

The Day Before - Not the Morning After

The first rise in five years in the number of under-eighteens becoming pregnant was recently reported. The UK already has the highest teen pregnancy rate in Europe. Around 8,196 girls under sixteen became pregnant in 2007. Strangely, only the number of girls was mentioned though, presumably, there were just as many fathers involved but perhaps some were older than teen age. And these are only the statistics for those who became pregnant; one can't help wondering how many teenage girls and boys were (and are) sexually active with no resulting pregnancy?

Film footage accompanying news coverage of the report showed a mother (baby in arms) proudly sitting with her three teenage daughters all with babes in arms - and not a father in sight! The message was that this is OK, smiles all round, children having children. The government's response is for there to be more, and compulsory, sex education in schools and to pump an extra £20 million into schemes to help teenagers get better access to contraception and information on the risks of unprotected sex! Note the word "extra". How much is the government already spending? However much it is, it obviously isn't working and so why is their answer simply to throw even more money at the problem? Instead of dealing with the problem literally the morning after, as a society we should be tackling things figuratively "the day before".

Young girls becoming pregnant is hardly a new phenomenon, but the age at which increasing numbers of children (and socially and psychologically that's what they are) are becoming sexually active should be a cause for concern. It surely goes far beyond the usual label of curiosity and some degree of blame has to be placed at the door of how early our society "sexualises" children whether through fashion, imitation, or the general social messages they receive (and, more importantly, the ones they don't). Current social thinking is behind the call for earlier sex education in schools, but the purpose isn't to prevent early sexual activity but, rather, to teach children how to be safely sexually active. What is clearly missing here is the moral message – no one is teaching what is morally right and wrong – but this immediately begs the question as to who should be teaching that message: the government, schools, or churches? Well, let's take a look at each of them.

Certainly government has shown itself to be neither fit nor qualified when you look at the cavalier way it has dealt with other profoundly moral issues such as abortion.

There should be room for hope that at least a partial message is being taught in our schools. The following material comes from the *Teachernet* website:

The emotional and moral dimensions of a sexual relationship will usually be taught within the framework of PSHE (Personal Social and Health Education) and is designed to ensure that sexual relationship education

- recognises the importance of marriage for family life and bringing up children
- keeps unsuitable materials out of the classroom
- is age appropriate
- involves parents fully in its development
- helps to reduce teenage pregnancies.

The guidance goes on to state that secondary schools should

- teach about relationships, love and care, and the responsibilities of parenthood as well as sex
- teach the taking on of responsibility and the consequences of one's actions in relation to sexual activity and parenthood
- provide young people with information about different types of contraception, safe sex, and how they can access local sources of further advice¹ and treatment
- give young people a clear understanding of the arguments for delaying sexual activity and resisting [peer] pressure
- ensure young people understand how the law applies to sexual relationships.

This still leaves open the question as to who is teaching this material, what actual (as opposed to purely academic) moral input there is, and whether in state schools it reflects, for good or ill, the teacher's own personal morality.

Certainly within our Catholic schools there should be no question at all about the moral message being taught. Moral education has to go hand-in-hand with sexual education. The content of the PSHE syllabus needs to be examined with a degree of discernment in light of God's (and the Church's) moral teaching - this has to be our bottom line. Even if teachers are legally required to mention such things as contraception and safe sex, pupils in our Catholic schools should also hear God's (and the Church's) teaching and be left in no doubt that these things are not open to personal interpretation or choice. But once again the question has to be asked as to who is therefore teaching PSHE and, in conjunction with the Catholic RE syllabus, will that moral message be taught?

Then there's the Church. It's very easy to say "The Church should be teaching this moral message" and ignore the fact that in addition to the institutionalised Church (with a capital c), we are all "church" (with a small c) and therefore whatever obligation we may feel the Church has, we also have (as church) and therefore we should all be insisting on and setting a better moral example than

¹ And, of course, this can often include access to contraceptives and the "morning after" pill (which aborts the possible consequences of what went on the night before), without parental consent.

we see in society around us. And this should very much include the so-called “domestic church” of the family, parents being the first educators of their children and especially in the faith.

But, yes, the institutional Church (that is, we priests as the teachers) should be speaking out more and promoting God’s moral teaching more. The fact that, often, we don’t is probably down to the “fear factor”: knowing full well exactly what sort of reception such teaching is likely to receive. To begin with, there is a very evident lack of self-discipline in our society today with the result that people don’t take too kindly to being told what to do or what not to do – even when it is God (or his Church) who is doing the “telling” – in this case the teaching. But then concerns for political correctness(!) and not wanting to drive people away from our churches become the justification for not grasping that particular nettle. But it’s a cop-out, and because we don’t make our voice (God’s voice in fact) heard, our young people listen instead to all the other voices around them. “Everyone” says being sexually active is OK (indeed the norm) and we are failing to say that it isn’t.

These other voices – to which our young people are subjected for more hours in the day than the voices of home, parents, or certainly church - are loud and persistent. Recently I was listening to a radio programme, I don’t remember the topic under discussion, but was appalled at a young woman who rang in and, before God and the world as they say, said: “When I first met my partner, we started having sexual intercourse, as all normal people do of course...” Sadly that says it all. In her opinion, that is *of course* how all *normal* people behave. It is taken for granted and the inference is that there’s something wrong with you if you don’t live that way also. She speaks for our society because that’s what you see in films, on the television and read about in books. It’s hard to swim against the tide.

We have to accept that only a minority of nominal Catholics go to church anymore and so hear what God and the Church are teaching. Being interviewed on a recent programme about the decline of Christianity in this country, a Catholic sixth former said: “I don’t think being a Catholic means going to church – I don’t think you need to do that.” That sort of statement is typical of the approach that many people – adults as well as young people - are taking to their faith. *They* are deciding for themselves what being a Catholic means but, while no one is advocating blind obedience, blind following, we don’t have that authority. God in the person of Jesus Christ (and in and through the Church that he established and which he continues to lead through the Holy Spirit) has taught and shown us what it means to follow him – and especially the vital importance to us of our sacramental life in Christ to which we have access only through the Church. It is unbelievably arrogant to say that we know a better way, in effect that we know better than God.

What the Church teaches (and this will be politically incorrect bad news to some) is that *the sexual act (which is ordered to the good of the spouses and the generation of children) must take place exclusively within marriage. By its very nature the institution of marriage and married love is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring. Outside of marriage the sexual act always constitutes a grave sin and excludes from sacramental communion.*² And in this regard we would also have to take into account Pope Paul VI's encyclical *On Human Life* ("Humanae Vitae")³, but I wonder how often its basic teaching (against the use of artificial methods of birth control, but in advocacy of natural cycle methods and the practice of periodic continence) is included in those PSHE lessons in our Catholic schools or, for that matter, in preparing couples for marriage?

In writing this paper, I was minded to include a reference also to what have been called in the United States "virginity (or chastity) pledges" - young people pledging to abstain from sexual activity - many of which were sponsored by evangelical Christian groups and churches as a way of combating teenage sex, sexually transmitted diseases and the moral decay perceived in society. Studies suggest that teens who take virginity pledges tend to delay sexual activity until an average age of twenty-one (compared to about age seventeen for the average American teen). Surely any move toward later sexual activity is better than our trend toward an earlier age, though from a moral point of view no such activity outside of marriage would be the ideal of course. At least church groups were doing and saying something and, subsequently, so were teenagers themselves given that an important contributory factor in such pledge-taking (in addition to religious background) was peer pressure not to have sex - and that can only be good.⁴

Our young people need help in resisting all the pressures around them to do what is increasingly regarded as "normal"; they need to find like-minded friends to provide peer support in remaining faithful to what they know to be right and respectful of self and of others; and, above all, they need to hear God's moral message emphatically and clearly "the day before" because it will be too late "the morning after". They also need our prayers.

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Do you know a young person who might benefit from reading this paper?

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, from para's 2390, 2353 and 1652

³ Available in booklet form from the CTS

⁴ Such pledges have come in for a lot of attention and criticism in the media because, perhaps, good news isn't very newsworthy and the media is always looking for an angle, a "we told you so" flaw.