

CULTURAL AND MORAL CHALLENGES FACING THE CHURCH

HIV/AIDS, ABORTION, PORNOGRAPHY

Culture generally refers to patterns of human activity and symbolic structures that give such activity significance. It denotes the whole product of individual, group or particular society. It includes technology, art, science, as well as moral system and the characteristic behaviors and habits of a particular society. Culture is also the way people live in accordance to beliefs, language, history, or the way they dress.

Moral involving right and wrong: relating to issues of right and wrong and how individual people should behave. It's also derived from personal conscience: based on what somebody's conscience suggest is right or wrong, rather than on what rules and regulations, the established laws or the Bible say should be done.

Recent research conducted in some of our churches in West Africa, has proved that the church is facing some cultural and moral challenges. Some of these moral challenges the church is facing are:

- HIV/AIDS (Human Immuno deficiency virus/ Acquired Immune deficiency syndrome)
- Abortion
- Pornography – books and media
- Sex education.

HIV/AIDS

Since the advent of HIV/AIDS, initially, the church has showed some reluctance to get involved in the debate about the epidemic and the fight against it. HIV/AIDS has been considered as God's punishment for the immoral corruption of humankind, a judgmental attitude which one hopes is no longer prevalent. Most of our churches found it embarrassing to speak and educate concerning this issue.

BREAKING THE CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

As HIV/AIDS is largely a human sexuality issue, it is urgent to look into our attitude towards sex. Unless this changes, our fight against HIV/AIDS will become increasingly difficult. We often find that when we speak about sex in public, we are faced with comments like, “don’t talk about sex, we are Christians” or “don’t talk about sex, we are Africans.” If we are serious about fighting the epidemic, we need to tackle this conspiracy of silence firmly and resolutely.

The church, as a body that claims to be the conscience of humanity and the custodian of moral values, needs to lead in the campaign to break the conspiracy of silence. But because of the history of silence on sexual matters, except to condemn, the church finds it difficult to open up. One Pastor says that when people turn to the church for direction in sexual matters, they are usually met with stony silence or a counsel of repression. He concludes that silence is no counsel and repression is bad counsel.

And because we have categorized HIV/AIDS as punishment for sinful living, the church has further marginalized the “clientele” it is supposed to serve. In most areas of our communities the issue of silence is compounded by both our cultural socialization and spiritual or theological perceptions. It is important, therefore, to focus on these two factors and see how they contribute to the silence on sexual matters.

The Ambivalence of Culture

As a transmitter of values and moral code, culture has undoubtedly played a significant role in ensuring that posterity knows what is acceptable and what is not. Contrary to the racist opinion that some people have always been promiscuous, their cultural signposts indicate that people in general have been proud of their good moral behavior. Most of the tribes in West Africa countries (precisely my country Ivory Coast) know what is culturally

acceptable as right. For example, a young woman who is discovered to have lost her virginity before the wedding is said to have caused shame for her people.

To ensure that young girls kept their virginity, some clans in the northern part of the country make virginity tests. In the modern-day culture of human rights such exercises are discouraged, but it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the significance of their background.

Another important cultural institution that helped in the teaching of sexual behavior to young people was the homes. Young women and men were taught how to prepare for adult life, how to relate to people of the opposite sex and, in some tribes, how to have sex by simulation. Penetration was firmly forbidden until marriage.

In most of our tribes speaking about sex in public is considered culturally taboo. If you do so, you are bound to be called names. Even those who try seriously to address sexual matters are shouted down, and it is worse if you are a church minister. Pastors are expected to speak about, salvation, heaven and God and if they speak about sex, it is in hushed tones behind closed doors. They are afraid that the congregation will think that they are canal; or their superior finds them speaking openly about sex they will be disciplined or suspended. Consequently, church ministers end up being simply agent of culture rather than ambassadors of the truth – the Bible principles. The conspiracy of silence continues.

The challenge to break the silence about human sexuality needs to be faced if we are to succeed in talking about HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the best place to break that silence is in the home. The book of Proverb says, “Train a child the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Pr 22:6). Parents must feel free to talk openly about sex to their children and allow them to ask questions. Most parents have abdicated their responsibility to give sex education to children in the hope that school teachers and the mass media will fill the void. Nothing on earth can substitute for parental guidance. Before our children hear about sex anywhere else, they need to hear about it first at home.

We suspect the reason parents are ashamed to talk about sex to their children is that because marital partners themselves are ashamed to talk about it to one another. In marriage, many people are afraid to discuss about their sexual problems openly because they do not want to hurt the other partner. Some secretly resolve to be involved extra-maritally. If nothing helps, they may end up divorcing their partners. Often, after the divorce, people talk about the real reason why they separated from their partner.

THE DEMONIZATION OF SEX

The reason why the church finds it difficult to handle sex and sexuality-related issues is because we have considered sex as belonging to the domain outside the sovereignty of God. Though we may find it hard to admit, it is true that the secular world, including the church regard sex as belonging to the devil – something that is associated with darkness, evil and wickedness. The church seems to be comfortable with the fact that sex education is the responsibility of the government and the schools. It remains a taboo for the church. Even our cultures have contributed to the present state of affairs.

The demonization of sex has a long history in the Christian church. The tragic separation of sexuality and spirituality can be traced back to some prominent theologians in church history. Augustine, for example, in the City of God views human sexuality in a negative way. He calls sex the “shame, which attends all sexual intercourse”, “evil of lust” (even in the marital bond), “sometimes the impulse is an unwanted intruder.”¹ He even suggested that Paul’s warning, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God” (1Th 4:3-5 NIV), should be interpreted as meaning that a man who desires holiness would prefer if possible to beget children without lust of this kind.

¹ “The Other Journal – A sinful doctrine?”
Sexuality and Gender in Augustine’s Doctrine of Original Sin, Part 1 : www.theotherjournal.com/article.php?=169 (accessed 20 September 2007).

To this day many Christians feel that their sexuality is nature's strongest competitor for their loyalty to Christ, the reasoning being that a Christian cannot love God and sex.² Smedes believes that such people allow their feelings to tell them that sexuality is not a gift of creation, but a bitter fruit of the fall. Such a view ignores the fact that biblical authors affirm human sexuality and see sex and sexual pleasure in marriage as God's gift to be enjoyed.³

HOW CAN WE HELP THE CHURCH?

HIV/AIDS has for a long time been associated with the West. Many find it acceptable to deal with sexual issues using a Western language, whether it is English, French or Portuguese etc. Without trying to be overly subjective, we have found that using our mother tongue in communicating a sex message, whether to young or old people, gets them begin thinking and participating on the subject. When we name sex related object by their vernacular names people tend to listen.

It is true that some spiritual and cultural bigots may categorize such an approach as vulgar and insulting, but if we do not people listen, we need to resort to theologically and culturally unorthodox methods that may be ecclesiastically and culturally frowned upon but biblically inoffensive. Explicitness is not necessarily sinful, as some may want to believe. This will hopefully open a way for husbands and wives, parents and children and church communities to talk openly about sex. In our fight against HIV/AIDS, it is critical to view human sexuality positively and thus allow the light of Scripture to shine upon that area.

Teaching and talking about our sexuality is an explicit acknowledgment that, as much as we are spiritual people, we are equally human. Talking about sex need not lead to sexual corruption. It should be viewed as a mechanism for airing thoughts and feeling in the hope of creating an environment in which people can express their feelings without experiencing guilt. The suppression of sexual feeling often leads to behavior that is not in line with ecclesiastically accepted belief and practice. The need to break the silence around human

² Lewis B. Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, (Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans, 1976), 77.

³ *Ibid*, 77

sexuality and HIV/AIDS is long overdue and the best place to do is with those who have the task of teaching and preaching the good news.

ABORTION

The most divine gift bestowed by God upon mankind is the gift of life itself, and throughout the centuries the sacredness of human life has been indisputable by responsible men and women of all persuasions.

We are currently confronted with a controversy surrounding the liberalization of abortion statutes stemming from the initiative of various groups and individuals whose actions, although predicted upon sincere and humanitarian motives, are nevertheless in conflict with divine law. Their position evolves from the general contention that the termination of unborn human life is justifiable when medical opinion believes there is substantial risk that continuance of the pregnancy would impair the physical or mental health of the mother, or that the child would be born with grave physical or mental defects, or if the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest.

It has been the position of the Church that the taking of unborn life is morally wrong. This is based upon divine law which is the most difficult law for man to comprehend for it transcends the boundaries of human frailty due to its source of divine authority. It has been argued that no law is perfect, and man in his diverse interpretations of the law is continually reminded of his human limitations. Even in such basic law as "thou shall not kill" we can take no pride in its exceptions which justify war and self-defense, for they serve only to becloud our unceasing efforts towards shaping man in the image of God. This same principle of exception also extends to the unborn child. When the unborn child places the life of its mother in jeopardy, then and only then can this life be sacrificed for the welfare of its mother. To move beyond this exception would be transgressing man's duty in the protection of human life as understood and interpreted by some of our churches.

We are profoundly aware that the discipline of divine law sometimes creates inequities that are difficult for human comprehension to accept, but the eternal values of divine law were not created for a man, but for mankind.

The solution to our vexing problem of an increasing need for abortion does not lie in reinterpreting the law to meet the needs of our present day morality, but rather challenges us to find more effective means of living up the high standards of divine law which is the eternal protector of human life.

We give glory to God for creating man in His image, and we offer humble thanksgiving that in his unending search for knowledge and truth man is proving worthy of this divine gift. With the great advances in human achievement, especially in the realm of medical science, we are fully confident that the welfare of both the born and unborn are being drawn closer to the day when complications of pregnancy and abnormal birth will go the way of many diseases which have been overcome and are now conspicuous by their absence.

Only by our unrelenting efforts to override the age-old temptations that beset the citizens of any society blessed with bounty and abundance will we subdue the plethora of problems that now besiege us, and of which abortion is only one.

It is firm conviction that one day the laws of God and man will coincide, and toward the achievement of that divine day of destiny we pledge ourselves to the protection of human life, born and unborn, as a sacred trust of man's eternal covenant with God.

PORNOGRAPHY

The unprecedented flow of pornography in our country confronts us both as Church persons and as concerned citizens. Religion and morality are indispensable supports of our form of government. Pornography constitutes a vicious assault on those supports. It dehumanizes the human person, reduces him to an animalistic level, and is therefore contrary to the will of God. It is destructive of the institutions of marriage, and so of the family. It is destructive of love, preaching a doctrine of ugly lovelessness to our children.

Religion and morality are the resources on which our government must draw. When we look at the freedom with which pornography flows today, when we look at our spiritual and moral capability, then we see a depletion of that capability.

We are equally concerned about the crime of pornography as citizens. We see how it adds to the soaring crime rate. There are so many areas in our cities where people no longer have the use of their streets because of this feat to walk them.

Contrary to the view expressed by some, pornography debases society and its growing influence through the television films, pornographic books, internet threaten our view of life and all that true religion teaches about human relationships. As pornography has grown in popularity its content has worsened considerably. Much of it now portrays violence, degradation and humiliation in addition to explicit sexual content. Common pornographic themes now include sadism, incest, child molestation, rape and even murder.

HOW CAN WE HELP THE CHURCH?

We must stop looking through our fingers as if to say this cannot happen with our people. It already has. Let us become aware of it. Pray that we may be all of one mind and accord before God. We must stop the degeneration of the term sex and return it to its proper light taught by the Church:

1. This spirit can be accomplished by realizing these facts and urging our spiritual leaders speak out on the subject.
2. We can draw attention to the smut rackets in our communities by the spreading of valuable information about them which are accessible form such publications as The Readers Digest.
3. The church writes letters to the government to restrain the production of such materials.

4. The local chapters of our organizations can form committees who will investigate their local distributors of books and movies and should such pornographic materials be available, try to discourage such businessmen from distributing it.
5. In many communities there are already groups which have been organized to challenge the spreading of his trash. Our local churches should do everything possible to aid these groups.

SEX EDUCATION

For those who would introduce sex education into the schools, the question of values, norms for sexual behavior should be the key problem. It is important that sex education not be reduced to the mere communication of information. Rather, this significant area of experience should be placed in a setting where long-tested human, personal and spiritual values can illuminate it and give it meaning. In such a setting, we are convinced it is not only possible but necessary to recognize certain basic moral principles, not as sectarian religious doctrine, but as the heritage of Christian morality.

The challenge of resolving this problem of values in a pluralistic society makes it all the more imperative that communities planning to introduce sex education into the schools not only call upon educators to become involved in decisions about goals and techniques, but also invite in our situation parents and Pastors, Clergy in the community to take part in shaping such a curriculum.

HOW CAN WE HELP THE CHURCH?

To those groups responsible for developing school and community programs in sex education we suggest the following guidelines:

- a) Such education should strive to create understanding and conviction that decisions about sexual behavior must be based on moral and ethical values, as well as on

considerations of physical and emotional health, fear, pleasure, practical consequences, or concepts of personality development.

- b) Such education must respect the cultural, familial and religious backgrounds and beliefs of individuals and must teach that the sexual development and behavior of each individual cannot take place in a vacuum but are instead related to the other aspects of his/her life and to his/her moral, ethical and religious codes.
- c) It should point out how sex is distorted and exploited in our society and how this places heavy responsibility upon the individual, the family and institutions to cope in a constructive manner with the problems thus created.
- d) It must recognize that in school sex education, insofar as it relates to moral and religious beliefs and values, complements the educations conveyed through the family and the church. Sex education in the schools must proceed constructively, with understanding, tolerance and acceptance of difference.
- e) It must stress the points of harmony between moral values and beliefs about what is right and wrong that are held in common by the major religions on one hand and the generally accepted legal, social, psychological, medical and other values in common by service professions and society generally.
- f) Where strong differences of opinion exist on what is right and wrong sexual behavior, objective, informed and dignified discussion of both sides of such questions should be encouraged. However, in such cases, neither the sponsors of an educational program nor the teachers should attempt to give definite answer or to represent their personal moral and religious beliefs as the consensus of the major religions or society generally.
- g) Throughout such education human values and human dignity must be stressed as major bases for decisions of right and wrong; attitudes that build such respect should be encouraged as right, and those that tear down such respect should be condemned as wrong.

- h) Such education should teach that sexuality is a part of the whole person and aspect of is dignity as a human being.
- i) It should teach that people who love each other try not to do anything that will harm each other.
- j) It should teach that sexual intercourse within marriage offers the greatest possibility for personal fulfillment and social growth.
- k) Finally, such a program of education must be based on sound content and must employ sound methods; it must be conducted by God fearing teachers and leaders, qualified to do so by training and temperament.

Conclusion

God loves our physical body and it is very precious to Him. Jesus showed God's love for our bodies when he healed so many people. God has a plan and purpose for our life that involves our physical body and that commenced from when we were within the womb. He is better than ultrasound- he sees us unformed body in the womb with the eyes of love. God does not behold us with impersonal detachment or scientific curiosity. There is nothing such as "just a foetus" to Him; the child in the womb is a person he loves in progress towards plans He has made (Jn 9:1-5).

No matter what the circumstance of our birth were, whether we are wanted or unwanted, planned or unplanned, loved or abandoned or rejected there is one who was watching all of this and yearning for us. God states His care and love for our body in Psalm 139 where David says we are fearfully and wonderfully made and that our physical bodies are amongst the concern of His thought:

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praised you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thought, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grain of sand. When I awake, I am still with you (Ps 139: 13-18).

Some abortion cases are understandable and regrettable. Abortion to save the mother's life may be required in some cases. In such cases there should be a sense of sorrow that the abortion has had to be performed and should not be taken lightly. Christians may choose to carry such children to term as a result of their faith; however, people who do not share our faith may take a different option without excessive guilt.

As Pastor the main reason we have come across for abortions are economic, family pressure and spite - taking revenge against a husband or lover. None of these reasons are good enough for taking the life of a child that could be loved. Bible says in Luke 1:39-45 that Mary went Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. It happened that when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary that the baby leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. It goes on to say that Elizabeth then being filled with the Holy Spirit prophesied over Mary and said,

“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, but why is this granted to me the mother of my Lord should come to me for indeed as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears the babe leapt in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believeth for there will be a fulfilment of these things which were told her from the Lord.”

This whole account is a clear demonstration of the spirit being within the foetus from the time of conception. In Jeremiah 1:5, we read that the Lord said to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Phonographs are generally sex advertising which is a form of unconsummated prostitution. The premise is ‘if you pay the money, you get the product.’ Prostitution is condemned in the Scripture. “Do not prostitute your daughter, to cause her to be harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry, and the land become full of wickedness” (Lev 19:29 NKJV).

In I Corinthians Paul says,

“Everything is permissible for me” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me” – but I will not be mastered by anything. “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food” – but god will destroy them both. The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Co 6:12-13).

Our bodies are meant to be under our control. The Corinthians had latched onto grace but not onto discipline and constructive living. Culturally Corinth was sophisticated, debauched and librated it was renowned throughout the Roman Empire for broad minded promiscuity and the use of prostitutes in pagan religious worship was common.⁴ The new convert to Christianity came from backgrounds that naturally turned grace into licence and used slogans as “everything is permissible to me.” So Paul laid down some very basic principle for them concerning our bodies.

In 1 Corinthians 15: 35-55, we know that our present bodies are connected to our eternal bodies just as a seed is connected to the plant that comes after the seed dies. It is the life within the seed that continues on and god gives it a body that he has appointed. Yet the seed is not unimportant, in fact it is vitally necessary and to be prized. We are not to despise our mortal bodies any more than a farmer would despise his seed.

⁴ Alfred Kuen, *Encyclopédie des difficultés bibliques 2è vol. Les Lettres de Paul* (Editions Emmaüs, CH – 1806 Saint-Légier : Suisse, 2003), 12 – 17