

## SEX AND TEENAGERS

By Archpriest Peter Olsen

Anita Wood Brewer was Elvis Presley's girlfriend from 1957-1962. The cultural understanding of sex and dating was drastically different in the 1950's and the early 1960's then it is today. Anita Wood's daughter, Jonitta Brewer Barrett, mentions in the biography that she wrote about her mother(1) that "It was not uncommon back then for parents to expect a boy to ask for their blessing before taking their daughter out on a date. We've let this practice go by the wayside in today's culture, and I think we've suffered for it. Today, girls and guys just meet up, without the parents having a chance to talk to the young man and make sure he will protect, respect, and bring his date home safely." "...it leaves our girls exposed and unprotected. That's just my opinion, as a mother of two boys and two girls." Anita Wood is quoted as saying that "in those days, you just didn't kiss a girl on the first date." She further remarks that "it (was) unacceptable for a young girl to go to a young man's house on a first date." The 1950's represented the height of family stability. Self-control and sex only within the parameters of marriage was the expected social norm. Today's cultural understanding of sex has changed dramatically as reflected in the comments of these contemporary teenagers (2):

Male speakers:

- "A lot of my friends are having sex with a number of people. It's really not a big issue with them. It's just something to do at a party"
- "My friends put pressure on me to have sex. They tell me, 'Everyone's doing it. You have to wake up and live in today's world.'"
- "My friends make fun of me a lot because I don't have sex, I don't do drugs and I don't go to parties. They are doing those things just to make themselves feel better. I don't have to have those things in order to feel good about myself."
- "If I go out on a date, the first thing my friends ask me is if I had sex. If I say no, then they ask me, 'Why not?'"

Female speakers:

- "Kids aren't deciding for themselves whether or not they should have sex. Their boyfriends or their girlfriends are deciding for them. Girls often feel lonely and they will go to all extremes just to keep the boyfriend."
- "Media propaganda tells us to live for the day. My friends are living for the day, but they are not thinking about tomorrow. How are they going to feel about what they did today when tomorrow comes? I have a lot of friends who have had sex, and very few of them do not regret what they have done."
- "There is so much alcohol around. Parents go out of town and leave their kids home alone with all the alcohol around. The parents leave and say, 'Don't do anything crazy.' That's all they give them. The kids have wild parties and get very drunk, so drunk, that they don't even remember what happened the night before."

The Church view and world views are light years apart in their understanding of sex and sexual intimacy. In cultural attitudes, sex is either glorified and marketed or it is riddled with shame and considered to be something dirty and secret. The huge narrative in the world is that life is all about having sex. The worldly view of marriage is reduced to merely having sex. Life, in the secular view, becomes meaningful when you can have sex. The understanding of marriage is reduced to a legalistic stamp of approval to have sex. If we correctly understand the Christian viewpoint, then sex should not be a topic that is taboo or that we are embarrassed to speak about. Some parents hesitate to speak about sex with their children. They fear that if they talk about it, then their children will do it. This is a very naive and irresponsible attitude. Some

parents are even scandalized if the Church tries to teach teens about sex. Shouldn't the parents and the Church be the first and foremost teachers about this very important topic? What do parents think is out there? Do they think that their children are immune and wear blinders? The world in all of its aspects (media, movies, internet, school, friends, you name it) bombard you with sex in blatant graphic terms all the time. Now more than ever it is the responsibility of parents and the proper Church educators to help teenagers navigate and understand the topic of sex. The way that teens should not be taught is by saying "you must do this, you must not do that." Commanding teens to behave a certain way is not very effective. They deserve more than that. They need to correctly understand the Orthodox teaching concerning sex. Then the parents and the Church should help to empower teens (aren't they already empowered anyway, whether we like it or not?) and told, "We hope that you make the right choices." Teens should be made to feel that their integrity is respected and parents and teachers should acknowledge the fact that ultimately it is their choice. Recognizing and respecting their freedom to choose is much more effective in the struggle to guide our children to live according to Christ than merely telling them that they have to behave a certain way. This presupposes, of course, that we talk about sex with them and teach them the correct Christian understanding. Not even our Savior forces us to behave in a certain way. He coaxes and teaches, but we make the choices. If our Savior doesn't force us to do His will, how can we force our will upon anyone else, including young adults? Even if you try, you won't be able to. It doesn't work that way and it even hampers teens and adults from making the right choices when they must make the tough choices in their lives. It is imperative that we all understand correctly the Christian narrative on sex and be able to articulate and explain it.

The starting point for understanding the Christian viewpoint on sex is that physical and emotional intimacy is directly tied in with the pursuit of righteousness, living in Christ and seeking the Kingdom of God. Sex must be understood within the larger context of our life in Christ. We thrive as human beings through our life in Christ. The life in Christ is about growing in union with God by directing our impulses and desires towards a self-offering of love towards Him. This is the same thing as the sexual relationship between the partners of a married couple. Sex is sacred, beautiful and created by God. Sex is a full self-offering expression of love. It is an expression of intimacy to be found within the parameters of a lifetime union between a man and a woman. The recipe for healthy physical intimacy is that sex must take place within the context of a selfless and giving relationship. Furthermore, it is within the context of sex that we participate in the sacred act of the creation and raising of children. If the reason for having sex is reduced only to the acting out on our temptations and urges we undermine the process described above. In order to have a healthy and beautiful relationship with someone, we need to know what to do with our impulses and desires. There is a direct connection between this selfless offering of ourselves to virtues, self-control, self-discipline and ultimately repentance. There exists the danger that this beautiful and godly expression of intimacy can be undermined by selfishness. If we engage in sex purely for selfish reasons and for self-gratification, having sex turns into an act of merely using people. Selfishness poisons the relationship between a man and a woman. Sex is not only a physical act but also a spiritual act. It involves our soul. St. Paul teaches us that the intimacy of sex results in two people becoming one. This oneness is not only biological and physical but psychological and emotional. It is of the spirit and of the soul. If we have even so-called "casual sex" with someone the result will still be the union of the two becoming one. Then, if our sexual encounter does not involve a lifetime commitment, there is a real divorce and tearing away of the two people involved when they move on to their next partner. This separation is traumatic and psychologically harmful. It affects the soul, and it will have a lifetime psychological affect upon us that will not be healthy or good.

In beginning the dialogue with teens about sex, I believe that not only for teens but for everyone we must recognize and acknowledge that:

- It is a difficult struggle to exercise self-control. It is not easy.
- It is difficult to pursue purity.
- It is difficult to practice chastity.
- It is very hard to control our impulses and desires.

A pitfall that we need to be aware of is that the unhealthy abuse of physical intimacy can result in sex becoming an addiction. Sex can be a very complicated and confusing topic. If we understand sex and dispel our confusion, it doesn't mean that directing the sexual aspect of our lives in a healthy and godly manner will be any easier, but not being confused makes it doable. The mindset that we must acquire is that chastity is normal and promiscuity is not. Some people think that pre-marital cohabitation, even amongst couples who are engaged, is like test driving an automobile. You don't buy a car unless you first take it out for a spin and give it a test drive, right? See if it runs well and if you enjoy driving it. If it suits you, then you buy it. If you don't like it, then you don't buy it. Test driving a car is fine, but people are not machines. We are human beings and if you haven't noticed, there is a huge difference between a human being and a machine. We are living, breathing creatures with feelings and emotions. You don't "test drive" a person. The very idea is demeaning, disrespectful and selfish. The Christian understanding of dating is not so that you can get someone into bed, but that you are seeking a partner for a lifetime commitment within the Holy Mystery of marriage. When we date, it is an opportunity for two people to get to know each other in a respectful way. Dating begins the process that is continued in marriage for a couple to connect with each other and to grow in love and care for each other. The goal is to build your relationship as persons. Not controlling our sexual desires undermines and destroys this process. Therapists will tell you that the primary organ of sex is the brain. What really arouses us is when we know and love the person. Great marital sex is built upon great respect, great love and a great connection. A relationship which is built upon impulses, desires, mutual selfishness and mutual gratification is doomed for failure. A relationship which is based on resisting our impulses and growing our intimacy with Christ as the foundation is the fuel that will sustain healthy and joyous intimacy for a lifetime. Dating involves setting boundaries. Don't give your heart entirely to someone until you know that they will go the entire distance with you. Fr. Thomas Hopko used to say, "Go slowly, prayerfully and carefully." Don't reveal everything all at once when you are dating. Go slowly and grow closer to the person in stages. Remember, you are only dating and the purpose of dating is to get to know the person before you can both decide whether or not you are compatible and suited for each other before you both agree to make a lifetime commitment. Some couples feel pressured into getting married too soon and end up marrying the wrong person because of the Church's emphasis on sex only within marriage. I am not encouraging pre-marital sex and this article, I hope, will make a good case for why we should not have sex outside of marriage. However, we should never rush into marriage but must go "slowly, prayerfully and carefully" and be sure as best as we can before deciding to make the lifetime commitment. Yes, you are seeking a sex partner, but more importantly, you are seeking a soul-mate. Remember, we are living in a fallen world and we are broken and lonely people. In addition to self control, we should not allow ourselves to become consumed with fantasies and desires when we meet someone that we like. We should not run to become attached to, identified with and swallowed up by this person. It is imperative that spiritual fathers prepare couples seeking to marry with an extensive pre-marital program. The program that I use is about eight hours long. We meet once a week for an hour. I want to do all that I can to try to give the couple the tools that they will need to help the couple so that the marriage hopefully will succeed and last a lifetime. It is also imperative that the couple clearly understands from the Christian point of view what marriage is all about. Simply meeting with the couple for a half hour or an hour in the priest's office is grossly insufficient.

I would like to say a few words about the health risks of promiscuity. Mary Beth Bonacci, in her article *"How Do I know When I Am Ready For Sex?"* (3) writes: "Sexual activity carries very real consequences. Sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy are two of the more obvious problems. A million teenage girls get pregnant every year. And I'm sure you're all aware of the frightening epidemic of AIDS, and the fact that teenagers seem to be at particularly high risk. There are other diseases you may not hear so much about. Herpes is a painful, incurable sexually transmitted disease which is said to affect up to 50 percent of sexually active, single Americans. The Human Pappilomavirus (HPV) causes sexually transmitted warts. The frightening thing about HPV is that these warts are often pre-cancerous growths, leading directly to cancers of the reproductive system. Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted infection which can leave a girl permanently sterile without even having any symptoms. "Feeling ready" {for sex} won't protect you from any of this. Nor will it protect you from the emotional and spiritual consequences that come with premarital sexual activity." Then there is the issue of unwanted pregnancies. Rape is a violent and aggressive crime against an unwilling person. The unwanted pregnancy that I have in mind is when you do not practice good boundaries and allow yourself to be caught up in a situation where you end up having sex. It could happen in the heat of a moment and no precautions are made to try to avert conception. Sometimes sex can happen with or without planning to have sex and attempts at precautions were or are still taken. This leads to the myth that there is such a thing as "safe sex" in order prevent pregnancy or the sexual transmission of diseases. The urologist Dr. Thomas Petry (4) states that some condoms are so thin that they are no barrier, for example, to prevent the transmission of HIV during sex. Dr. Petry further states that even when condoms are used by married couples, they are statistically 83% effective in preventing conception. When teenagers use condoms for the first time, their effectiveness drops down significantly to being, at best, 50-60% effective. The transmission of sexual disease has more to do with genital secretions than the preventing of conception. When there is an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy the mother will have three choices: 1. Abort the baby 2. Carry the baby to term and keep the baby 3. Carry the baby to term and give the baby up for adoption. I needn't go into all the difficulties involved and how drastically a teen's life will change once she has a baby, especially if she is abandoned by the father and she must raise the child as a young single mother on her own. Some women say about abortion, "Oh, I am only getting rid of a few cells." The hard fact is that abortion is murder. Period. The psychological effects upon the mother and the father (yes, we often forget about how this affects the father) of the child who is either aborted or given up for adoption will last a lifetime. Sooner or later the parents of such a child will need professional psychiatric help and therapy.

### **A word to my brother priests who are spiritual fathers**

We are not the sex police. I know that some things in people's lives sometimes unwillingly stand out or become known or apparent to us. However, our job is not to monitor people's lives but to bring people to the light of Christ and to share the message of the Gospel. Our job is to invite and to try to inspire people to pursue righteousness, purity, self-control and chastity. Sex is a very close and intimate topic. Discussion about this with someone on a personal level requires having a close relationship with the person and knowing how they know and understand their faith. They must feel comfortable with us and trust us in order to share with us such intimate details of their life. This is a very sacred trust that carries with it a very heavy responsibility for the priest. The roadblock I run into all the time is that in America our Orthodox go to Confession infrequently, perhaps only once a year during Great Lent, or not even at all. What does the spiritual father do, then, when you don't know the person going to Confession and they confess sins of an intimate or sexual nature? This is a very difficult question and not easy to answer. First of all, sex should not be the first and main thing that we talk about, even if it is the first thing that we notice. Telling the penitent that sexual activity outside of marriage is a sin and that it breaks the teaching of Christ and of the Church is not

going to be very helpful when many of our teens don't even have a clue as to what sin is and are confused or have little understanding of the teaching of Christ and the Church. I don't know the answer to this question when our teens and adults rarely go to Confession, yet are permitted to receive Holy Communion on a regular basis. In order to be an effective spiritual father, you must know who your spiritual children are, what they struggle with and what are their questions, as opposed to what our agenda might be to make sure that they pursue sexual purity. I believe it is more effective if our modus operandi is to point people in the right direction and speak about how beautiful and sacred the Christian understanding of sex and marriage is. Our goal is to save souls and not to drive people away from the Church. I am not suggesting that we compromise or deny our faith and its teachings. I am suggesting that we be good shepherds and wise, loving, kind and understanding pastors. Our sacred task is to lift people up and not to drive them down into the ground.

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### **Footnotes**

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1. "Once Upon a Time: Elvis and Anita, Memories of My Mother," Jonnita Brewer Barrett, BrewBar Publishing, 2012, page 24, 29 & 31
2. "Straight Talk: Teenagers and Sex," video on YouTube, December, 2015
3. April 27, 1995 issue of "The Arlington Catholic Herald."
4. Ibid, "Straight Talk"