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A \"prudent and positive\" Catholic sex education

Kate Childs Graham | Oct. 7, 2010

When I was researching the views of the Catholic hierarchy on education for my last column, I came across this quote in *Gravissimum educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education) that nearly knocked me out of my seat:

> **"Let them be given also, as they advance in years, a positive and prudent sexual education."**

I have to admit that sometimes this church is absolutely mind-boggling. I mean, here's a quote that easily could be used for a comprehensive sex education campaign; and yet, the U.S. Catholic bishops spend a good amount of time railing against sex education, favoring instead an abstinence-only approach.

However, it's not just about the lobbying power of the bishops. Sex education of any sort is lacking from Catholic churches and schools, not to mention many Catholic homes. As I've mentioned before, I was raised in a Catholic household and did my fair share of churching growing up. And let's just say that I was way older than I should have been when I found out some of the details about sex. I was told not to do it before marriage, that I would regret it, plain and simple.

The fact is that the "just don't" message, while it put the fear of God in me about sex, did not prepare me to be a good decision-maker about relationships the way comprehensive sex education could have. It didn't give me any values to use in building relationships. And it left me to muddle through a few embarrassing conversations I had as I grew up.

Wouldn't it have been great, though, if I had received comprehensive sex education infused with Catholic values? I'm not talking about those judgmental opinions that suggest that same-sex relationships are intrinsically evil or sex outside of marriage is sinful. I'm talking about an education on the real values that are at the core of our Catholic faith ? values like respect for the dignity of others, loving our neighbor, fairness and equality and, yes, even the primacy of conscience. An education that would be available at churches and schools for Catholics who wished to receive it. An education that would begin at a young age and give age-appropriate information throughout our whole lives. An education that would help all Catholics become good decision-makers about relationships. An education that is evidence-based. An education that wouldn't shame Catholic youth about sex or sexuality. Certainly, this would be the "prudent and positive sexual education" the bishops of the Second Vatican Council were talking about.

Unfortunately, after doing a bit more digging, it turns out that the progressive views of Vatican II on sex education have changed over the years. A document released in 1995 by the Pontifical Council for the Family titled "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family" stated that sex education must "be presented according to the doctrinal and moral teaching of the church, always bearing in mind the effects of original sin." It also says that the "years of tranquility and serenity" from about five to puberty "must never be disturbed by unnecessary information about sex." Other guidelines on Catholic sex education say to avoid discussion of masturbation, homosexuality and contraception.

A sex education that doesn't mention sex until puberty, excludes the real issues that we face today and focuses on original sin is not necessarily my ideal for a "positive and prudent sexual education," nor has it been proven to be effective in educating young people.

If knowledge is power, then we, as Catholics, are powerless when it comes to sex. Let us heed the call of the Second Vatican Council and give "as they advance in years, a positive and prudent sexual education."

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