Less Balking, More Talking: Good Sex Education in the Roman Catholic Church as Imagined by Young Adult Women

Abstract: This in-progress qualitative study on religious sexuality formation in young adult women who were raised Catholic asked participants to imagine their ideal sexuality education experience, both by re-imagining their own upbringing and by explaining how they would teach their own children about sex and sexuality. Participants emphasized the need for sexuality education to be heavily conversational, to respect the knowledge and experiences of the learner regardless of their age, and to emphasize the dignity of the learner foremost.

Methodology: This in-depth qualitative format involved interviewing participants face-to-face for 60-90 minutes with a limited interview schedule and great latitude for probes and follow-up questions. Interviews have been fully transcribed and are in the process of being coded for major themes.

Participant Demographics (at time of their interview)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Current Religious Identity</th>
<th>Relationship Status*</th>
<th>Raised in ___ Community</th>
<th>Catholic School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Episcopalian</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>K-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Single, casually dating</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maura</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Serious/committed relationship</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Committed relationship</td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>K-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Christian Undenominational</td>
<td>Committed relationship</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Committed relationship</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Serious/committed relationship</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridget</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Serious/committed relationship</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>K-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Optional demographics question. No participants declined to respond.

- Georgia identified her sexual orientation as Bisexual/Queer. All other participants identified as straight/heterosexual.
- All 9 participants were Caucasian and raised in the Roman Catholic religion.
- 3 participants identified as having been in a sexual relationship: Georgia, Maura, and Jessica (Optional demographics question, no participants declined to respond)
- All participants had at least one parent who completed some college except Rose (both parents had 2-year vocational degrees)
Emergent Themes for Discussion:

1. Conversational learning versus “dangerous questions”
   - Can definitive moral expectations be taught in a conversational model?
   - Why do the religious educators noted by participants avoid conversation?

2. Parental involvement versus learning it all in school
   - Who counts as a trustworthy authority, and how do youth make this determination?

3. Dignity of the human person and the human body
   - Crossover point between comprehensive and abstinence-only education ideals?

4. Making it one’s own—thinking through and abiding by a convincing sexual morality
   - Why did some participants need to go through the process of relearning and readopting a morality that made sense to them while others didn’t?
   - Most participants insisted that they don’t judge anyone else for failing to live by the sexual morality they feel is right

5. The language barrier—most participants spoke about sexuality with euphemisms despite almost all participants claiming that they “love to talk about these kinds of things.”
   - Is this a marker of discomfort or lack of practice talking about sexuality?
   - Do they actually “love” to talk about sexuality, or could this be a culturally desirable thing to say makes them feel open-minded, intelligent, or worldly?

Guiding Bibliography


