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Sex in the conception of the Catholic Church from a cultural anthropological perspective

Introduction

Present paper is based on the research work I have been conducting since 2020. I have noticed that the topic of sexuality in the Catholic Church has a relatively little research background itself, and, it has even less results according to the narrative of the Catholic Church, as it is, in a sense, a tabooer topic within the walls of the Church, as it turned out. I intended to examine the topic of premarital sex and sin based on the interviews of alumni in a particular Catholic school.

I am going to leave the mentioned high school's name in anonymity, because my interlocutors asked me not to name it, since for them, these are intimate topics about which they wish to talk about anonymously, and they do not intend to affect the reputation of the particular school.

Nevertheless, to better delineate the topic, I am going to share a little information that I was allowed to. It is one of the high schools located in the II district of Budapest. I interviewed 18 women and 15 men who were no longer adolescent high school students but shared their stories with me as young adults¹¹ on the research topic.

It is also important to mention that most of them knew each other due to the fact that I asked interviewees from the same school. With this, I also tried to specify the research as much as possible. The conversations were conducted anonymously, in an environment of trust and comfort for the interviewee. The interviews pointed out that the topic needs further elaboration, moreover, specific terms emerged during the research that I would like to further interpret in my study.

It is important to mention that my research basically started from a "closed community" as I conducted the conversations from the same school, class and age group, but as the research deepened and expanded, there were conversations that I had not

¹¹ According to Erik Erikson's stages of self-development, a young adult is a person between the ages of 18 and 40, whereas an adolescent is a person between the ages of 12 and 18. Jeremy Sutton, 2021

planned before, but some of my interlocutors lead me to others, who also wanted to take part in the research as they heard there is an opportunity to *“finally talk about sex openly, without wondering if it is alright to even mention it or not.”* I became aware of the fact, that discussion about sex is something a lot of Catholic “believers” seek, they just cannot find the right platform to it. That is why some unexpected people showed up in the research – they wanted to share.

Sex is a defining element of our physical and psychological reality, as well as our history and culture. It can be said that sex is an ‘evergreen’ topic that can be examined from a different point of view as we can always find newer variables from a sociological and anthropological interpretation.

The Catholic Church as a variable is very interesting in this subject because it represents a very definite teaching and, “system of rules” about sex that is inconsistent with the ideas of the “outside” world regarding sex. I received very serious explanations for all of this in my research, as almost everyone reported that Catholic education about sex was a difficult topic both at school and at home. Whereas the teaching of the Catholic Church prohibits premarital sex and almost anything that can be linked to or reinforces sexual desire, it puts a great deal of pressure, especially on teenagers and young adults.

I would like to mention that ‘prohibition’ as such, especially for certain age groups but in general, can have just the opposite effect on a person, meaning that ‘forbidden fruit’ will be much more exciting for them than if it was not forbidden.

In a study (FitzGibbon, Ogulmus, Fastrich, Lau, Aslan, Lepore, Murayama, 2020:2) about understanding people’s desire on what is forbidden we can read that a ban increases curiosity, which is – in short – the desire for information. This is actually the ‘forbidden fruit effect’, about which we can also read in the study mentioned. The myth of prohibition also appears in our history and literature (e.g., Adam&Eve).

Certain things that are forbidden will be more interesting just because they are forbidden. In fact, the complete opposite can be achieved by this teaching in many situations, even in the case of those Catholic interviewees I asked, the answer was often that they wanted to do something defiantly - in our case sex - because of it being a sort of taboo, a prohibition, and so the lack of information aroused an irresistible desire.

It is very important to point out here that the young adults I interviewed who eventually decided to ‘break’ the rule and live their lives the way they wanted to – in our case they lost their virginity before marriage – mostly still felt under tension, for the

reason of them questioning their decision over the upbringing that they got and “*the way of living their Catholic lives the right way*”, through the teaching of the Church. “*Did I do a sinful thing?*”¹² - The question arose.

Here we run into the field of psychological anthropology, but I find the effect of upbringing on human identity very interesting for further research. It was shocking how decisive the family background, home education in childhood even in adulthood can be, despite the fact that the person might no longer agrees with that specific teaching. The question arises if that fact is only true for people brought up by the teachings of the Catholic Church, any other religion, or everyone?

Towards the end of the introduction, I would like to mention two key elements of the present study, one of which is the word that came up several times during the interviews, “*purity*” – which I found fascinating for further investigation. The other element is the body itself, love and acceptance of our physique, and the difficulties involved in a relationship that did not include sexuality, sexual proximity. In the following, I will analyse these and the previously mentioned topics and issues on the basis of the discussions.

Research methodology

In the following, I would like to explain the anthropological methodology used in my research to describe. The methodology I applied was based on in-depth interviews and community-based, participatory research. Because I myself grew up according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, I attended Catholic schools, I had the basic knowledge and network of contacts that I needed for the research to succeed. Based on all this, I already had a fundamental advantage. By applying the elements and possibilities of community-based, participatory research¹³, I tried to get as close as possible to understand the given community, and also the individual within the community.

We can read in the Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology that like action research work plans supported by anthropologists, CBPR projects use community concepts as a research unit. In addition, CBPR supports, builds and nurtures cooperative

¹² In my study everything that is the narrative of the Catholic Church, I am presenting in quotation marks, and the words spoken during the interviews, which are the respondents' own narratives or specific interview details, are shown in quotation marks and italics.

After some of the longer and meaningful interview details I am going to present the fictitious initials of the conversation partners, whose gender, age and marital status is presented in the Appendix

¹³ CBPR in the following

partnerships with organizations and individuals in that community during the project. Once these relationships are established, the researcher should ensure that the interests of that specific community are raised and represented in the research questions (Bernard and Gravlee, 2015:190)

In addition, CBPR is also intended to be repetitive and reflexive during the research operation. During the collection of information, both the researcher and the members of the community develop research methodologies, on the basis of which they jointly build the future development of the research. For this, of course, it is very important that the results of the research are understandable and accessible to everyone who has participated in some way (Bernard and Gravlee, 2015:190).

However, in order to be able to analyse the community using my own research plan and chosen methodology, I must first define the community itself as such. In Michele F. Fontefrancesco's study, we can read that community is actually a set of individuals who mutually participate in the development of community practices and share the same ideas (Fontefrancesco, 2010:51). One could also say that the community is made up of members of the same territorial group who participate in a common culture - we can read in a study by Max Gluckman (Gluckman, 1947:107) .

Common culture is an important term in the present research, as several of my interlocutors have expressed themselves, mentioning that the Catholic Church is a community, a system with deep roots to which millions of people from different cultures worldwide belong as part of the same subculture. What is more, the group of young adults I examined can be interpreted as part of this own small group and community within this culture, as they attended the same school and received the same teaching about both the general moral views of the Catholic faith and sexual education by the rules of that particular church.

I was able to apply the CBPR methodology in my research, as I went to the same school with most of my interlocutors and got to know each other, I also gained insight into these particular teachings and views in the same way. During my research, I visited church several times, tried getting 'involved' in the teachings and customs of the Catholic Church as much as possible.

Regarding the structure of the interviews, I set up semi-structured interview questions and a guideline, according to which I left some space for the respondents. This way, the conversation shaped itself, new questions and concepts emerged. Basically, I

didn't ask much, I let the respondent direct the conversation themselves, and I only spoke or asked a question if it was necessary. I would like to underline that these were not very frequent situations, my interlocutors were open and talkative, they mentioned some times when I had to ask, they only had a brief confusion or wandering so I tried to lead them back to the matter.

The Catholic Church and sex

According to the official teaching of the Catholic Church, all forms of practicing sexuality before marriage are morally incorrect. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church: 2350) we can read that "an engaged couple is meant to live purity in self-restraint".

It was on this basis that the word "purity" mentioned earlier first emerged, which I will analyse later. Respectively, in the Catechism we can read more in the sense of purity, namely, the "sins against purity". "Impurity (lat. luxuria) is the messy desire or unbridled enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally messy when it is sought out of order for itself, for the transmission of life, and for love" (Catechism of the Catholic Church: 2351).

Based on these, we can see that according to the Catholic faith and teaching, premarital sex, sexual act, or even complacency is wrong, as they are fundamentally not based on passing on life and in many cases not on unconditional love, but on their "own good" and "own desire", appeasing self-desire.

Additionally, in the Catechism we can read about the "sin" of "self-infection," which means the following: "self-infection (lat. masturbatio) is the intentional stimulation of the genitals for sexual pleasure. Both the ecclesiastical Teaching Office — in the constant process of tradition — and the moral sense of "believers" say without uncertainty that self-contamination is in itself and a severely a wrong act" (Catechism of the Catholic Church: 2352).

In my research, I found it important to find out from the respondents whether these precepts described in the catechism were taught to them clearly and understandably at home and at school, or whether these "rules" in some sense always remained semi-obscure.

Most of the responses revealed that although the topic was not entirely taboo, they did not talk clearly or often about sexuality and the specific rules mentioned. What turned

out however, was that most people only knew that *"they shouldn't have sex before marriage"*. Of course, this does not yet include everything that is sexual in nature like *"petting, or occasional masturbation"* – just that sex itself is not allowed. To my surprise, this was mentioned by many of my interlocutors, that the described specific “rules” in the matter were a sort of novelty to them.

My interpretation is that most Catholic youth either do not know how specifically the Catechism articulates it, or they do not even want to know and are simply trying to refrain from premarital sex. Regardless of this, of course, belonging to a certain community also means that the given “rules” and expectations are accepted and shared by the member of the community. And here the question arises on the one hand, who do we call a Catholic? One who obeys all the laws of that specific religion or, one who goes to church, prays, believes in God? And why does one who cannot or does not want to meet certain expectations call themselves a Catholic? The question of why there is still stress about these sexual matters (whether it is/was alright or not) on someone who does not even agree with certain doctrines of the Church is very interesting. Why does someone cling to the Catholic identity who deeply condemns or considers the present teaching to be wrong, for example.

I consider the anthropology of religion to be very important, as our culture, social and self-awareness are both shaped by religion. Religion is part of our history, art, politics. To understand and examine certain-minded people, the symbols and narratives they explain through religion, I need to understand what it means to be religious.

In the study of Clifford Geertz “Religion as a Cultural System” we can read that “For an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them, on the one hand--its model of aspect--and of rooted, no less distinctive "mental" dispositions--its model for aspect--on the other. From these cultural functions flow, in turn, its social and psychological ones.” (Geertz, 1966:44)

From this we can understand that for a religious person the world is not the same place as for a non-religious one. A “believer”¹⁴ who belongs to or wants to belong to this culture must adhere to certain “rules”, expectations, moral norms. We can read in the study of Lawrence Cunningham, which he wrote in Britannica that “two subjects are key

¹⁴ Believer is a word used by the Catholic Church to its followers, and this is also something that the respondents used to describe themselves

to understanding Catholic faith: the preambles of faith and the motivation of faith. The preambles of faith include those rational steps through which the “believer” reaches the conclusion that belief in God is reasonable”. (Cunningham, 2023) Therefore, I understand that the Catholic Church and its “believers” are calling themselves as such, because their truth, their reality is that God exists – in a very real sense.

Religion can thus be said to be a kind of motivation that encourages us to stick to certain things, to meet certain expectations. I would also like to give the example of Geertz, who set out all this in his study, and mentioned that being religious and religion itself is a way to ritual:

“Which brings us, at length, to ritual. For it is in ritual - that is, consecrated behaviour - that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated. It is in some sort of ceremonial form--even if that form be hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle, or the decoration of a grave--that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in men and the general conceptions of the order of existence which they formulate for men meet and reinforce one another.” (Geertz, 1966)

Naturally, all these affirmations are not only about the positive things but also about the fact that for example, “*the enemy*” is common, the image of “*sin*” and “*wrongdoing*” is common. Accordingly, this particular culture also defines certain frameworks within which one is allowed to move, but actions outside these specific borders are defined as “*sin*,” “*sinful*”.

As the Catechism explains these “rules” and “sins” in relation to “purity”, calling them “*sins against purity*,” “purity” itself has obviously been included in the research, and the respondents have either raised it themselves or I have mentioned it so they explained to me what the term meant to them. Based on all this, I would like to continue the paper by explaining and interpreting purity according to the view of the Catholic Church.

Purity or impurity? - interpretations of the meaning of purity

Before delving into my own study and the results of the interviews, I find it particularly important to mention Mary Douglas, who also dealt in depth with purity. In her book “Purity and Danger” we read that when examining the concept of purity, it is not necessary to explain the meaning of the basic concept, but to go deep into the specific symbolic system that gives the concept of “purity itself” to different cultures and subcultures.

In fact, it is not what is pure and what is impure that matters, but what we have learned about certain things. If a child has been taught to always take a bath before going to bed in the evenings to wash away the daily dirt from themselves, going to bed at times without bathing will make them feel 'dirty'. If we learn that we can put our feet on the table and there is nothing wrong with that, we will not find this to be dirty or unclean while others who have not been raised this way will be disgusted by the fact that we eat with our feet on the table.

Douglas follows the same line of thought in her book, in which she captures the notion of 'dirt' and, in contrast to its religious meaning, she underlines its social meaning. In practice, she describes that if we are able to abstract the meaning of "dirt" from pathogenicity, and the concept of hygiene, then its original concept 'loses its meaning' – so we can see that the meaning of "dirt" itself depends on "where it is" (Douglas, 2001:46).

"Purity", or "dirt" in this sense, according to Douglas, is mainly a social concept. Accordingly, in the system in which we grow up, we learn what a given society considers 'good', 'bad', 'clean', 'dirty' and so forth. These things of course, mean different things in different cultures – as I mentioned before.

In the light of all of this, Douglas calls "dirt" something that is not in its intended place – "a matter out of place" (Douglas, 2001:36). Dirt is therefore a thing that does not fit into a given system or situation, is not in its intended place, in a word it is "in the wrong place". Thus, according to the author purity and pollution are matters that fit into a given culture's symbolic system, which defines its interpretations and morale.

Of course, the Catholic Church's conception of purity and impurity also belongs to this line of thought. If we look deep into the teaching of the present religion, we can see that in fact, it is only a matter of understanding its system that is historically long and deep. Sex, according to the Church's interpretation can be "pure" and can be "unclean" – in our case – it can be "in place" and can be "outside of place". According to the system of interpretation of the Catholic Church, marriage is the place of sexuality, and outside of marriage it is incorrect literally "*sinful*", "*a matter out of place*".

The interviews I conducted revealed that many people felt some form of sexuality or sex itself as a "*sinful*" act. Here, of course, another (although also mentioned earlier) variable of the research emerged. Upbringing and family background play an important role in adult consciousness. If the teaching of the Catholic Church is what is considered "*right*" and taught at home as well, these particular norms are going to be part of thinking

as adults, even if the particular person already thinks differently about these specific matters.

I became attentive to it, and also found it very interesting how decisive upbringing is, even for those who ultimately disagreed with the church in a sense, or simply ignored things they could not or did not want to keep. More specifically in our case, they lived a sex life outside of marriage, moved in with their partners, so they went against what their parents' and the Church found right. Many of them however, arose that they still had some degree of "concern" and "pressure," so they could not completely let go of the norms they had "brought from home or the Church."

All of this suggests to me that the issue of purity in question, the "displaced" thing was still not in a "good place". I found it interesting that they said there was "no flawless place for sex" anywhere. It is "outdated" or "unbearable" to maintain virginity before marriage, but many felt tense living a sexual life outside of marriage too. The question arises, what is right then? Where does it belong to? Why did the feeling of "something is wrong" remain? I would like to present a part of an interview to try and explain this, from a subjective point of view, from one of my respondents' words:

"I don't think I can fully explain it because I don't really understand myself either. On the one hand, of course, I am aware of the reason of my decision and am not ashamed about it, but I have always had a question in me that I might best describe with the "what if" effect. I do not know if I would be more or less of a good person if I would have kept my virginity but I am also sure I will not get an answer to that question here in this life anymore. If I want to be really honest, I have to admit that I have a little fear that it might have been a mistake... But of course, I handle this very well 360 days a year, I mostly do not even think about it. But those other five days...Frankly, it sometimes causes me bitter tension." (N.K.)

It is very interesting how she also refers to it as something that she herself "cannot even explain" a complete way. The mentioned "what if" effect though is something that I heard several times during the talks. I became aware of something that I would explain as the fear of the unknown – at least it is what I interpreted from all those things they mentioned as a pressure. A person, who has been brought up and taught according to the Church's norms, may never let go of the thought that the Church in the end, might be right – and in that case, they are not sure where their place will be.

The deepest question that arose regarding all that was "will I go to Heaven? How can one be sure, if sex is such an important matter?" (L.M.) – the woman I had this talk with

has lost her virginity already and is living in a relationship in which they live a sexual life. She mentioned fears of the very end, which in my interpretation is deeply meaningful in light of all the above.

It is very interesting how much importance and "power" Catholic believers give to sexuality. Almost something that goes beyond this world, since a phrase was also said during the interviews that "sex in the correct way brings you to Heaven" – not only because of orgasming, but because sex experienced "with a pure body and soul" is the most real form of "experiencing God here on earth". Accordingly, sex can be sort of a transcendent phenomenon, which I found to be so interesting in light of my research, that I would like to present the related results below, in a new chapter.

Sex as a transcendent

Since in the following I am going to discuss sex in the light of religiosity, I would first like to explain religiosity itself, the meaning of the transcendent. For this, I used the dissertation of Papp Richárd, in which he writes about the present matter.

Papp describes how religion maintains a connection with the reality of transcendence. The reality of transcendence is manifested in our everyday environment. In this sense, in the daily life of most cultures, one can experience the presence of "holy space," "holy time," or people "owning" holiness. The mentioned sacrament and its universal and social manifestations and importance are represented by the religious institutional systems. In this sense, the worldviews of each religion apply to the whole of a given society, or even to the whole of humanity. Based on this, religion is a cultural system that inherently shapes society. In addition, it explains the changes, possible difficulties and crises that arise in human and community life. Religion creates a kind of harmony, a so called "cognitive harmony" between man and the saint, and between man and man, man and community (Papp, 2020:46).

I consider it important to further explain the transcendent as such, as it has often been argued during the conversations of the research that the Catholic faith associates sexual union with the possibility of a transcendent. We can read about this in the Bible, as Papp mentions: "the Biblical teachings are no exception, since the Bible sees in the unification of the two bodies (male and female) the possibility transubstantiation to the likeness of God (1 Mos 27:2–24)" (Papp, 2020:72).

During the interviews, it became clear to me that if a Catholic “believer” actually believes that one of the inherent of sexual intercourse is an icon of transcendent, divine experience, and in a sense divine love, then this act truly has to be “pure”, “sinless”.

This was reported by a male interlocutor who formulated it this way: *"it is very easy to get lost in the realm of human instincts, desire and self-will. As a man, I think it is especially difficult, but of course it is not easy for my wife either. Nevertheless, we both see and find that our sexual togetherness is really pleasant, both physically and mentally satisfying, when we are fully attuned to each other, we both want and wish each other the same way. Sometimes when we get to pray before sex, it makes it all even more beautiful."* (O.O.)

To the question of whether the “presence of God”, “God’s love” in sex can really be experienced, most of my Catholic interviewee’s answer was a clear “yes”:

"It is a feeling that elevates the already perfect sexual gratification to an even greater level. Unspeakable. There and then, we don't need anything more, and I'm no longer me, just as he is neither, we are one. One in God." (N.N.) – Said one married woman during our talk, and explained to me that this state is not as easy sometimes to achieve and that they still are working on it with her husband, even after 6 years of marriage. *"There is no problem with sometimes failing or, in a sense, spoiling this perfect state. The point is to be able to talk about it, to recognize that we made a mistake. Once we discuss it, we both feel much better, and thus we try better to get as close to this divine state as possible next time."* (N.N.)

What I found really interesting, and important to highlight, was that one of my interlocutors, who had problems with her body and had difficulty entering sexuality with her husband because of this (since she lived a “pure life” before marriage and no man ever touched her before her husband), also reported a similar transcendent state: *"it took me a relatively long time to completely surrender myself to sex, and we still struggle today with some difficulty because of it, but when I finally manage to completely let go of my frustrations, I really experience a sort of divine encounter and acceptance in sex. In fact, that is the best thing about it: nothing bothers me, my problems disappear, finally for a while, I manage to accept myself, in fact, I want to be who I am. I think it is mainly because I am not alone anymore, but we are one with my partner, and I get to see myself through his eyes."* (H.A.)

It is very interesting how even this woman with her serious lack of self-confidence and body issues is able to experience the mentioned “perfection”, seeing herself through

"the eyes of her partner". This all shows to me how seriously this *"transcendent feeling"* can form one's feelings and thinking. It is something completely and noticeably real for Catholic "believers".

There are four words worth to mention, which came up during the conversations that two of my interlocutors mentioned about *"pure love"*, living *"pure sexuality"*, the kind of union in which *"God can be present"*.

These four words were *"free," "complete," "faithful,"* and *"fruitful."*¹⁵ My understanding is that sex can only be free for them if the woman and man are already married, so sexual union is possible for them, not something that is "out of place," since sex's place is in marriage and so it is *"free."*

It is *"complete"* when a woman and a man experience sexual union not only by petting, but by concrete intrusion - this is said to be an essential point, since, according to the Church's teaching, petting alone is not a "pure" act.

It is *"faithful"*, since the spouses have already uttered an infinite "yes" to each other in the "sacrament of marriage", so that sexuality itself has been promised to one another for a lifetime.

Last but not least, it is *"fruitful"* because pure sex also means that the couple does not contracept themselves, or if they do (for serious reasons such as illness, financial problems, etc.), they do it with the method of *"natural family planning" (N.N)*, which does not completely rule out fertilization, since no external means are used for this purpose, only nature, the knowledge of the woman's body and biology. The next detail from one particular interview regarding all this is to show and make us understand what all that means to one of my practicing Catholic woman interlocutors:

"Truth be told, my husband and I examine these four points almost every time. Since we both follow the teaching of Pope John Paul II on The Theology of the Body, we strive to conform to this as much as possible and to truly make our sexual intercourse free, complete, faithful, and fruitful. We try to pray before sex and sometimes even after it. There is an unspeakably big difference between two intercourses, when in one we were both physically and spiritually there and so we were able to "involve" God through prayer. We are attuned to each other quite differently at that time, the dynamics of the whole sexual experience is completely different. Those times we can provide this complete union, we actually become

¹⁵ These exact four words were mentioned by five of my interlocutors, all of them living in purity. Some others also mentioned them, but did not remember the whole concept of it all.

one, not only physically but also spiritually. And while I have to admit that sometimes I wonder how good it would be if we could have full control over the blessing of children, yet I always remind myself that it's actually a miracle that a child can conceive of the physical love of the two of us at any time. It gives a sort of wholeness beyond this world. It's a miracle."
(N.N)

From this excerpt of this interview, we can see that there are real and fully understandable examples, explanations that sex itself can be a sort of *"transcendent experience"*, and that the four components of *"pure sex"* listed are things that some take seriously, moreover, experience its good effects and benefits.

It was very interesting to hear how much the said couple wanted *"God to be part of their own sexual union"*. All this was explained to me in the most natural way possible, because like everything else, they want to live their sexual life with God as well, and they even explained in detail, what seriously good effects it has on their relationship, their sexual life.

It has also been mentioned that such *"pure"* sexual associations are an *"icon of the Holy Trinity"*, both because they pray to God before and after sex and because they do not use contraceptive methods – meaning that a *"third"* person can any time be *"involved"*, since they could be gifted with child any time this way.

Based on all this, we can understand that for Catholic couples who follow this specific teaching and system of norms within the Church, it is an absolutely living lifestyle that they seek to use in a *"right"* and *"pure"* way.

The teaching mentioned in the interview, which is associated with the name of Pope John Paul II, is called *The Theology of the Body* (Paul II, 2006) This teaching has come to light in several interviews, so it has become clear to me that this teaching is known to most of my interlocutors so probably for many Catholics – both because it has been heard/read about, and because it has already been mentioned by others, so they know more or less about it.

The Theology of the Body is a book written by the Pope himself, which specifically seeks to explain the teaching of the church about sex, why it has certain *"rules,"* a framework for Catholic *"believers"* (and everyone). I understand that he is talking about sex being one of the few earthly acts by which we can know and *"experience God's presence"* (O.O.) and *"infinite love"*. The next part of an interview is to best describe that *"presence of God"* in sex:

"I learned by teaching of The Theology of The Body that I am not guilty of my sexual thoughts and interests. It's all perfectly normal, it just needs to be used well. I finally understood that God does not want to make our lives be miserable for wanting us to see the limits and borders to keep our sexuality pure, but because He wants to elevate it, wants to bring us this bodily experience to levels we would never otherwise be able to understand or live on earth. Sex is much more than only satisfying bodily desires, and even more than simple love. It is something divine, something beyond earth, it is a type of love and belonging that we people are not enough to provide to each other. We need God in it." (H.E.)

Now we can see how it is not only a myth or a gossip, but their reality. Many of my interlocutors presented their thoughts regarding *"God's presence in pure sex"* the same way. It is more to them than only loving each other. They are indeed able to feel God, to meet God through sexual union. Many times, it was mentioned *that "orgasm is best described by God's unearthly love" (L.L.)*. It is a perfect feeling that cannot be *"something that does not come from the Divine" (L.L.)*

It turned out to me that not only they can read this teaching from a book, but there is also a community who pass on the teaching to those interested through presentations and conversations during a weekend, which they consider a sort of retreat. In fact, I have completely interpreted all of this as a platform for both "believers" and potential "outsiders" to talk about sex in the Catholic Church without taboos, asking and answering every question possible.

Needless to say, the Pope's teaching is the foundation, but sex in general, and other forms of it, are the topic during the whole weekend. There is talk of petting, complacency, contraception, abortion, and everything else in light of the Church's teaching. It was mentioned in an interview that these weekends are so well structured and presented by so many honest couples and singles that the current partner of my interlocutor who was completely an outsider of the Church, enjoyed the weekend and understood the teaching that, incredibly, he in the end agreed and convinced himself, followed *"purity,"* premarital sexual abstinence. She mentioned the following:

"Unfortunately, we have parted ways since, but as far as I know, to this day he follows the teaching and continues to live in purity. Maybe I was the way for him to get to know this way of life. God finds a way to reach those who have an open heart." (P.E.)

All this shows to me that not only she feels proud of her ex-partner to find the teaching true and changing his mind about *"purity,"* but she also believes that her role in

his life was to introduce him to that. Her part in his life was to make him change his mind and *"walk on the right way, on God's way" (P.E.)*.

All of these topics have led to further elaboration on how Catholic "believers" are preparing for sexual intercourse. Is there any unusual way they prepare for sex? As it has already been mentioned above that some couples pray together before and/or after sexual intercourse, this was already a result of this question, but I thought it needed further explanation and for that reason I am going to present this further in the upcoming chapter of my research.

Preparing for sexual union

It is important to mention that I have examined two types of answers to this question. I did not necessarily mention this to the respondents, as it was interesting for the research to know which answer they started with, or whether they think of both possible answers at all.

I primarily examined whether preparation is interpreted by the respondents in a physical sense based on the question, or in a mental sense. It was fascinating to me, when someone gave an answer to only one aspect, or when they took either the physical or the spiritual interpretation forward – showing a picture to me on which of the mentioned aspects are in a way "prior" to the other.

What was surprising to me, however, is that while I was more likely to expect men's answers in a physical sense regarding that, a lot of the women I asked answered first in a physical sense. A lot of things were mentioned such as hair removal, having a shower before, scenting, wearing "sexy lingerie."

Many of them first mentioned these preparations in the physical sense. It also came up that *"it is important for a woman to feel good in her body, feel sexy, feel that the man desires her." (O.L.)* - The question arose in me, why? Does the man have physical preparation in the same way, or does it not apply to them? If not, why not?

To answer these questions, I would like to present a special case in which my female interlocutor reported to me, that this physical preparation is something she does but her partner does not, and *"honestly it never even came up." (O.L.)*

The woman in question has been married for several years and along with her husband, they live both their married and sexual lives in accordance with the values of the

Catholic Church. She told me that all of this preparation is a sort of “*compulsion*” because this is what makes her feel ready and prepared for sexual intercourse:

"It never occurred to me that a man should be preparing physically in any sense before sex. It is probably because men don't have to depilate, they don't have to pay attention to certain things, which is common and evident for us women. I love feeling beautiful and desirable, I like wearing a nice underwear or lingerie, and I also like to be clean before and after sex. I think it is a woman's job to always be feminine. Obviously, my husband doesn't go to bed dirty either, but men are much more natural in that sense. I cannot imagine how they should be physically prepared for sex, obviously outside of being clean." (O.L.)

I found it very inspiring how she talked about men being “*more natural*” as they don’t depilate, don’t use makeup, and there is no piece of clothing for men that would necessarily be meant to arouse a woman’s desire.

I find it especially interesting how it all correlates with what we see around us every day in magazines, advertisements and posters. The question arises as to whether a woman should be perfect and desirable in bed as well, because that is what bounces back from all the commercials? Perfect and desirable women in all walks of life - this makes it really hard to keep up, it can really be a compulsion to “*beautify*”. All this, however, proves, of course, that these social expectations and advertisements affect Catholic women and couples in the same way as everyone else:

"Of course I do hair removal and makeup. I have no idea what the church thinks about it, but if we were to regulate this as well, it would be a great and ridiculous issue. I am aware of the fact that using makeup, fake eyelashes and such things are only showing issues like lack of self-confidence, but these are the usual things we are used to...I like to do my make up in the morning, I like to feel pretty before leaving the house. I like to look good even before sex, in fact, sometimes when I feel like I look a bit messy or a little sick and have a cold or my hair is greasy so I really don't feel desirable, I don't have much of a desire for sex." (U.A.)

Needless to say, it all points out that physical preparation for sex is just as important to the members of the group I studied as for anyone. I would still like to emphasize that I find it particularly exciting how all of this has been mentioned in a physical sense only by my female interlocutors, in a very specific and detailed way. The feeling of desirability increases sexual desire, the willingness to have sex. Here I would like to show and underline a detail from an interview of a woman I had a conversation with:

"The truth is, I think my husband always considers himself desirable, there's nothing wrong with his self-confidence. I hardly consider myself desirable, but when sometimes I do, it adds a lot to the success of our sexual intercourse. I think as a woman, we need to work on that. It is important, that we feel desirable and beautiful, or else it is much harder to let go of some of our inhibitions unfortunately, even when it comes to sex." (N.N.)

The latter excerpt from the presented interviews was also given during a conversation with a woman who pointed out that these self-confidence issues are need to be addressed. I found this important to mention because during other conversations, it has been suggested that certain things need to be worked on personally and spiritually when it comes to sex. The following was said in an interview with another woman:

"Sex simply cannot be perfect as long as we have any kind of anxiety about either our own body or the other's. These anxieties must be worked on, they need to be resolved, or we may never be able to experience the perfection that would otherwise be the outcome of the sexual union of a man and woman. For me, prayer helped the most. When we both turned to God everything has changed. I am not ashamed of God, I know that he knows everything about me, all of my beauty and my flaws, so I have nothing to hide. I have learned to accept myself, because both my fiancé and God love me the way I am." (L.X.)

This interview correlates very well with the before mentioned acceptance of the body and one's own reality through "God's love". It is something that gives strength and peace to Catholic "believers" I found it. Also at this point, we have returned to the type of sexual preparation which may start with prayer and proximity to God. For many, it seemed to be unanimously real help, real peace:

"It is also important to mention that we are not always in such a highly elevated mood before or after sex, we do not always pray and always involve God in this way, but we always try to emphasize the infinite and pure love we feel for each other. And even if sometimes this harmony is not something that we can start our sexual intercourse with, after sex we still discuss that it did not work out the way it should have this time. I think when it comes to any kind of preparation or derivation, communication is the key." (H.E.)

I could see, that sex for many of them cannot be a standard activity, it is indeed something very important for their "flawless union". Even if it does not happen the "perfect" way, they need to discuss it, to understand why it was not that "pure". All in all, I can say that although the preferred response regarding sexual preparation for many respondents was in a physical sense, also for many of them, mental fitness, or both, was

just as important. All of this strongly correlates with the sex as a transcendent feeling explained in the previous chapter.

In addition, it has been revealed that beauty, desirability, and hairlessness are especially important for Catholic women - in other words, to meet the norms set by society, despite the fact that the Catholic Church teaches that acceptance of naturalness, our own bodies and the harmony of the two is essential.

I did not mention any of the men's interviews on this question yet because there was no explicitly interesting answer in a physical sense, only in a psychological sense. Among men who agreed with the teaching of the Church, several mentioned the *"importance of prayer"*.

I have had the good fortune to talk to several men who live their relationship/marriage according to the teaching mentioned earlier, according to *"purity."* They also mentioned the Pope, for many of them this topic was not new at all, in fact, I was talking to someone who had read the book before. He talked about *"purity"* and preparing for sex in the following way:

"Naturally, this is not the easiest way. But our Lord Jesus Christ never said that it was easy to follow him. Nevertheless, I know and believe that everything we are experiencing now has a deep meaning we will once reach to understand. For example, for the reason that we have waited until marriage with sexual intercourse, we brought something new into our marriage, something exciting, a real gift to each other that we can explore together and it was wonderful for us to discover and experience this together. We try to say a brief prayer at least occasionally after our intercourses. It means a lot to know that it is all God's will and that we do not want to exclude him from our bedroom either." (E.K.)

These words gripped me a lot, not only because it is not something one would often hear anyone talk this way, that *"they do not want to exclude God from their bedroom,"* but also because although I slipped past a thing mentioned in an interview earlier, at this point I was reminded something that I found very interesting. In that mentioned interview it was said that the place of the crucifix is in the bedroom, above the couple's bed - here I became aware that the reason was the same reason as in the latter interview. For this reason, to understand, I asked my female conversation partner I had that specific interview with before, and said:

"Yes, of course there is a crucifix over our bed so we will never forget that God is in the bedroom too, He is part of every area of our lives, part of our sexuality. After all, we got sex from Him, so that we may love one another in earth, as God loves us." (N.N.)

I think after the many conversations I had, it has become absolutely clear to me here that sex is a particularly important topic in the Catholic Church, for Catholic people, as it is not only for childbearing, pleasure, or even love, but also for unification with God Himself, as they can *"experience the perfect love of God on earth."*

This is the reason why the topic of "frustration and tension" regarding sex and sexual activities in the first chapters of the dissertation were mentioned to be difficult for Catholic women and men. From their upbringing, despite all taboo and unpleasant sexual conversations, they have all learned and interpreted deeply since childhood - even latently - that sex is much more than a physical reality, more than pleasure, more than reproduction. In my interpretation, according to many Catholic "believers", you can either do sex very well, "divinely," so that it is already *"extraterrestrial"* and even *"leads to Heaven,"* or you can do it very badly, *"sinfully"* - they do not seem to find a way between the two. Either they choose one path or the other. An interview excerpt illustrates this interpretation well:

"Although I did not see it that way when I was young, but it is amazing how stressful it is for a Catholic teenager or young adult to have to decide on sexual issues. I think it is a big step for even secular people when they start having sex, losing their virginities. But for a Catholic young person, not only they have to deal with sexual tension, whether or not they should lose their virginity, but also by taking the wrong path with this decision according to their religion and religious background may lead them to spoil their lives. There is no going back. Who is to tell who is right about that?" (L.M.)

We can see that even my adult interlocutor is particularly sharply supporting the possibility of serious and existing frustrations about all of this, as we are talking about the sexual perception of people with a globally sensitive topic, in a sensitive age and sensitive religious background.

Summary, conclusions

In my paper, I have tried to analyse the attitude of the Catholic Church to sex, based on the stories of young religious adults who have been raised Catholic and attended Catholic school.

I was curious about, what the teaching of the Church exactly is about experiencing premarital sex. Why is it a "sin", if the interviewed Catholic interviewees know about it, what feelings it all evoked in them.

The study covered the teaching and rules of the church on sexuality, the question of "purity", physical and mental health, and how decisively the body is part of the teaching of the church. It was revealed, that it all caused frustrations, insecurities and physical difficulties - dissatisfaction with self-image and the extent to which it can affect married life as well.

Questions have been raised as to whether maintaining virginity can still be a good and a credible thing, or is it outdated and, in a sense, unhealthy and even dangerous to the human psyche - in light of the fact that it has been found to cause guilt and anxiety.

It also turned out that different gender roles are very deeply rooted in the Catholic Church, also in marriage: men have "too much", women have "too little" self-confidence, which can cause new marriages problems in intimacy, in living a sex life. Women are more likely to remain insecure about sexual touch and nudity. Couples experience this as a kind of struggle, which already appears in marriage, so physical contact, withholding sexuality, inexperience leads couples to difficulties - despite the fact that sexuality is also an immensely important element of marriage, according to the Catholic faith, since it can manifest a "transcendent experience" moreover, it has been called the "icon of the Holy Trinity."

I am very much grateful for all the conversations I had, for the openness of these Catholic people I had the interviews with. They showed me something very interesting and deeply rooted, something that is very much alive in our society, something that is the manifestation of the unnatural, the "real presence of God" for them. The research showed to me, that specific notions most of the world interprets as something "unreal" or as a myth, for them, it is reality that they are trying to follow, live their lives according to.

It raises further research questions and chapters, such as virginity, and I also find it very interesting to further explore the topic of nudity. Why is nudity such a difficult topic for religious but often non-religious people as well? Can nudity be interpreted as a vulnerability? Is our body more determined by our confidence than our intelligence, our aptitude? On the issue of "purity", a term, "*second purity*," has been raised. What does it mean? Can a person be "*pure*" more than once? I would like to explain all these issues and topics in further research.

Appendix

N.K.: 28 years old, woman, in a relationship, employee

L.M.: 26 years old, woman, in a relationship, student

H.A.: 26 years old, woman, engaged, student

N.N.: 38 years old, woman, married, housewife

H.E.: 31 years old, man, married, freelance

L.L.: 30 years old, woman, married, employed

P.E.: 28 years old, woman, single, student

E.K.: 33 years old, man, married, employee

O.O.: 35 years old, man, married, employee

U.A.: 32 years old, woman, married, housewife

I.X.: 28 years old, woman, engaged, student

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