

# PROFESSIONAL SEXUAL ETHICS

A HOLISTIC MINISTRY  
APPROACH



PATRICIA BEATTIE JUNG AND  
DARRYL W. STEPHENS, EDITORS

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## Sex and the Pastoral Life

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, a novel overflowing with passion, Louise Erdrich tells the nearly unfathomable vocational tale of a woman who has metamorphosed through three life phases—first, a short-lived effort to wed Christ as Sister Cecelia, which ended when her relentlessly ardent piano playing of Chopin drove the convent inhabitants crazy with sorrow and sent her packing; then, as Agnes DeWitt of rural Wisconsin, seeking food and shelter and finding love from a German farmer Berndt Vogel; and finally, undercover as Father Damien, a Catholic missionary priest, dressed as a man but with the desires of a woman, compelled into service on the remote reservation of Little No Horse. Overtly, Erdrich's book explores the question of what qualifies as sainthood, but my interest lies in the flux and flow of passion, its beauty celebrated but also its necessary boundaries respected and tested.

When Agnes walks unexpectedly into Berndt's hard farm life, she trades housekeeping for a bowl of hot oatmeal, only to ignite in Berndt his own passion to unbind the cloth wound tight around her breasts. Right after she appears hungry on his doorstep, cleans her plate, and utters in her mother's German dialect, "*Jetzt muss ich schlafen* [Now I must sleep]," we read: "So he took her to his bed."

As a woman reader who recognizes in my bones vulnerability and self-protection, I immediately thought "to bed" as in "to ravish." But he doesn't mean it that way. "He took her to his bed, the only bed there was, in the corner of the otherwise empty room," and he retires to the "barn he loved . . . [to] lay awake all night," determined by morning to marry her "if she would have him."<sup>1</sup> She refuses. She has already been unfaithful, although whether to her

1. Louise Erdrich, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 17.

love as a religious of Christ or to the Polish composer, conjured through her keyboard fervor, we cannot say. Either way—once, it seems, is enough.

So begins the ancient tension between desire and constraint that underscores the paradox and lesson that *proper boundaries, respectfully employed, protect and even deepen sexual passion*. Agnes's rationale is merely "her first pawn in a long game . . . the two would play over the course of many months." And he is a more "dogged and ruthless opponent" than she anticipates. In a penultimate move, he agrees to buy a piano, the "sort of thing a husband gives his wife," he says, hoping finally to convince her to wed. Once more she spurns him; she can move to town, she declares, find a room, and support herself by giving lessons. So he yearns, waits, *and* practices. Just as she cannot keep her fingers from pounding out the Adagio of the Pathétique on the arms of the chair, so he cannot "help his own fingers moving" on his rough barn mattress "in faint imitation of the way he would, if he could ever, touch her hips." Only when a side of the house is removed to move the grand piano shipped from Minneapolis into the front room and Agnes sheds every shred of clothes to pour herself into each wrought note, do they both give into love, even if never to marriage. And a deep sexual love it becomes, told in sparingly few but deeply moving details. "Then followed their best times."<sup>2</sup>

Months and miles later, after daringly donning the clothing from a priest found dead in the aftermath of a devastating flood, Agnes becomes Father Damien and travels on to assume the position for which he was intended, and we expect her desires to end. But they do not, even though they are more restricted than ever by duty to her parishioners. Desire reemerges with a "jolt" when she grasps the hand of Father Gregory, an assistant sent by the bishop, the "heat" traveling up her arm "from his heavy palm . . . into her heart." The situation is loaded with contradictions and quandaries: Father Damien willingly despairs "to be discovered" as a woman; Father Gregory fears with an "awful and appalling joy" that his attraction to her (as a "him") marks him among "those whom the Church darkly warned against"; they are both priests promised to celibacy; she is at least temporarily his teacher and superior; yet their bodily attraction is palpable, their pleasure untainted by personal and social distortions, and their clandestine love loyal unto death, unknown to anyone except perhaps a housekeeper rescued by Father Damien from a horrific domestic situation. When they later break bread and confess they "belong" to each other, they feel "spreading from those words a branching fury of impossible difficulty."<sup>3</sup>

2. Ibid., 17, 19, 20, 22.

3. Ibid., 194, 200, 201.

## PROMOTING THE BEAUTY OF PROTECTED PASSION

This third and final passion play of *The Last Report*, like the two before it, raises questions about desire's boundaries that this chapter will not address. Fortunately, other chapters in this book provide guidance for navigating the "impossible difficulty" when passion is fanned into flames in the wrong places. In fact, I can only write this chapter because others here and beyond have underscored the importance of maintaining clear sexual boundaries with parishioners and staff. As a prerequisite to this chapter, I assume readers will have labored over the steps essential to the prevention of the abuse of power. I assume readers are committed to nurturing a healthy professional sexual ethic through study, workshops, collegial consultation, professional supervision, and support networks. This allows me to turn to another essential and overlooked theme—the importance of sustaining a passionate sexual life beyond the professional pastoral life.

My purpose here is to affirm passion within its proper place—intimate, committed, just, and mutual relationships outside one's place of employment. I want to celebrate the beauty of sexual passion protected and promoted within such parameters and explore practices that secure its good. In a word, I argue for clear boundaries within ministry *and* good sex outside one's professional pastoral relationships. I start with my own case, not as representative at all (especially given the quintessentially slow awakening and still naïve and illogically modest nature of my own sexuality), but simply as a place to begin, with all its limitation. I will try to draw some general conclusions from my experience in conversation with resources that have informed my work as a teacher and scholar of pastoral theology.

I envision three groups among the readers of this book. There are those who are passionate, at risk because we are sometimes careless and often over-extended, and hence prone to falling into inappropriate relationships due to poor preparation and inattention to professional sexual ethics. This, I fear, includes most of us. There are those less prone to sexual indiscretion but still in need of greater understanding and enjoyment of the sexual reward within enduring intimate relationships. This group includes a lucky few wise and seasoned clergy. Finally, and regrettably, some few readers of this book may have serious emotional, spiritual, and sexual problems. They may be among those who prey on the vulnerable and need criminal or legal intervention and professional healing to prevent abuse. I write this chapter primarily for people in the former two groups who not only need to maintain clear patterns of professional behavior that prevent sexual violation of those in their care, but

who also seek to sustain a rich and viable sexual life and, ideally, help their parishioners do the same.

Indeed, when I shared my intentions for this chapter with others, one person who regularly hosts workshops on professional ethics remarked that pastors who attend often want sexual education for themselves. While sexuality pervades popular culture, it still seems foreign in Christian contexts. Throughout Christian history, topics like asceticism, celibacy, and even sexual orientation and appropriate sexual boundaries have received more discussion than the pleasures of sex. Most of us do not feel supported in our sexual passions by *either* our Christian communities *or* popular culture, where sexual freedoms and fantasies are paraded and exploited heedlessly. This is unfortunate since Christianity actually has positive contributions to make on the sacramental value of passionate love.

#### GET A LIFE—A SEXUAL LIFE

Sometimes, when we perceive someone as overinvested in work, we say that she or he needs to “get a life.” This is essentially what Mark, my husband, and I learned three decades ago, early in our shared lives as a couple and as ministers, he in a congregation and I in a seminary. *Get a life—a sexual life outside your professional context.*

There, forever emblazoned in my teaching notes on clergy sexual ethics, is the wake-up call: “Pay more attention to your own primary relationships.” Right next to that is another note: “Cancelled anniversary vacation *rescheduled*.” It was the mid-1980s, we were newly married and encountering the first wave of disclosure of clergy sexual abuse. I was developing my pastoral care course. He had just returned from a denominational workshop on clergy ethics, awakened. He learned a lot about prevention, but one priority stood out: Our relationship needed to be sustained. Seems simple enough, but no one had advised us to have more sex until then. Of course, it was about much more than that. Still, contrary to the Hollywood portrait, our sexual life would not automatically flourish without tending. It needed time, space, attention, devotion, and, yes, practice. We rescheduled the anniversary trip we had just crossed off our calendars. So “get a sexual life” not only made its way into my teaching, it became memorialized in our lives. I taught students not to take for granted those treasured intimate relationships outside our congregational or professional context. Without “consistent emotional closeness,” we risk using inappropriate means for meeting such needs.<sup>4</sup>

This seemed counterintuitive to ministerial assumptions about devotion to one's flock. It certainly was counterintuitive to how many women across generations have been raised to suppress our needs for the sake of others. The words of Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach on the “construction of femininity” are as powerful today as when they wrote them three decades ago. A mother's over-identification with her daughter “makes her annoyed with the child for displaying her needs and for not controlling them as she herself does.” Unwittingly, many mothers transmit to daughters the message that there is something wrong with such desires, “something that needs to be kept at bay,” thus providing daughters with their “first lesson in emotional deprivation,” and, I would add, sexual deprivation.<sup>5</sup> Decades of feminist reconstructions of Christian love, from self-denigrating sacrifice to radical mutuality, have made apparent the delicate and rich balance that must occur between self and other in the give and take of any significant relationship, whether between intimate couples or a minister and her congregation.

This balance cannot be sustained if one doesn't even know one's desires. As Polish psychologist Alice Miller makes apparent in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, those who go into helping professions are precisely those who have learned well how to take care of others' needs by suppressing their own, thus perpetuating a cycle of further narcissistic wounding.<sup>6</sup> Ministers who meet repressed needs for love and admiration by trying to keep everyone happy face serious challenges in their congregations. In the prototypical struggles of dependency, authority, and power in churches, the “personal authenticity of the minister, priest, or rabbi is the greatest strength,” according to Episcopalian pastor John Harris.<sup>7</sup> In a nutshell, one must know one's desires and one must learn to express them openly and appropriately.

4. I was especially struck by the overlooked importance of the middle term of “Value” of Lloyd Rediger's acronym PREVENT, which stresses *preparing* for appropriate behavior before challenging circumstances arise; developing a *regular* or consistent pattern of proper behavior; establishing a means of *evaluating* one's accountability with congregational leaders; *valuing* our need for intimacy and close relationships; striving for *excellence* and joy in ministry; sustaining support *networks* with peers; and remaining *terrified* of the traumatic consequences of clergy malfeasance. See G. Lloyd Rediger, *Ministry and Sexuality: Cases, Counseling, Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) and G. Lloyd Rediger, *Beyond the Scandals: A Guide to Healthy Sexuality for Clergy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 133–34.

5. Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, *Understanding Women: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Approach* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

6. Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, trans. Ruth Ward (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

7. John C. Harris, *Stress, Power and Ministry: An Approach to the Current Dilemmas of Pastors and Congregations* (New York: Alban Institute, 1997), 3.

Knowing and affirming passion is not just a psychological necessity. It is also a theological mandate. In an article on the church and sexual violence, one sentence from Catholic ethicist Christine Gudorf's assessment really resonates with me: "If the church had done a better job of teaching how marriage is sacramental—and how central sexual pleasure is to the spiritual life and growth that characterizes the vocation of marriage—the sinfulness of sexual violence would be much clearer than it presently is."<sup>8</sup> That is, if we truly celebrated sexual passion in its proper place, sexual violence would stand out as abhorrent by contrast. Gudorf went on to write an entire book on pleasure as an essential component of a Christian sexual ethic. On a mission that extends to recent writings, she has become bolder and clearer: "Sex—good, frequent, mutually pleasurable—is as vitally important to the vocation of marriage as reception of the Eucharist is to membership in the church community. One of the tasks of the church should be to help make marital sex more pleasurable."<sup>9</sup>

This last claim rests on a Catholic understanding of marriage as a means of grace comparable to the Eucharist in dispensing divine life, with sexual intercourse as integral to the bestowal. Admittedly, most Protestants recognize only two sacraments, and marriage is not among them. But this doesn't make Gudorf's blessing of pleasurable sex any less crucial for Protestantism. Marriage remains for Protestants a Christian vocation, and many recognize the sexual passion at its heart as capable of conveying God's love.

Of critical note: I am *not* claiming that sex and sexual pleasure is *reserved for marriage*. This important question belongs to a different text with a larger agenda. I am claiming, however, that *the mandate for sustaining a good sex life beyond the congregation belongs not only to the married; it pertains to all who minister, whether single, vowed celibates, or married*. My agenda here is simply to affirm sexual passion within its proper place: intimate, committed, just, mutual relationships outside one's place of employment. These parameters may not necessitate marriage, even though they do include ideals common to marriage. In her extensive work on just love, Christian ethicist Margaret Farley spells out the norms necessary to morally good, intimate relationships. They must entail no unjust harm, free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice.<sup>10</sup>

8. Christine E. Gudorf, "Sexual Violence: It's Sinful to Remain Silent," *SALT: Catholic Journal of Social Justice* (May 1993): 10.

9. Christine E. Gudorf, "Graceful Pleasures: Why Sex is Good for Your Marriage," *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Kieran Scott and Harold D. Horell (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 124.

## PRACTICES FOR THE LONG HAUL

How does one have a healthy sexual life outside one's ministry? I am not a sex therapist or expert or even someone that is well-informed about sexuality. Worse, I have fit so well the women Eichenbaum and Orbach describe that I struggled in the early years of marriage to give into pleasure and made sex difficult. My impulse to chase and kiss boys as a young girl had been shamed into hiding long ago and had to be reawakened and welcomed back. Nonetheless, I can speak to the challenge and parameters of what makes for a good sexual life through its fits, starts, and flourishing in my own. I list in no particular order practices that have played an important place for me and my husband. When I step back, I see that these are actually suggestions for a loving relationship more generally and not just in the bedroom.

### REMEMBER THAT SEXUAL PRACTICE MATURES OVER THE LONG HAUL.

So many Hollywood films make sexual ecstasy look easy. People appear naturally to know just what to do. Although biology serves as a rudimentary guide in many practices that appear inborn (for example, nursing), most such proclivities take practice and learning. With time, sex can get better, not more boring.

### WELCOME THE FREEDOM THAT COMES WITH LONG-TERM COMMITMENT.

Why does sex sometimes get better with time? Comfort and trust come with time. Sometime during the first decade of marriage, our sex life shifted. Perhaps our egos were less fragile as we left behind graduate study and early years establishing ourselves in school and congregation. Perhaps it was the renewed commitment we made once we had kids (if we had kids, we had to stick together), the richness that can accompany sex in pursuit of procreation,<sup>11</sup> or just knowing the other's body and pleasures more clearly. Or more basic, Mark got a vasectomy and I no longer had to fool with the unpleasantness of mood-altering hormones, a slippery diaphragm, or an IUD that caused bleeding. Whatever the reason, a more genuine letting-go surprised us when it appeared. Trusting the relationship more deeply allowed us to recognize that

10. See Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

11. See Cristina L. H. Traina, "Papal Ideals, Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), 273–274. She writes, "Other than childbirth, I can think of nothing that compares with the physical, psychological, and spiritual exhilaration of intentionally procreative lovemaking" (273).

any particular failure—the kind that stopped sex and left us upset, unsatisfied, frustrated, sickened—was relative, as one of many and surely better times. So, covenanted boundaries of certain kinds can deepen passion.

#### PRACTICE FORGIVENESS.

The Christian idea of forgiveness of self and other has as key a role to play in one's sexual life as anywhere. Failure is inevitable and recurring, even if it occurs less frequently as "practice (supposedly) makes perfect." When Gudorf says, "even in loving marriage, sex does not always function ideally,"<sup>12</sup> I laughed and thought, "Not always? How about *never* (even in marriage)?" We have had amazingly wonderful times. But we have had our fair share of frustrations, especially early on. Grace goes a long way.

#### LOVE YOUR BODIES IN ALL THEIR IDIOSYNCRASIES AND ODDITIES.

This is a hard one for almost all of us. We are at odds with our bodies, no matter how "beautiful" by cultural ideals. Gender and race studies show the horrific distortions of self-perception caused by cultural stereotypes about body weight, color, shape, and so forth. No body part is left untainted. Size wields such a huge and destructive influence here—big breasts and penis, small butt, belly, and nose. Christianity defies this. In the *imago Dei*, no one is ugly. Moreover, the power of sexual love to counter this is partly what makes it sacramental (if not formally a sacrament). It affirms creation and paves the way for God's grace.

#### TAKE RISKS, HAVE FUN, PLAY, AND ENJOY TENDERNESS.

Although two separate categories, I put fun and tenderness together because they both bring to mind intimate practices of our own making, practices I imagine readers might appreciate knowing but those who know us well would rather I didn't share (children, students, colleagues). These practices are personal (for example, how he touches my neck bone, how I kiss his eyes). Imagination and gentleness are what is essential, not any particular actions or techniques. Touch, the most undervalued of senses, has a special place.

#### PURSUE MUTUAL PLEASURING.

In 1993, Mary Pellauer penned a daring essay on female orgasm that puts women's pleasure and mutual pleasuring at the center of sexual ethics as a moral mandate.<sup>13</sup> Although sex play alternates between giving and receiving, the overall aim is a deep mutuality. I doubt this can exist easily without a wider

mutuality in the relationship that distributes domestic and public workload as equitably as possible. Here and in bed, mutuality fluctuates over time. Seldom is any division of labor instantly and easily mutual. Rowan Williams, formerly the Archbishop of Canterbury, describes the dynamics: "My arousal and desire must become the cause of someone's desire. . . . We are pleased because we are pleasing."<sup>14</sup>

#### KNOW YOUR OWN BODY NEEDS AND DESIRES.

The long legacy that labeled masturbation sinful reflects just how far the church went in discouraging sexual self-knowledge, portraying such knowledge as fundamentally selfish and unnatural and viewing pleasure as an unnecessary evil on the way to procreation. The result is an ignorance that actually inhibits joyful procreation rather than sustaining moral holiness. I learned more about what my body is telling me through bearing, birthing, and nursing children. It also helps to remember that we need physical, and not just genital, intimacy (for example, touch and affection).

#### MAKE TIME AND DEVELOP ROUTINES.

For practicing Jews, sex is a *mitzvah*, a commandment that married couples are obliged to observe. Its purpose is to reinforce the marriage bond on a regular basis. Sex is "a source of tremendous energy . . . that overflows on others," as Gudorf says. Her kids were sometimes inclined to notice "when either my husband or I was tense and irritable" and "suggest that he or I entice the irritable one into a 'little nap,'" their family euphemism for a "retreat to our bedroom."<sup>15</sup> Were all families so open about parental need for love making, it might head off more feuds. Some of our family vacations were less happy precisely because they disrupted routines that had evolved, from late-night weekend sex when our kids were little (and asleep) to early-Saturday-morning sex when our kids were older (and asleep). Routines change with circumstances (for example, children) and abilities (for example, aging).

13. Mary D. Pellauer, "The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm: Toward Sexual Ethics That Celebrates Women's Sexuality," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 (Spring-Fall, 1993): 161–82.

14. Rowan D. Williams, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 312, 313.

15. Gudorf, "Graceful Pleasures," 129.

12. Gudorf, "Graceful Pleasures," 128.

## RIGHTLY ORDERED PASSION

Passion drives Erdrich's book and, indeed, makes life itself worth living. Unfortunately, the church has trouble with passion. Theologians have worried incessantly about all kinds, not just sexual. Passion is indelibly linked with the body, which is also deeply mistrusted. The worry and distrust are not without sound reasons. Untutored, unmonitored sexual desire, like religious zeal itself, can go grossly awry, injuring everyone in its destructive wake. Early church father Augustine, while frequently blamed for the excessive anti-sexual leaning of the tradition, was at least on to something when he saw the value of rightly ordered desire and placed love of God at the epicenter.

Unfortunately, this insight was accompanied by other convictions that malformed Augustine's legacy—like antipathy toward physical pleasure and its equation with sin, fear about losing control over one's body, and obsessive repression of sexual passion. This antipathy had disastrous results and was further distorted in North America by sixteenth-century Puritanism and nineteenth-century Victorian ideals, leading to Freud's quintessential "return of the repressed" in all manner of inappropriate behavior. This leaves all of us, but especially those called into ministry, at risk of misusing and abusing the passion each of us naturally possesses.

Fortunately, this is not the whole of Christianity or the right reading of the gospel. Christ's embodied passion, the story of Jesus' love for people despite the political pressures of the world around him, stands at the center of our faith. Incarnation itself affirms creation and God's eagerness to assume human form on our behalf, including sexual yearning. Theology is ultimately "love-talk"—talk about love-in-practice—in Marcella Althaus-Reed and Lisa Isherwood's vivid words.<sup>16</sup> Although I cannot easily resolve the ethical dilemmas that run through the three scenarios of Erdrich's book, I can with confidence affirm her blessing of desire. Most of us can and should avoid the "branching fury of impossible difficulty" without missing out on what lies behind it—a love located deep within passionate bodily desire.

16. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid, "Introduction: Queering Theology: Thinking Theology and Queer Theory," in *The Sexual Theologian: Essays on Sex, God, and Politics*, ed. Isherwood and Althaus-Reid (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 2.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What assumptions do you harbor about sexual passion? What assumptions do you hold about the relationship between Christian faith and sexual pleasure?
2. What did you learn from your own upbringing, and from your parents in particular, about your own sexual desires?
3. What do you think about Alice Miller's view of helping professionals as gifted in meeting others' narcissistic needs while repressing our own? Or what do you think about Eichenbaum and Orbach's portrait of women as learned in depriving ourselves for others' sake? How do these images fit (or not fit) your own experience?
4. Why hasn't the church made a place for open conversation about sexual passions and pleasure? Can you imagine ways to create in church an environment that affirms the potential gracefulness of our sexual desires? How might scripture and tradition be (re)read?
5. What practices have you developed to sustain a healthy intimate sexual relationship outside your place of employment? What impediments have you encountered?

## RECOMMENDED READINGS

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