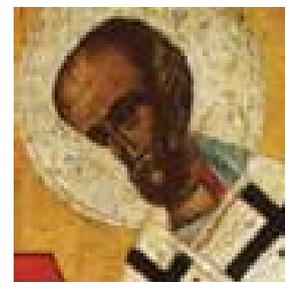
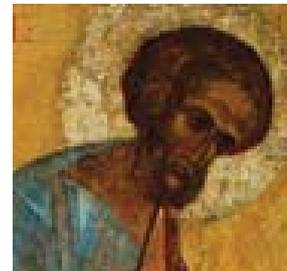


**A FUTURE
FULL OF HOPE**
CLIFTON DIOCESE



Topics in Relationship and Sex Education

A simple guide to Church Teaching

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Introduction

This is intended as a very simple guide for primary school teachers who may be faced with questions from pupils in the area of relationships and sex and feel they do not understand the teaching of the church.

Please note:

It is **not** intended for pupils

It is in no way a comprehensive or exhaustive guide to the teaching of the church.

It is intended to be a beginning and to provide some basic knowledge for those teachers who feel they need a little more clarity about what to say in class

Possible Questions

1. What age should you first have sex?

The Law

In the UK the age of consent, (when you can legally have sex) is 16 for both men and women. It is an offence for anyone to have any sexual activity with a person under the age of 16. The Sexual Offences Act 2003 provides specific legal protection for children aged 12 and under who cannot legally give their consent to any form of sexual activity. There are many reasons for this, and it is not the same in every country. The aim is to try to make sure someone is old enough to really give consent, that they fully understand the implications of what they are doing, have thought through the consequences and are not under any undue influence and prevent exploitation.

The Catholic Church

It is important to say here that Christianity holds a really positive view of sex. This is found throughout the Bible. In Genesis the creation stories tell us that we are called into relationships, the Song of Songs celebrates physical love and throughout scripture the importance of physical love and relationships is celebrated. So why does the Church oppose sex outside of marriage?

The world tends to see sex as simply a physical act. We talk about casual sex. However, for Catholics sex is something far deeper. The Church says that making the decision to have sex with someone is really important. We are called into relationships. When you have sex with someone you give yourself completely to them, you become ‘one flesh’. Sexual intercourse is not just about our physical natures but to help us form an ever-deepening relationship, it is a sign of a couple’s exclusive commitment to each other. A sign that you will always be there for them, I give myself completely to you. We believe that God’s love for us is unconditional, faithful and always present. The Church sees the love between two people as expressed through marriage as a visible sign of God’s love for us. Pope Francis spoke about this in a document called *Amoris Laetitia – The Joy of Love*. He said: “*Jesus speaks of this by quoting the passage from Genesis: “The man shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one” (Mt 19:5; cf. Gen 2:24). The very word “to be joined” or “to cleave”, in the original Hebrew, bespeaks a profound harmony, a closeness both physical and interior, to such an extent that the word is used to describe our union with God: “My soul clings to you” (Ps 63:8)¹*

In other words: when scripture talks about a couple being joined together, the relationship that it envisages is one of profound closeness both physical and emotional. This same language is used to mirror our relationship with God.

The church thinks that sex should be within marriage not because it disapproves of sex but because it thinks it is so important.

¹ AMORIS LÆTITIA Par 13

2. How do I know what Love is?

People use the word love very easily. They say 'I love chocolate' or 'I love this new outfit'. However, what they really mean is they like something. Many people believe love is an emotion, a feeling. If you don't always feel it then you should just walk away from that person. However, the Church believes that **Love is not simply a feeling**. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."² God's love for us is unconditional. It doesn't depend on what we do, God never stops loving us. When we think about loving another person we aim to try and love in the same way God does. We aim to put the welfare of the other person first, to think about their needs not our own. We decide that we will behave this way. So, love is a decision not simply an emotion. It is not easy to do this. We often make mistakes and things go wrong. However, the Church says we should aim to see love in this way.

² 1Cor 13

3. Can you get divorced if you are a Catholic?

In English law of course you can get divorced. There are various grounds for divorce including adultery, unreasonable behaviour, separation, etc. A divorce recognises that there was a legal marriage but now there isn't.

The Catholic Church believes that marriage is for life. "What God has joined together, let no one separate." Mk 10:9

When you marry someone, you enter into a committed permanent exclusive relationship. However, the church recognises that life isn't perfect, things go wrong, it doesn't always work out the way you wanted or hoped for. There are many pressures on people today and the church needs to provide support for those who are married. However, the reality is that relationships do go wrong.

Sometimes if a relationship is broken you may need to get divorced for really practical reasons, to sort out finances, to protect others etc. In 'The Joy of Love' Pope Francis says: ***"However there are also times when separation becomes inevitable. At times it even becomes morally necessary, precisely when it is a matter of removing the more vulnerable spouse or young children from serious injury due to abuse and violence, from humiliation and exploitation, and from disregard and indifference."***³

For those who find themselves in this position Pope Francis teaches that it is really important to provide pastoral care for people. You can get divorced if you are a Catholic but what you cannot do is remarry sacramentally. If someone who is divorced does remarry outside of the church then Pope Francis says it is important that:

"the divorced who have entered a new union should be made to feel part of the Church. They are not excommunicated" and they should not be treated as such, since they remain part of the ecclesial community. These situations "require careful discernment and respectful accompaniment. Language or conduct that might lead them to feel discriminated against should be avoided, and they should be encouraged to participate in the life of the community. The Christian community's care of such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage; rather, such care is a particular expression of its charity"⁴

In order to marry again in the Catholic Church, you need to obtain an **Annulment**. This basically means you need to prove there was no marriage in the first place. This is different than a divorce. There are various grounds for annulment. They include:

- i. At least one partner didn't fully & freely consent.
- ii. Someone wasn't mature enough to understand the full extent of what they were doing.
- iii. There was never intent to be faithful.
- iv. One or both partners did not intend to be open to children.

If you want an annulment you must take your case to the diocesan tribunal. They will listen to all the people involved and, if they agree you have grounds, grant you an annulment. If a person has an annulment they can remarry in the Catholic church. Above all the Church recognises that we need to make sure everyone, whatever their circumstances, knows that they are loved by God and welcomed as part of our community

³ AMORIS LÆTITIA: Par 238

⁴ As above Par 243

4. Should you use contraception?

Contraception means to prevent conception. Generally speaking, the Catholic Church would be opposed to artificial methods of contraception. The position of the church was outlined in a document called HUMANAE VITAE. Effectively this document says that intercourse between two people should always be open to the possibility of new life. At the same time the idea of responsible parenthood is also accepted. Couples are asked to use natural methods of contraception. Some of the reasons that lie behind this document were also the fear that contraception would cheapen the value of sex, lessen the role of commitment in a relationship, put more pressure on women, especially young girls, to have sex, increase the rate of STD's (the most common form of contraception the pill offers no protection against disease) and lead to a rise in abortion. Some of these reasons particularly affect young people.

There are of course situations where Catholics may feel they need to use contraceptives despite the teaching of the church. There exists within the church a process called the '*Internal Forum*' This is a term used to describe a decision, by a Catholic, to act in a certain way, a decision arrived at by a person's bringing to bear his/her mind (conscience) on a particular moral problem. In arriving at a decision to act in a certain way you have a duty as a Catholic to have an *informed conscience*. You might inform your conscience by reflecting carefully on the teaching of the church, on scripture and through discussion with a trusted person. Through the Internal Forum process you could decide that although you accepted the teaching of the church in principle in your particular circumstances you might use contraceptives. This process is similar in some ways to how a school might operate. There may be a school rule which says pupils must do their homework and if they fail to do it there will be a detention. However, if a pupil comes to you and offers a really good reason why they couldn't do homework that night you might, after reflection, decide to suspend the rule out of compassion for the person. It wouldn't change the fact that the rule remains and there would be situations where you might not accept the reason given. In his Apostolic Exhortation AMORIS LAETITIA (The Joy of Love) Pope Francis says when talking about the response of priests: "*Therefore, while clearly stating the Church's teaching, pastors are to avoid judgements that do not take into account the complexity of various situations, and they are to be attentive, by necessity, to how people experience and endure distress because of their condition*"...." (79) It is also worth bearing in mind that some forms of contraception are actually early forms of abortion.

5. Is it ok to have an abortion?

In law in England you are allowed to have an abortion for the following reasons:

✧ **Up to 24 weeks:**

Two registered medical practitioners must agree that: the continuance of the pregnancy would involve risk, greater than if the pregnancy was terminated, of injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family.

✧ **With no time limits:**

- i. the termination is necessary to prevent grave permanent injury to the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman
- ii. there is a risk to the life of the pregnant woman, greater than if the pregnancy were terminated
- iii. there is substantial risk that if the child were born it would suffer from such physical or mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped.

The Catholic Church is opposed to Abortion.

The Church takes the view that life begins at the moment of conception and that **all** life is valued and loved by God. The fact that in law there is no definition of ‘seriously handicapped’ is also a cause of real concern. It means there is no consistency in applying this. For example, under this rule an abortion is possible if you believe the child you are carrying has Down’s Syndrome but people with Down’s syndrome are able to be independent and live fulfilled lives. Please see <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions-linked-learning-disability/downs-syndrome> where people diagnosed with Down’s Syndrome talk about their lives. Moreover, the fact there is no time limit for some abortions also seems contrary to prevailing medical science about when a foetus can become independent from the mother. It is not enough however to say you can’t have an abortion. A woman may be worried, scared, afraid and alone. They may be homeless or abused, they may be under pressure from others. In all these circumstances it is important that practical help and support is provided, otherwise someone may feel they have no alternative but to have an abortion. The charity ‘Life’ has been providing this help for a number of years. It also supports those who have had abortions. Please see <https://lifecharity.org.uk/> for further details. It is important to note that though the church says the act of abortion is wrong it is not making a judgement about the person having an abortion.

There are however always exception and these fall under the ‘**Double Effect Rule**’. Here the question is about intention. The principle of double effect means that sometimes one must perform an action that is in itself morally good but may also have an unintended ill effect for which the person is not morally culpable. For example: if someone has uterine cancer and was pregnant, removal of the uterus will lead to loss of unborn life but, that is not its intention. The intention is to save the life of the mother.

6. Is ok to be gay?

The Law

Homosexuality was decriminalised in England in 1967.

The rules about sexual encounter apply to homosexuality as well as heterosexuality. In other words, 16 is the age of consent. Same sex marriage became legal in 2013.

The approach of the Catholic Church is complicated. The following notes try to represent the position of the Catholic Church, as it currently stands. However I need to emphasise again that these are brief summary notes and for a more complete picture you would need to do more research.

- ✧ One of the key articles of faith is that every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and is called into being by God and loved by God. This implies that everyone is worthy of respect. Each person has a dignity by reason of the fact that they are a child of God and each person is capable of revealing something of God to others. For these reasons prejudice and discrimination of any form are completely contrary to Catholicism. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “They (people who feel that they are homosexuals) must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition.” 2358
- ✧ The Church condemns anyone who uses violence in speech or action against people who are homosexual. "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violence in speech or in action such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs.”⁵
- ✧ To label people simply as heterosexual or homosexual is not to do justice to us as children of God.
- ✧ Everyone should be welcomed in the parish. Any group of people who are marginalised or victimised because of who they are, should feel they are welcomed by the Church community. "The Church has a serious responsibility to work for the elimination of any injustices perpetrated on homosexuals by society. As a group that has suffered more than its share of oppression and contempt, the homosexual community has particular claim upon the concern of the Church.”⁶
- ✧ We should not judge others. We are told in the Gospel “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” Matthew 7. Pope Francis said: “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge.”
- ✧ Bearing this in mind we should make every effort to make sure that children understand that all forms of homosexual bullying are wrong and against the teaching of the Catholic Church.

⁵ letter to the bishops of the catholic church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons 1986 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

⁶ An Introduction to the Pastoral Care of Homosexual People Catholic Social Welfare Commission 1979

- ✧ The Church also actively discourages the use of any form of language or humour that might have a homophobic feel. The younger the pupils are, the more we need to emphasise this.
- ✧ However, as children get older, they should also understand the reasons why the Church opposes sexual relationships between those who are not married. In this area the Church is not singling out those who are homosexual. The Church believes that the right expression for sexual activity is between a man and a woman who are committed to a permanent, faithful exclusive relationship.
- ✧ The Church upholds the traditional understanding of marriage and therefore opposes the marriage of same sex couples. The following points may help this discussion. However, for a fuller understanding you will need to reflect on the theology of the body.
- ✧ Feeling that you are more attracted to same sex relationships is not a sin.
- ✧ The Church is however against homosexual sex and homosexual marriage. The reasons for this are based on the following grounds:
 - a) The Church has always taught that the sexual expression of love is intended by God's plan of creation to find its place exclusively within marriage between a man and a woman. The Church therefore cannot in any way equate a homosexual partnership with a heterosexual marriage.
 - b) The sexual (genital) expression of love must be open to the possible transmission of new life.
 - c) This is not discrimination it is simply stating the purpose of marriage, and the place of sexuality within that union.
- ✧ Love is not the same as sex. For those who are married sex will be a part of that love but for all of us love is important. Whoever we are, we are called to be in relationships with other people. "Love between two persons, whether of the same sex or of a different sex, is to be treasured and respected"⁷
- ✧ All of us at times fail to live up to standards set for us. We can at times be selfish. Sometimes fear or loneliness drive us to behave in different ways. At times we can end up using other people rather than putting their needs first. In a pastoral situation when we are trying to communicate the Gospel to those who will not hear it except through us, we need to be careful that we follow Pope Francis' advice and focus on the core of our faith. "Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others"⁸

⁷ Cardinal Basil Hume -A note on the teaching of the Catholic Church concerning homosexuality 1997

⁸ Pope Francis The Joy of the Gospel para 39

7. What does the church say about transgender?

Transgender people have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their sex assigned at birth. For the Catholic Church this is a relatively new issue. (Note: “Intersex people are born with a reproductive, genetic or sexual anatomy that doesn’t fit the typical definitions of female or male. Intersex people are normally assigned a legal gender of either male or female at birth. However, this may not be consistent with their gender identity as they grow up and may result in a desire to change gender roles at a later stage in life. It is difficult to be absolutely certain because births are not always recorded as intersex, but some organisations set the percentage of children born as intersex to be approximately 0.06%”). There is a difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual orientation is used to describe who you are romantically or sexually attracted to whilst gender identity refers to the way you perceive yourself. As young people grow their gender identity can be fluid at times. Some young people simply react against forced or limiting stereotypes - (I don’t want to be a boy/girl in this way or if it means this.....) Whatever the outcomes or reasons, schools have a legal and moral obligation to support young people (and their families) on their journey to discovering who they are.

Findings by the charity Stonewall, say that among trans pupils, nearly one in 10 (9%) have received death threats at school, while 84% say they have self-harmed and 45% have tried to take their own lives because of the pressure they feel they are under. Catholic schools and Catholics in general have a duty to ensure that those people who are transgender feel welcomed and supported.

The Bishop’s Conference of England and Wales reminded us that: “we recognise that there are people who do not accept their biological sex. We are concerned about and committed to their pastoral care. Through listening to them we seek to understand their experience more deeply and want to accompany them with compassion, emphasising that they **are loved by God and valued in their inherent God given dignity. There is a place of welcome for everyone in the Catholic Church**”. Bishops’ Conference April 2018

This issue is complex. At present what the Catholic Church would reject is the notion that gender identity can be fluid. It does not believe that you are free to choose your identity. It does believe that there is a distinction between male and female and that our biology – the way we are created – is part of who we are. It does believe that the notion that gender is fluid, you can simply choose your identity, is flawed. However, the church has called for more research and dialogue.