality and intimate relations amongst American college students, and the corresponding cultural perceptions of sexuality and intimate relationships amongst American Catholic college campuses? The goal of this paper is to prove that, contemporary Catholic social teaching has provided the background for the ideal quintessential hetero-

sexual relationship, which is an ideal still prevalent and practiced amongst American Catholic college students. The ideal of the quintessential heterosexual relationship is in competition with new growing ideals about sexuality and intimate relations, such as the “hookup culture,” which are fundamentally opposed to the basic presuppositions of contemporary Catholic social teaching, yet the ideals of the “hook-up culture” are not nearly as prevalent amongst campus culture as they are perceived to be.

Catholic social teaching on sexuality and intimacy is a deep and rich tradition in the Church. It has roots that have arisen from scriptural and societal origins that have combined to form the religious tradition that is experienced by millions of people in their everyday lives. It is absolutely crucial, for this paper, to form a clear and complete picture of the Church’s teachings on sexuality; the Church’s teachings define the previously used term, “quintessential heterosexual relationship.”

The biblical roots of the Catholic view of sexuality and intimacy need to be examined properly for a full picture of the Catholic social teaching on sexuality to be formed. The origins of human sexuality are seen at the beginning of the Bible itself, in Genesis. Genesis 2:24-25 reads, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.”¹ Genesis 2:24-25 reveals a form of sexuality that is positive and self-less, and exists in a context of marriage. The above verse features a form of sexuality where ideas such as modesty and exposure were non-existent. Concepts such as same shame and embarrassment over one’s sexuality

¹ The International Student Bible for Catholics: New American Bible. Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1999.

do not exist in this “perfect” model. According to *Catholic Sexual Ethics*, “ On the Genesis accounts, sexuality is not something divine but something human; it is still, however, something very good, since it is the gift of God.”² Sex and sexuality are intimately human as well in the scriptures, and are described as one of the strongest and most meaningful gifts given by God to the human race. Additionally, “The Old Testament provides another important insight into the meaning of human sexuality in the Song of Solomon. This sensual and even erotic poem extols the love between the sexes. It portrays human sexuality and sensuality as good in themselves...”³ In addition to being intimately human, sexuality can be highly pleasurable and stimulating without being perverted. According to this early scriptural sex, intimate human bonding, and marriage are closely tied together and are all a part of the same beautiful gift of sexuality God gave to man. Sexuality should be uplifting and self-affirming according to sacred scripture, not damning and inspiring shame on those who experience and engage with their sexuality.

Sexuality while it was intended to be positive and good, has become corrupted according to the church’s scriptural tradition. What was meant to be unifying and uplifting was perverted and changed forever by human action in the form of man’s original sin and its consequences. The verse Genesis 3:7 reads, “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”⁴ The beautiful and almost seemingly poetic form of God’s unblemished sexuality was changed and

²Lawler, Ronald David, and Joseph M. Boyle. *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation & Defense*. Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1985. 36.

³ Ibid. 36.

⁴ The International Student Bible for Catholics: New American Bible.

morphed by mankind. In the scriptural tradition, many of the inherent issues of sexuality experienced by man are in fact self-induced wounds. According to *Catholic Sexual Ethics*, “As a result of their sin, the man and woman find themselves at a loss to understand themselves and their sexuality. They experience shame over their nakedness, and the harmony that is meant to exist between them is broken.”⁵ Many of the problems experienced in contemporary expressions of sexuality are all rooted in man’s inability to fully embrace and understand his God given sexuality. A proper and restored view of sexuality is, necessary according to scriptural tradition, and inherently tied to a resorted connection with God which is broken by sin.

The meaning and context of engaging in and exploring one’s sexuality outside of a defined martial context is explored in the Catholic scriptural tradition as well. The Bible’s scriptures in the New Testament carry through and further expand on the basic tenants of sexuality established in the Old Testament. 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 reads:

Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.⁶

The essential idea that like sexuality, one’s body, is a gift from God is a key feature of the scriptural tradition on sexuality. The human body is in essence a sacred object, and needs to be treated and operated according as such. In the scriptural context of glorifying God then, the individual should refrain from engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage and enjoy the beautiful gift of sexuality in the context God meant it to be used in originally. According to the above

⁵ Lawler, Ronald David, and Joseph M. Boyle. *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation & Defense*, 38.

⁶ The International Student Bible for Catholics: New American Bible.

verse engaging in sex outside of marriage can be viewed as a sacrilegious action. *Catholic Sexual Ethics* says:

This view of the makeup of the Christian person has immediate implications for sexual morality. Since sexual immorality affects the human person in such an intimate, bodily way, it is abominable — a sacrilegious desecration of the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Other sins are outside the body, but sexual sins are especially perverse because they are within.⁷

In the scriptural tradition sins regarding sexuality are especially important because of their explicit dualistic nature. Sexual sin has a distinct physical affect on the body of an individual, as well as a perverse spiritual and emotional effect. The sacred nature of the body makes all of sexuality intimately tied to an individual's relationship with God, more specifically a person's direct spiritual relationship with God. Given this dualistic nature, sexuality is a very important topic in the scriptural tradition of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church's scriptural tradition informs the basic themes and central ideas of the Church's social teaching. Catholic tradition and societal changes form the specific details and practices of the Church's social teachings on sexuality and intimate relations. The specific areas of Catholic Social teaching on sexuality that will be examined are focused on sex outside the marital context, the morality and spirituality of sexual exchange, and the linking effects sexual intimacy on individuals.

It is clear from scriptural evidence and basic church doctrine that sex outside of a marital context is wrong. According to Gerald Kelly, S.J. the following guideline applies to engaging in sex outside of marriage, "Every directly venereal action is against the law of God, and a serious

⁷Lawler, Ronald David, and Joseph M. Boyle. *Catholic Sexual Ethics: A Summary, Explanation & Defense*, 41.

sin of impurity.”⁸ There is absolutely no room for a varying interpretation on this staple of the Church’s teaching, direct sexual exchange outside of marriage is a sin and is morally wrong. The guidelines for interpreting any intimate sexual interactions, other than genital intercourse, that might occur outside of marriage are dependent on the intent behind the action. Gerald Kelly, S.J. states, “Any action is a serious sin against chastity when it is performed with the intention of stimulating or promoting venereal pleasure.”⁹ The motivations behind an action of passion sexuality are extremely important to the Church’s sexual teaching. A person’s actions behind an action are reflective of their inner nature at the time and are the determining factor behind whether a person sins. There is a third principle that is central to the Church’s social teaching, “It is a mortal sin for one to expose oneself freely and knowingly to the proximate danger of performing a directly venereal action or of consenting to venereal pleasure.”¹⁰ The Church’s teaching also relies on the principle that it is up to the individual to actively remove themselves from sexual temptation and from situations where they may engage in intimate sexual relations. The Church focuses on the individual’s choices and decisions that could place themselves in a situation where they might in extramarital sexual relations or receive sinful sexual pleasures. The intent of a person’s choices is crucial to the Church’s teachings on extra-marital sex and intimate relations.

The Church’s social teachings also address the dual nature of sexuality and sexual exchange. According to *Tender Fires*:

⁸ Curran, Charles E. *Dialogue about Catholic Sexual Teaching*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993. 308.

⁹ *Ibid.* 311.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 309.

Here's where sexuality reveals itself as more than genitality. Sexuality involves the whole person. Its voice calls out for communion from every fiber of our being. It won't be silenced while our genitals enjoy a few moments of disconnected pleasure. As energy for relationship, sexuality will not allow our feelings to stand on the sidelines while our bodies seek human closeness without them. If it senses union happening anywhere, sexuality quickly summons our hearts.¹¹

Catholic teachings on sexuality acknowledge the dualistic power of bonding found in sexual intercourse and other intimate relations. In the Church's teachings, sexuality is perhaps the strongest physical bonding force that can link to humans together. The bonding force is so strong that the scriptures use the metaphor of "one flesh" to come up with an adequate intellectual concept.¹² In the Church's social teachings the physical and spiritual emotional sides of sexuality cannot be separated and are linked together permanently. The Catholic Church's social teachings on extramarital sexuality, the morality of sexuality and the dualistic nature of sexuality are an intricate mix of scriptural principles, cathetical tradition, and societal principles.

College-aged Millennials have created amongst American collegiate campus cultures a form of sexuality labeled the "hook-up" culture. The "hook-up" culture is a nationally present phenomena on many of America's collegiate and university campuses, even American Catholic universities. The "hook-up" culture is a relatively self-defined ideal of sexuality, amongst college students, that is much younger than the Catholic social teaching on sexuality.

The "hook-up" culture is generally defined by some basic ideals and principles, but lacks a single unifying definition and is rather an ideal reflected of college age Millennials views about sexuality and romance. A good quote that summarizes many student's attitudes about sexuality

¹¹ Ferder, Fran, and John Heagle. *Tender Fires: The Spiritual Promise of Sexuality*. New York: Crossroad Pub., 2002. 69.

¹² The International Student Bible for Catholics: New American Bible, Genesis 2:24-25.

and romance is, “A lot of people come into college expecting to meet their husband or wife . . . once you get here you realize that it’s really just not that easy to do. Like, finding love just isn’t that easy. Sex is probably a lot easier.”¹³ The culture on college campuses about love and romance is based on an ideal of disillusionment about the measure of work required to find and maintain love in a marital context. Millennial college students are entering into university and collegiate campuses with the ideal of meeting their future spouse, but are off-put by the necessary effort to engage in a romantic relationship and find having sex to require less effort. This ideal of love and romance is reflected in student data numbers about romance from *Sex and the Soul*. According to data gathered by Donna Freitas:

Sixty-five percent of students, “identified romantic experience as having no sexual intimacy.” Fourteen percent of students, “identified romantic experience in conjugation with a first kiss or kissing.” Thirteen percent of students, “identified romantic experience in conjugation with having sex/more than kissing.” Eight percent of students, “reported never experiencing a romantic encounter.”¹⁴

The vast majority of college students, over fifty percent, do not associate romance and the concept of romantic relationships with sexuality. The percentage of students who make a cognizant link between romance and romantic relationships is eight percent of students. It is a relatively easy decision logical decision for large numbers of students to choose to engage in sexual activity when they do not succeed in romance, because they do not have a pre-established cognitive understanding that links sexuality and intimate relations with a notion of intimate emotional and spiritual romance. The popular type of romantic story that college students express revolves

¹³ Freitas, Donna. *Sex and the Soul Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 265.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 307.

around “just talking” and “Romance to them is chaste.”¹⁵ One student quote about this ideal, “It got colder and colder as the night went on, so he enveloped me in his arms and we watched the stars, sang songs, and talked about anything and everything.”¹⁶ The most popular idea of romance among college students is largely intellectual and emotional focused. This focus has created a conceptual gap between emotional spiritual interpersonal connectivity and physical sexual connectivity in the minds of the majority of college students. For American college students sexuality does not blend the spirituality and physical connectivity at all the way Catholic social teaching on sexuality does.

The “hook-up” culture also features a new mentality in regard to the orthodoxy of how romantic relationships are formed on college campuses. This new orthodoxy has arisen in large part to what has been as the virtual disappearance of traditional dating culture.

“I’ve never gone on a date here,” she says. “I don’t feel like people date anymore. I just don’t hear, ‘Oh, I went on a date with so-and-so last night.’ You either meet up at a party or you hang out at their house. It’s not as formal.” Just because people don’t date doesn’t mean that people don’t want to. “I think girls want to be taken out on dates, I really do,” she says.¹⁷

The perception among students at college campuses is that traditional dating is dead or at least non-existent. The interesting part of the campus culture, is that students are not necessarily willing to abandon the hope of experiencing the traditional dating model. Some students even want to experience the traditional modeling, it just appears as if no one is willing to put in the work and risk that the traditional model requires. This same quote is reflective of the romantic gap, as

¹⁵ Ibid, 303.

¹⁶ Ibid, 307.

¹⁷ Ibid, 375.

the majority students desire an emotional spiritual romantic experience but the majority of students are not putting in the work to make it happen. The following quote illustrates this point, “The alternative to dating, Claudia tells me, is hooking up. Students see it everywhere they go—at parties, in dark corners of a bar—it’s all around, people meeting and then going home together.”¹⁸ The concept of the “hook-up” then, while it is relatively recent, is a convenient replacement for the dating model. It is a lot easier, in terms of physical effort, to meet someone at a random setting and go home with them, then devoting countless hours to a traditional relationship which involves a lot more risk in terms of possible lost time versus potential physical sexual benefits for students.

The “hook-up” culture also involves and is related to the themes of alcohol and drug use amongst college age students. These substances typically lower inhibitions and make it easier for students to actively participate and engage in the intimate relations and sexual conduct. According to data from *Sex and the Soul*:

7% say that they either engage in this combination—random hookups/sexual activity with drinking/doing drugs—“frequently” or “all the time.” An additional 9% say they are “usually” drinking or using drugs when they engage in casual sexual activity. These numbers go up even more, however, when it comes to the middling response to this question. Approximately 33% percent answer that they are equally as likely to have been drinking or under the influence of drugs during sexual activity than not. A much more common response to this question is that the student is “never” or “rarely” drunk during hooking up—a whopping 51% fell into this category.

Unless students are underreporting their behavior, these figures indicate that the relationship between random hookups and sex while drinking to excess is not the norm according to about half the student population surveyed at the spiritual colleges. These figures contradict the widespread student perception that getting drunk is virtually synonymous with

¹⁸ Ibid, 376.

socializing. For now, however, the perception that drunken hookups have replaced the romantic first date prevails on most campuses.¹⁹

For the majority of students on college campuses and actively engaged in the “hook-up” culture, alcohol and drug use is not a major factor in engaging their sexuality. It is the smallest percentage recorded at seven percent that always use alcohol and drugs to engage in sexual practices.

The common perception that the “hook-up” culture is largely driven by substance abuse has some merit, however it is not merely as pervasive as many students actively think it is. A majority of students have a distorted vision of their own campus cultures as they base their opinions of the “hook-up” culture only the statical minority of students that garner the most attention. The reality of campus culture is currently that students express the opinion that the “hook-up” culture has replaced the dating model, despite an expressed student desire to return to the latter option of the traditional dating model.

The level of influence that the ideology of the “hook-up” culture has on campuses can very depending on the type of campus and the students that attend it. This section in particular is going to focus on the influence that the “hook-up” culture has on Catholic collegiate campuses versus public collegiate campuses and private non-religious campuses. In student response data regarding peer perceptions about views on sexuality, there are some significant statistical differences between reported numbers for Catholic universities and secular universities:

“Friends value sex in committed, loving relationships,” Catholic schools had 4% to the secular schools’ 3%. “People are open-minded about sex,” Catholic schools had 35% to the secular schools’ 42%. “Peers aren't casual enough about sex,” Catholic schools had 1% to the secular schools’ 2%. “Peers are too casual about sex/suspect that people act “carefree” about sex in public but feel otherwise in private,” Catholic schools had 45% to the secular schools’ 35%. “Peer attitudes are divided between those who are casual and

¹⁹ Ibid, 383-385.

those who take sex seriously,” Catholic schools had 8% to the secular schools’ 5%. “Sex is personal/not my business to judge others,” Catholic schools had 7% to the secular schools’ 12%.²⁰

Catholic universities and colleges had several areas where the influence of a faith background is visibly present. The first noticeable difference is the -7% spread that has Catholic schools with less students believing their peers are open minded about sex. This statistic is an indicator of religious influence on Catholic universities as students perceive that significantly fewer numbers of their peers are open minded about sex, a higher concentration of religiously minded or influenced students could very well account for this difference in perception. Another significant statistical difference is the largest spread in the data with a +10% spread in the favor of Catholic schools with students thinking that their peers are too casual about sex. This statistic shows a direct reflection of the possible influence of faith and religion on the individual student’s judgement. A significant proportion, 10% of the student body, on Catholic campuses have a strong negative view on the casual nature of the sexuality found in the “hook-up” culture. The data results for students regarding virginity and sexual activity for students on Catholic and secular universities is also telling of religious influence:

“Students who consider themselves virgins,” Catholic schools had 37.1%, private secular had 31.4%, and public schools had 18.6%. “Students who don’t consider themselves virgins,” Catholic schools had 62.9%, private secular had 68.6%, and public schools had 81.4%. “Students who had never experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex,” Catholic schools had 26.9%, private secular had 20.8%, and public schools had 14.9%. “Students who had experienced oral, anal, and/or vaginal sex,” Catholic schools had 73.1%, private secular had 79.2%, and secular schools had 85.1%.²¹

²⁰ Ibid, 437.

²¹ Ibid, 442.

The first important statistical data point to examine is the +18.4% spread of students that consider themselves virgins at Catholic universities versus public universities.²² The proportional number of self-reported virgins at Catholic schools is nearly double that of public universities. The religious influence present on Catholic campus culture is clearly demonstrated in this data set as a significant statistical proportion of students identify as virgins on Catholic campuses, Catholic campuses even have +5.7% greater proportion of virgins than private secular universities.²³ Another important data trend to examine is the “virgin gap” between the number of students who consider themselves virgins and have never engaged in any form of sex on Catholic versus secular campuses. The Catholic virgin gap is 10.2%, the private secular virgin gap is 10.6%, and the public university virgin gap is 3.7%.²⁴ The greater virgin gap at Catholic schools and private universities demonstrates the influence of religious practices, particularly the Catholic social teaching’s emphasis on chastity before marriage, by demonstrating the desire of a greater proportion of students who have engaged in some form of sexual relations to maintain the purity that religious ideals dictate. According to Freitas in *Sex and the Soul*:

Most telling about these data at the spiritual colleges, however, is the huge discrepancy they point to between sexual realities and romantic ideals. The overwhelming majority of students I interviewed—79% if you factor in those who included kissing in their ideal romantic encounter—held to a chaste view of romance. Most students are having sex at some point during the college experience. But they also long for romance without sex.²⁵

²² Ibid, 443.

²³ Ibid, 445.

²⁴ Ibid, 445.

²⁵ Ibid, 437.

While the Catholic social teaching's influence is noticeable in the data points in the notion of Catholic vs. secular campuses. The influence of Catholic social teaching on the overall influence of trends about perceived ideas of sexuality amongst students and the sexual realities of how many students engage in sex on Catholic campus culture as a whole is not particularly strong. The trends of the "hook-up" culture still exert a comparable, yet slightly lower, amount of influence on the campus culture of Catholic universities.

There is a growing trend of interest to note in the realm of Catholic campus culture, that may help explain some of the statical differences between Catholic and secular universities, a group of staunch and animated young Catholics that embrace the tenants of the Church's social teaching and openly practice them. This rising group is described as "evangelical Catholics."²⁶

Michael Hunt, C.S.P. describes this group of young Catholics:

The second group would, understandably, never attract much media attention. They subscribe to the traditional norms about sexual behavior which, as with all in moral allegiances, does not mean they always live up to them. But they do believe that sex is properly the love between a married couple, that promiscuity is degrading and wrong, and that they should struggle to discipline their sexual instincts. They are unhappy, even repentant about their lapses. They are scornful of the exploitation of sex in our commercial culture. They have respect and high regard for those who evidence sexual virtue. They often tell me that they think most students like them, no less so for failing to attain sheer virtue.²⁷

The "evangelical Catholics" are portrayed as a group on the rise and as having significant religious fervor. The group sticks to mainline Catholic teaching and upholds the values of these teachings to the best of their ability. The presence of this steadfast, but significant, minority might very well explain why the data for Catholic schools has some significant differences in

²⁶ Ibid, 161.

²⁷ Hunt, Michael J. *College Catholics: A New Counter-culture*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993. 55.

terms of how many students actually practice and subscribe to the tenants of Catholic social teaching on sexuality.

The campus culture of American Catholic universities and colleges is a striking mix of secular born ideals on sexuality, embodied in the “hook-up” culture that is so prevalent in the minds of students on Catholic campuses. The “hook-up” culture while it is the predominant ideal of sexuality that the majority of Catholic university students claim to engage in and uphold, is an ideal plagued by vague and disparate notions of sexuality that has gaps in the romantic desires of students and the reality of the sexuality that students are engaging in. These gaps have caused a fundamental sense of longing in students that subscribe to the “hook-up” culture, the sense of longing that the students want are in large part striving after ideals found in the ideal of the quintessential heterosexual relationship described and informed by the Catholic social teachings on sexuality. The presence of a small but active and vocal influence of College Catholics described as “evangelical Catholics” speak to the fact that Catholic social teaching has a still present influence amongst the Catholic campus culture. The statical gaps in sexual perception and sexual practices on Catholic versus secular campuses speaks to the tangible influence that Catholic ideals of sexuality still holds noticeable sway amongst the student bodies of Catholic universities and colleges. The combinations of these factors combine to support the idea that while the Catholic social teaching on sexuality is not the pre-dominant form of sexuality in Catholic campus culture, it is in fervent competition with the sexual values of the “hook-up” culture and has the ability to gain a strong foothold amongst the student body’s of Catholic universities championed by the rising tide of “evangelical Catholics.”

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