The Signature
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The Dating Dilemma: How Far Can We Go?


It's the subject of almost every Catholic book and conference for young people, a constant topic of conversation for girls, and chances are you've probably stayed up late trying to figure it out yourself. Yes, dating and romantic relationships are hot topics in our Catholic world. Many of us know of a self-appointed expert (I myself purport to be one of these) on temperaments, discernment, or relationship dynamics. Yet, despite the numerous amount of these experts, I still don't think that young Catholics have figured out how physical intimacy, acts such as hugging, cuddling, and kissing, are supposed to figure into dating. In other words, college students don't know how far they can go. As a remedy to his problem, I would like to recommend Leah Perrault and Brett Salkeld’s book entitled How Far Can We Go? A Catholic Guide to Sex and Dating.

Now, let's be honest. Physical intimacy and dating are hot topics and we all have strong opinions about these subjects. Because of this, I think that it's important to read the book through the lens the authors have in mind – not our own biases. With this in mind, I believe that Perrault and Salkeld have two points they want us to notice. First, they want to offer a distinctively Catholic approach to physical intimacy. In other words, they want to offer something different than the typical Evangelical Protestant sex-talk, complete with over-used analogies and fear-mongering. Secondly, How Far Can We Go? is a guide to sex and dating. It is not a manual or a magisterial document. It is the fruit of the prayer and study two lay persons have done, based on the Church's teaching, but the book itself lays no claim to such authority. (Note that this is good news for all you self-appointed experts – your opinions still count!) This also means that it is not a Christopher West or Jason Evert style Theology-of-the-Body-For-Dummies handbook. Now that we understand this book correctly, we are more at liberty to see what it actually says.

So, how far can we go? Is it alright for dating couples to kiss? For how long? When does cuddling become a sin? Perrault and Salkeld’s book tries to answer these types of questions by navigating a middle course between two common, yet mistaken, Christian models of physical intimacy. They call the first view the “How Pure can we be? Model” The followers of this model claim that asking “How far can we go?” is motivated by impure motives. Our hearts should be set on purity and the attempt to live out the bare minimum of chastity seems to violate the Gospel command to love generously. However, this view is problematic because it doesn’t really answer the question about physical intimacy and because it seems to imply that any physical intimacy is a concession to impurity.

The second model is the “This Far! Model” These people want solid answers and would prefer a hard and fast list of rules about dating. However, this view is also problematic because it assumes that a pair of virtuous seniors in college is the same place as a hormonal middle school couple. Also, it assumes “that everyone means exactly the same thing by terms like ‘prolonged kissing,’ and that everyone understands physical expressions of intimacy in the same way” (27). Instead of these two models, How Far Can We Go? argues that physical intimacy should grow over time alongside intellectual intimacy, social intimacy, emotional intimacy, and spiritual intimacy. In other words, as a couple learn to trust each other, they should share their thoughts and opinions, attend social events together, talk about their deep desires,
and their relationship with God. Physical intimacy should be an outward sign of this inward unity, a unity which is perfected in marriage. A couple that is intimate in these ways should have some kind of physical intimacy. Thus, sexual acts are inappropriate for unmarried people, not because sex is dirty, but because sexual acts before marriage do not express the reality of the relationship.

Young Catholic couples need know that physical intimacy is alright. Even though we respect our fallen nature, we need to know that physical intimacy is a good thing, provided it expresses the truth of our relationships. If you’d like to learn more about Perrault and Salkeld’s thoughts on sex and dating, I’d suggest you pick up a copy of How Far Can We Go? A Catholic Guide to Sex and Dating.

My first holiday memories involve my brother, Dave, talking to a mixture of yeast, sugar and flour. After coaxing the concoction to rise, he’d add the final ingredients to produce butterhorns (basically extra-buttery crescent rolls). This bread, still best made by Dave, is sure to be present at both our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners. In the midst of these two holidays, I think it’s important to recognize why we remember these things: the turkey coming out of the oven, the mashed potatoes and gravy, the flaky pies. Why do the Whos down in Whoville crave to carve the roast beast? Why are you drooling right now? Why is feasting such an important part of being a person? How, then, can we do it well?

People were created to both eat and be in relationships, ergo the feast! There’s something sincerely beautiful about being surrounded by family and friends, enjoying the tastes, sights and sounds of life. Isn’t it sad, then, how in such a technological age this beauty is becoming rare and food memories are not being formed in the first place?

In a society where we’re constantly plugged in, tuned in, work-laden and running around, it’s becoming rare for a family to sit down and eat together. Bigger holiday meals are still observed, but during a normal week, it’s much easier to grab something on the run. However, by doing so, families and friends are missing out on bonding time that can speak to both body and soul. In addition, food itself is rushed. “Fast food” has become the norm, leading to many mechanized processes that are unethical (i.e., poor conditions for animals or harmful pesticides).

Though problematic, it seems impossible to cut back on this hyperactive way of living. The busy mentality permeates everything we do so much that we may panic just trying to think of what to cut out. Dr. Amy Levad, theology professor at St. Thomas, suggests a gradual approach. “We should be making food choices at least three times a day—breakfast, lunch and dinner. Within the course of a week that gives us many opportunities to make maybe one or two different meal choices.” For instance, maybe we can schedule one home-cooked meal a week instead of eating out. Perhaps we can choose a couple organic or community-grown products on our next grocery trip. By building up small habits, it becomes easier to make food choices that factor in both family and ethical practices.

Most of all, we can look to the perfect example of a human, Jesus Christ, to guide our consumption. We often think of Christ fasting in the desert (this is good to note for we should have virtuous limits on our consumption of both food and technology), but think how often Jesus feasted! He started his public ministry at a wedding feast. He was regularly criticized for eating with sinners. He gave us his Body for food at the Last Supper. Jesus still holds a feast every Sunday! It is this weekly feast that is meant to be holy and set apart, but also shape the rest of our week. We receive and are called as Catholic Christians to recognize the presence of God—body and soul—readily recalling it in all our other meals and preparing ourselves to eternally feast with Christ.

This holiday season, I encourage you to indeed enjoy food with your family, but to do it in a reflective way. What are some of your favorite food memories? How did that food get to your table? How blessed are you to have your fill? How can you eat in a way that will help you order your life to Christ’s and, therefore, become an excellent human? I know I will be thinking about these things while eating a fluffy, flaky butterhorn. Yum… Thanks be to God. Here’s to happy and healthy feasting!
Musicals have long been a vibrant part of American culture. Like most things, they’ve evolved with our culture. This has manifested in a recent change in the purpose and content of musicals, which reflect the serious changes and questions our society faces by illustrating current hot-button issues. Spring Awakening (2006) focused on sexual issues such as abortion and rape, and Rent (1994) covered the topics of homosexuality and misconceptions about AIDS. In 2008, Next to Normal continued this trend by addressing mental illness. Although these shows do not explicitly express Catholic inspiration or motives, they provide Catholics with a unique reminder of our call to serve and fight for social justice.

The Tony-nominated Next to Normal follows Diana Goodman, a mother struggling with severe bipolar disorder and hallucinations of her deceased son. Diana’s illness deeply penetrates her family life. The show portrays her struggles as believable without over-dramatizing them. The music and script reflect this in a very honest way, emphasizing the pain those with mental illness endure while acknowledging the limitations of therapeutic solutions (both at home and in the doctor’s office). This musical is not a “feel-good” show but rather a show jam-packed with raw feelings for both actors and audience members.

One particularly emotional scene closes the first act. Diana sings to her “son” about longing to see him (“I Dreamed a Dance”). He responds by extending his hand, asking her to join him in a place free of pain (“There’s a World”). As the audience watches them join hands, they hear the doctor’s voice reading her medical file—Diana slit her wrists and nearly bled to death.

Instead of providing escape from reality, as musicals often used to, this show and others like it force us to stare reality in the face. Because our society is cluttered with distracting media, we often become desensitized to the gravity of current events the media displays. Other than the theater, there aren’t many other places you’ll find hundreds of people (ungrudgingly) sitting together, seeing the same thing, without distraction. This is the power the modern musical yields: to be able to focus a group’s attention on an issue in a way that fosters understanding and compassion for human suffering.

Take for example the Next to Normal scene previously described. For an audience, this scene often becomes horrifyingly emotional because it fosters the understanding that those with mental illnesses have little control over their dark pain. Next to Normal challenges its audiences to recognize the human suffering mental illness cause. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in four Americans has a mental disorder. The impact of this show is significant because only once we can empathize can we understand how to best deal with the realities of our society. In this sense, the modern musical prompts its audiences to take action on social justice issues.

Herein lies the value of the modern musical for us as Catholics: this “secular” call to take initiative on social justice issues echoes one of the most fundamental callings of our faith. Blessed Pope John Paul II once said, “True holiness does not mean a flight from the world; rather, it lies in the effort to incarnate the Gospel in everyday life, in the family, at school and at work, and in social and political involvement.” No matter how uncomfortable, God calls each of us to serve the forgotten, suffering, and outcasts of our society, as Christ did, including those with mental illness.

Mara Morley
The Importance of Intellectual Bric-a-Brac

Every year, St. Thomas students pay thousands of dollars to get an education, an education that includes not only classes in our chosen areas of concentration, but in theology, philosophy, English language, natural science, social science, arithmetic, history, foreign language, and quantitative reasoning (whatever that is). At some period, usually when a humanities student is in the throes of a complicated equation or an arithmetical student is pouring over a text trying to find a seemingly ineffable meaning, one must ask an important question: why? Why are we putting our social and financial lives in jeopardy for intellectual bric-a-brac that seems only useful on Jeopardy?

If a thing is more efficient than another, posits the business major, then that thing should be done. It is more efficient to learn a single discipline than to learn many disciplines, as it gets one more quickly into the work world. Therefore, one should prefer learning a single discipline to the alternative; a modus ponens argument of which any PHIL 115 professor would be proud. This is, in fact, the irony of the example and, indeed, the irony of the whole argument against liberal education.

Let us examine our example. The hypothetical business major (at whose expense many fine jokes are had) before he makes his assertion, has to use the lens of logic to understand his own proposition. Logic, of course, has been delegated a philosophical rather than a financial skill, and thus the business major finds he has been using philosophy to undermine the premise that philosophy is necessary to a business major. The syllogism, in and through its very existence in syllogistic form, is self-contradictory. Suppose, however, we call logic an interdisciplinary skill. Then our business major, wiping his brow and likely taking a sip of wine, will discover something quite extraordinary, the sort of thing that wine often seems to accomplish. In determining that which is best for him as a business major, and therefore what is best for business overall, he has crossed the threshold of business and entered educational theory. It seems our business major is more interdisciplinary than he thinks.

Our business major is then forced to do one of two things: he can either admit business is an interdisciplinary skill or redefine business to include those skills. Both of these cause problems. If the former, then his initial premise is completely undermined. The very notion that anything can be interdisciplinary intrinsically supports a liberal education. If a thing is composed of multiple disciplines, then one should naturally be well-versed in those disciplines if one is to perform a job well. If the latter, then another problem arises, as we are forced to come to terms with the fact that there is no solid definition for what “business” really constitutes, and if we do not know what business constitutes then we have no knowledge of it and cannot study it.

I answer that: both conclusions are true, and not only for business majors. The scientist must read and write if she is to publish important research, the philosopher must make his research marketable if she is to survive, and the English scholar must do historical research if he is to interpret a text. In fact, when we look into the nature of a discipline, we find that all disciplines are interdisciplinary. They are distinguished only by the fact that this knowledge, which often pertains to other disciplines, is important in one’s own discipline. Each discipline requires knowledge of the other in order to function well. Since functioning well is, debatably, the definition of efficiency, I think we can safely say, given our proverbial business major’s own argument, that a liberal education is preferable. Nor can I say it is only work-related. We are meant to live by truth, and seeing the truth through the lens of many disciplines yields a closer understanding than one ever could alone.