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# Dating

## *A Practical Catholic Guide*

*by*  
*Jason E. King*

Editor  
Damian Lenshek  
Catholic Information Service  
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council

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Catholic Information Service  
Knights of Columbus Supreme Council  
PO Box 1971  
New Haven, CT 06521-1971

[www.kofc.org/cis](http://www.kofc.org/cis)  
[cis@kofc.org](mailto:cis@kofc.org)  
203-752-4267  
203-752-4018 fax

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## INTRODUCTION

Dating is a relatively recent phenomenon. Throughout most of history, marriages were negotiated by families, usually for economic or political reasons. In most parts of the world, this approach is still the norm. Romantic relationships outside of marriage were thought to result from an impractical attraction, a corruption of virtue, or even a mental disorder.

Dating as we stereotypically think of it only emerged in the late 1920's and then primarily in the United States and parts of Europe. While sociologists and psychologists have studied the phenomenon, theologians have rarely touched upon the topic.

Ignoring dating, however, is a serious mistake. By the age of sixteen, 78% of girls and 83% of boys have been on a date. With the average age of marriage being roughly thirty for college graduates and just a little younger for others, most people in the United States are doing something more than friendship and less than marriage for upwards of fifteen years of their lives. Aristotle believed that after the age of seven people were formed in their habits and could not change. In the United States today, people spend twice this amount of time forming themselves in habits of relating to one another, habits that will affect their behavior for the rest of their lives, for good or for ill.

Since Christianity is at heart about relationships—the two greatest commandments are about how to relate to God and relate to others—Christians cannot dismiss dating. Even if dating turns out to be a fleeting moment in cultural history, it still affects countless individuals today. Not reflecting on dating is akin to abandoning all of these people, giving them no guidance, no opportunities for reflection, and no support from

the community. It leaves them little to no help in forming relationships that are truly loving and relating these relationships to their Catholic faith.

This booklet is an attempt to bring the riches of the Catholic tradition to bear on dating. It explores how beliefs in God, the Trinity, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus provide a way to think about dating and suggest ways in which it should be practiced.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF DATING<sup>1</sup>**

In the very early 1900's, men and women familiarized themselves with each other through "calling." If a man was interested in a woman, he would come to "call" at her house. He would introduce himself to her parents but not to the woman herself. The parents then took the name of the man (if they approved) to the woman, and then the woman decided if she wanted to meet the visitor or not. A woman could have several men "calling" on her, as "calling" was not a formal relationship and usually entailed conversing with the man in the woman's home under supervision. If a woman repeatedly declined to meet the caller, the man would realize that he should stop visiting. If a woman decided to only accept one "caller" and no others, the relationship had moved to a different level. The couple still met in the home under supervision, but the two were considered to be "keeping company." As the woman was supposed to "keep company" with only one man, the relationship was considered to be more formal, more serious, and progressing toward marriage.

This approach included family, took place in the home, focused on conversation, and placed decision making in the hands of the woman. These features changed in the late 1920's and early

1930's primarily because of the automobile. This is when dating as we stereotypically think about it began. A male would pick up the female from her house and take her to the movies, skating, dancing or whatever it was that they had agreed to do.

This new approach resulted in a number of changes in how these romantic relationships unfolded. Instead of the relationship taking place in the woman's home with support from the woman's family, dates now took place in the man's car and with the man's money. The former power of women was replaced by the newfound power of men. Also, being separated from family and home, the lure of sex and sexual activity on dates began to grow.

Despite these shifts, dating was still a formal practice. Times and days for dates were planned ahead. Parents and peers thus knew about the dating, and, should something happen on the date, people knew who was involved. Social cues to indicate what was acceptable and what was not acceptable were still in play. Going on dates was thought to be a precursor to "going steady" and thus a preparation for marriage.

This approach to dating shifted in the 1960's and the 1970's with emergence of contraceptives and the sexual revolution. The formality of going on dates tended to be replaced by informal relationship, cohabitation, and sexual encounters. Dating was referred to as seeing someone, hanging out with someone, or hooking up with someone. People began to marry later, so the connection between dating and marriage became tenuous at best.

In today's world, dating is usually understood in one of three ways. A man and woman might get together one night or a series of nights for sexual activity—ranging anywhere from kissing to

intercourse—without a serious commitment. Or, a man and woman might enter into a highly committed relationship, eating almost every meal together and frequently spending nights at each other's place. Finally, a man and a woman might go out with a group, talking primarily with each other, but not excluding the other members of the group. This group could be friends, other couples, or even families. Dating may or may not include sex, it could be serious or not, it might be public or private, and it may or may not have any connection to marriage. Given this diversity, it is no wonder that one of the challenges facing men and women today is how they communicate their understanding of dating and what it entails.

## **WHAT IS DATING?**

Given these various manifestations of dating, it is difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of what dating is, much less to evaluate it. If we are to arrive at a Catholic understanding of dating, however, we must explain what we are talking about when we consider the subject. To cover all of these various types of dating, I am going to define dating not by what it is, but by what it is not.

*Dating is not marriage.* This statement is obvious but needs to be made since there are similarities between the two types of relationships. Both are about the relationship between a man and woman, and both involve romantic love and sexual attraction. While marriage is entered into with the expectation that it will last until death, dating is entered into with the certainty that it will end. In dating, people either break up or get married. In either case, dating has ended.

Dating is not friendship. Often dating and friendships overlap, and, from a Catholic perspective, they ought to overlap. But they are not the same kind of relationship. Dating involves what the ancient Greeks, and more recently Pope Benedict XVI, call *eros*.<sup>2</sup> *Eros* is a concrete and specific love. It is a love for a particular person and his or her physical presence. It involves physical affection but is not what we call “erotic” in our culture. Friendship is a different kind of love, one that does not involve *eros*. In other words, if friends start kissing, they are something more than friends.

*Dating is not courtship.* Historically, dating has been synonymous with courtship. Only relatively recently, since the 1970’s, did this really change. Still there is a difference – an important difference. In courting, the question of marriage is being actively entertained. The root of courtship is to court, to woo, to invite. Courtship is thus to invite the real possibility of marriage into the relationship. While dating rarely cuts off the possibility of marriage, the possibility is not a prominent feature. Usually in dating, people are just getting to know each other.

While the separation between the two should not be drawn too sharply, there is an important value in making the distinction. If one collapses courtship and dating into one relationship, then marriage is considered before or while the couple is just getting to know each other. Rather, we should come to know each other before we think about getting married. Otherwise, we end up with situations of sixteen year olds trying to evaluate their relationship based on whether or not they would marry the person, or a twenty year old in college searching for a spouse instead of just talking to people.



*Dating is not sex.* Sex is frequently associated with dating, but the two are not synonymous. Many people have dating relationships in which they do not have sex. Some people have sex with a person that they do not or will not date. This obvious distinction needs to be made, because when people condemn dating, they often are in fact condemning premarital sex. An opposition to the latter does not mean an opposition to the former. Catholicism stands against pre-marital sex but this is not a stand against dating. It is a stand against one type of activity often associated with dating. As long as this distinction is maintained, many of the concerns people have about dating fall away.

In excluding these understandings of dating, we have created a broad grasp of dating that encompasses the numerous types and experiences of dating. Knowing what dating is, though, does not tell us how Catholics think about it.

## **VARIOUS VIEWS OF DATING**

While dating has not been around long, it has existed long enough for people to think and form opinions about it. Let's look at some of these opinions.

*Dating is wrong.* While not a view held by many people, it is held by numerous critics of our culture as well as many Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike. It should be no surprise that the best selling book on Christianity and dating is titled *Why I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.<sup>3</sup> The concerns these people have about dating are multiple. Since dating relationships break up, they cause suffering and suffering should be avoided. Since they end, they are also a practice for divorce and train people to give up when relationships get difficult. Dating, even if it does not involve

premarital sex, tempts one toward it. For these reasons, it is argued that dating is wrong.

It might be easy to dismiss these individuals as curmudgeons, but they allude to a reality often glossed over in the more romantic notions of dating. Violence often accompanies dating. 65% of people experience emotional, verbal, or physical violence in dating relationships. More than a third of dating relationships in college have incidences of nonsexual dating violence.

This violence is overwhelmingly directed toward women, who make up 85% of the victims of dating violence. In colleges, 67% of all sexual assaults are cases of date rape, with 94% of the perpetrators being male. In fact, date rape is the most commonly reported crime on college campuses. Rape is more common at private colleges and major universities than in society at large. (Institutions with a religious affiliation, however, have rates lower than the national average.)<sup>4</sup>

Such violence deserves the strongest condemnation, and the Catholic Church provides a the foundation necessary to completely reject this destructive behavior. Given Catholicism's devotion to the Blessed Mother, its upholding of the dignity and vocation of women,<sup>5</sup> its insistence on the procreative *and* unitive value of sex,<sup>6</sup> and its uncompromising pro-life stance that abhors violence directed at other people, the troubling reality that these rape and violence statistics suggest is obviously incompatible with the practice of the Faith.

*Dating is wonderful.* This understanding of dating is more widespread and common. It is the one most people have when entering into relationships and is the one most often portrayed in books, television shows and movies. Like the understanding of

dating we just looked at, this one also has a basis in reality. The joy and excitement of a new relationship are overwhelming at times. We learn about another person, experience new things, and visit new places. The world itself seems magical and delightful.

This experience is so joyful and profound that Catholicism has historically used it to describe the relationship of God's love for humanity. The Song of Songs, found in the Old Testament, is a long poem describing the pursuit of the beloved by the lover and the lover by the beloved. Catholics have traditionally understood this book as a metaphor for understanding God's pursuit of us and our pursuit of God. The fun and happiness that we experience at the onset of a new relationship give us a glimpse of what our life in God is destined to be like.

While there are experiences that seem to justify condemning dating, there are also wonderful experiences that lead to a support for dating.

*Dating is advantageous.* Unlike the other two views that work in categories of good and bad, right and wrong, this understanding sees dating as useful. Dating, in other words, is not necessarily good or bad but rather practical. If people choose to date, they can expect some benefit from doing so. Since almost 80% of the population does date at some point, it can be safely concluded that dating is an advantageous enterprise. If you are one of the 20% not dating, the assumption is that you are missing out on something important.

What is the advantage of dating? It can be like "test driving" a vehicle before you buy it or like buying a product with a money back guarantee. You can try it out, but you are not required to

completely commit to it until later. Dating can also be useful to help find someone to marry or prevent you from being lonely. You can try out different kinds of relationships until you find the right one, the one that works for you. By dating, you can also learn how to relate to other people, how to interact with your peers of the opposite sex. Dating can even help you to become more popular, be recognized, or improve your social standing.

Regardless of the end, dating can be useful in leading people to it. Dating can be fun and enjoyable in and of itself, but its real allure is its ability to lead you to something greater.

*Dating is trivial.* Like the last category, this view of dating is not a moral evaluation but a practical one. Unlike the last understanding that held dating to be useful, dating in this view is the opposite. Dating is recreational. It is like a game or sporting event or party. It is fun while it lasts, but, after it is over, we go back to our normal life. Dating on this understanding is akin to “hanging out” or “hooking up.” It does not involve a substantive commitment nor does it seriously impact people’s lives. Culturally, we take this view when we think of dating as just a phase of life or a rite of passage. It is a hoop we jump through and nothing else. By all means enjoy it, but do not take it too seriously.

## **WHICH ONE IS THE CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF DATING?**

The short and easy answer is that there is no one specifically Catholic understanding of dating. Dating is not mentioned in the Bible or in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Neither the Church Fathers nor recent popes have talked about dating. The Church as the whole body of believers, spanning the globe and human history, tends to think about those issues that apply to

most people over a long period of time. “The Church thinks in centuries,” the saying goes. Because of this concern for all people and all times, it is no wonder that the Church has not commented directly on a phenomenon that has been around for less than 100 years and affects less than 1/3 of the world’s current population.

While the Church may not have an explicit teaching on dating, it has riches beyond belief about human relationships, especially romantic ones. Formulating a Catholic proposal about dating requires us to take the Church’s two thousand years of reflection and experience and apply it to our current context. If we do so, we can arrive not at *the* Catholic understanding of dating but at *an* understanding of dating that is both compatible with and nourishes our Catholic faith.

The first insight gained from the Catholic tradition is that the four views of dating are all equivalent to “heresies.” In Catholicism, a heresy is often a half-truth. Heretics frequently take one part of the faith and exclude another part. Thus, Gnosticism was considered heretical because it insisted that Jesus was God but not human. Ebionism championed Jesus’ humanity while neglecting his divinity. Thus, the four perspectives on dating each affirm something true but also leave out some truth. A Catholic view of dating takes all of the positive insights of the four views while abandoning all of the shortcomings.

## **A CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF DATING**

Building on the previous four views, a Catholic definition of dating is: a joyful practice in Christian love that is incompatible with sin. Let me explain this definition by going in reverse order

to draw out the good and avoid the bad of each of the four understandings of dating.

*Dating is joyful but not trivial.* Viewing dating as trivial though wrong, serves to underscore a Catholic truth about relationships: they are intended to be joyful. We are not only made to love and be loved, but, in doing so, we experience peace, joy, and happiness. The examples in the Christian tradition of this truth abound. Moses reminded the Israelites that by following the commandments their lives would be blessed. Jesus described heaven as a wedding banquet. Saint Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Dante depicted heaven as a place of singing and dancing in communion with God and the saints, welcoming newcomers by singing, “Oh joy, another person to love.” Saint Thomas Aquinas said that heaven is where we find happiness as friends of God. Jesuit Father Bernard Lonergan said that religious conversion was like falling in love with God. Joy in our relationships with others, joy in our relationship with God, this is what God wants for us and for which he made us.

In this sense, dating truly is re-creational. God is the creator of the universe, establishing from the very beginning a relationship between himself and us. He enjoys it, saying it is good. We should then re-create this original joyful relationship in all of our relationships. Yet, only in this sense is dating recreational. After creation, God takes immediate interest in humans, attending to them, respecting them, chastising them, guiding them, basically treating them with a dignity and respect far beyond anything they deserve based on their behavior. Relationships are never trivial in God’s eyes. The first three commandments are about how to relate to God and the last seven are about how we are to

relate to one another. Over and over again, the Bible talks about these two relationships and how they must not be neglected. So, trivializing any relationship is really a trivializing of God's creation, God's commandments, and God's own concern for other people. While grasping the fun and pleasurable part of a relationship, the trivial view of dating misses its profound importance.

*Dating is a practice but is not advantageous.* The view of dating as advantageous indicated that dating was useful and thus led us to some other end. We usually think of marriage as this end. Dating is thus useful because it helps us to test if this is the person whom we want to marry. There are other ends: to learn how to socialize, to become more popular, or to avoid loneliness. The truth found in this perspective is that dating does lead us somewhere. Where this perspective goes awry is in its understanding of the purpose of dating.

Catholicism views relationships in general as good, not for just anything, but as practices in loving. "Practice" here has a specific meaning. Often we think of "practice" as leading to some external goal. We practice in order to win a game or in order to be the best performer at a recital. We practice to get the trophy or the prize. Yet, practice also helps us refine and perfect what we do. In this understanding, what happens at practice cannot be divided so easily from the game or recital. People who love a sport or instrument practice not to win awards but to excel at the particular activity. Their practice is doing the activity so that they can excel at it. Their end and joy is doing the activity well, not winning the awards.<sup>7</sup>

Relationships are practices in love in this second sense. They are practices not because we use other people in relationships to learn

to love but because we love the other people in our relationships, we work to become excellent at loving. This is where the “dating is advantageous” perspective veers off into error. Those who view dating this way often focus on the wrong end, often a self-serving one. Dating to become popular, increase social standing, or avoid loneliness are selfish reasons. You would be viewing other people as useful to yourself. They are important only to the degree that they can help you, and, as soon as they cannot, you leave them.

Instead, Catholics view relationships as places where we hone our ability to love because we love those with whom we are in relationship. In his encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI says that eros—what we would call today romantic love—is a love that draws us out of ourselves, toward others, and, eventually, through the longing, on to God. Of course, *eros* can be corrupted in any number of ways. It can direct people toward pleasure instead of the person or it can cause a couple to focus on themselves and neglect those around them. If purified and properly understood, however, *eros* leads to the Christ-like love of others that the early Christians called *agape*.<sup>8</sup> Hence, it should be no surprise that after Pope Benedict XVI discusses the unity of love in the first half of his letter, he then discusses the “practice of love by the Church” in the second half.

One purpose that “dating is advantageous” proposes that is closer to love, but still falls short, is the idea of “test driving.” Dating is to try out another person and see if that person is compatible for marriage. While this argument sounds reasonable, it is problematic in at least two ways. First, it assumes a consumer mentality with regard to other people. Dating becomes shopping for a partner. Persons are viewed as things that we can “try” and “test.” Yet, as human beings, we cannot do this. People are not



commodities that can be bought, sold, tested, and tried. What we do to people and how we relate to them affects us as much as them. If we treat another like a product, we do not see in that person the individual who is made in the likeness and image of God, the person whom God's only begotten Son came to save. Instead we see him or her as a thing to be treated as we see fit. People should go on dates but not to "test drive" people. Rather, we should go on dates to learn to love other people for who they are. If the relationship continues to grow in this love, the question of marriage should naturally arise.

Second, there is no way to have a "test drive" or a "trial" marriage. Sacramental marriage is a promise, a vow exchanged between two people in the presence of the Church. There is no way to test making a vow. You make it or you do not. I am not saying that dating has no relationship to marriage, but that there are dimensions to marriage for which dating cannot prepare us. The Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas went so far as to say that, "We always marry the wrong person!"<sup>9</sup> His point is that even a couple perfectly related to each other before their marriage, the very act of getting married changes the person irrevocably. Hence the person you perfectly related to before the marriage is now different. Hauerwas' thought should resonate with Catholics. We believe that the sacrament of marriage changes the couple: they receive God's grace and enter into a bond that can only be broken by death. Thus, no matter how serious and extended the dating period is, it cannot simulate the irrevocable bond that binds a husband and wife.

Nowhere is this inability to "test drive" a spouse more apparent than in cohabitation. Culturally, we assume that people who live together beforehand know more what marriage is like and thus

are better prepared for entering marriage. If there is any way to truly prepare for marriage, would it not be living as if you were married? The reality is that while dating may be done in a way that helps prepare for marriage, the same is never true of cohabitation. If a cohabitating couple actually gets married (which is only a 50% chance), then their divorce rate is 75%, one and a half times the already staggering divorce rate of our culture.

Statistically, the factors that best predict successful marriage are high education levels, not being teenagers or single parents, and having common values, background, and goals.<sup>10</sup> Neither length of dating prior to marriage nor number of people dated are good predictors of successful marriages. What is the relationship of dating and marriage then? Dating helps us to learn about another person and care about him or her. It is a practice in how to love another person. Linking dating too close to marriage though, as if marriage is the exclusive end of dating, neglects the reality that many other factors are needed for a successful marriage. Compatibility in dating can help in choosing a marriage partner but is not sufficient in and of itself.

Thus, dating does have a goal. It is not the goal of status or popularity or even exclusively marriage. Dating, like all Christian actions, is a practice in which we learn how to love with a Christian love. What is a Christian love? This takes us to the next aspect of a Catholic view of dating.

*Dating is “Full of Wonder” and not just “Wonderful.”* Dating can teach us Christian love. Culturally, dating and falling-in-love are often synonymous. We can not imagine marriage, much less long-term dating, without love. Yet the love often depicted is a narrow love. It is the beginning of love, the first throes of love. It

is exciting and wonderful. Yet, ultimately, this portrayal is not what Christians mean when they talk about love. When Christians talk about love, they talk about a reality that is paschal, triune, and incarnate.

Christian love is paschal. In our broken world, the process of loving is not easy or natural. It is fraught with faults, failures, and sin. Christians are called to love by continually and repeatedly repenting of their failings, by ongoing conversion, trying to live up to their faith again, and forgiving those around them who also fail. Cardinal Newman said that God is perfect and so does not need to change, but humans are imperfect and so need to change and change often. Just as it is Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that saves us, we are to continually die to self and sin in order to be reborn in new life where we must again die to the new self in order to be born again. This is paschal love; this is the way of the cross.

Christian love is also triune. The Church's doctrine of the Trinity says that God is three persons in one divine nature. Three persons, unique, unconfused, and yet one God. The Trinity is a relationship of Persons whose selves are not lost but perfected in and through their relationship to each other. God is not in isolation nor is God a couple. God is three, a community, and God calls us to share in His divine life. Christian love, then, can never be completely closed off from the outside world and can never be purely private. Christian love always reaches out to draw others in.

Christian love is incarnate. Jesus is fully God and fully human, as the early ecumenical councils of the Church clarified. Jesus is perfect God and perfect human, everything that makes God God and everything that makes humans human. While one must

never disregard Jesus' divinity, one must not exclude His humanity either. If we are to love like Christ, we are to take the body and the soul seriously and inseparably. If we do not turn the other cheek and pray for the living and the dead we are doomed, but we are doomed if we do not give to those who need food, drink, shelter, and clothes.

And here is the peculiar twist of Christianity. These are the doctrines about God, but since God is love, they are also the doctrines of love. We sometimes miss the awkwardness of this identification. While legitimate, perhaps we too readily identify God with our anthropomorphized versions of Him. If God is love, love itself, then in loving spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends, friends, pets, objects, enemies, in genuinely loving something, anything, we actually experience God, albeit partially and imperfectly. And since God is love and love is relational, it is only in and through relationships, relationships that encompass forgiveness and repentance, that embrace the whole person, body and soul, do we come to know God as He truly is.

While there are other ways to learn Christian love, dating can and should teach us this kind of love. Paschal? If paschal love is a pattern of life-death-new life, dating is an excellent practice for this. Every dating relationship ends. Every one of them dies. They either break up or end in marriage. As with the end of a life, those involved in a dating relationship that ends must figure out "like the saints and the poets, how to do something creative with the idea of death" to quote Dorothy Sayers.<sup>11</sup>

Incarnate? Dating is amphibious, half friendship, half marriage. Two people are getting to know each other, hanging out together, discussing what happened and what matters. They are friends, even if nascent friends, but they are also more so. Everyone knows

that dating involves some element of *eros*, some sexuality. The questions surrounding sex and dating are never “is it there” but rather “why, when, and how far.” Dating then becomes a practice in trying to balance the friendship and the sexuality, of respecting both spiritual and physical aspects of a relationship. Neglecting friendship or the realities of sexual desire causes a distorted view of both the relationship and the world.

Triune? If dating is to be a legitimate Catholic practice that fosters Christian love, it must be open to others. A relationship that isolates you from your friends, strains your family relationships, or keeps you from the Church are problematic. Relationships where one or the other or both members are the sole focus are too narrow and non-Christian. Love is supposed to overflow and lead us to engage and depend upon others. Just as God’s inner life is a community and we are invited into this life, so too dating relationships should help strengthen our communities and be open to others. Couples should feel free to hang out at home or go out with friends. Movies and dinners are fine but so are volunteering at soup-kitchens, visiting the sick, after-school mentoring, and other acts of charity.

Dating as a joyful practice in Christian love distinguishes it from dating that is “wonderful.” Dating that is “wonderful” is problematic not because dating is not wonderful but because it is more than this. Wonderful or “full of wonder” ought to be present in Christian love. The fact that the Almighty Creator of the Universe made us in His communal image, became one of us to make us one with Him, and even offers us His love and acceptance despite our sins and betrayal is an amazing and wonder-full love. It is a demanding love, a great love, a love that can overcome death. This is the wonder.

But dating as wonderful often truncates this love, emphasizing the wonder in the first moments or months of a relationship. This is where the happiness and joy seem to be. This is when the world looks rosy. Again, there is nothing wrong with these moments as long as they are not assumed to be love in its entirety. Peter, James, and John all left everything to follow Jesus, yet this moment occurs at the beginning of each Gospel. After this wonderful moment, James and John ask for positions of authority at Jesus' right and left hands and Peter denies Jesus three times. It takes time for even the Apostles to truly become "full of wonder" for what God has done for them and for everyone. Thus, for dating to be Christian, it cannot just be the wonderful peak moments at the beginning of relationships. It must entail the demanding enterprise of love that endures despite failures (the paschal dimension of love), is attentive to the whole person (the incarnate dimension of love), and enlivens one's other relationships (the triune dimension of love). Only then will the dating relationship be "full of wonder" as it begins to reflect the love that is God's and is God.

*Dating is not wrong but can be done wrong.* As defined so far, dating can be a joyful practice in Christian love. Yet, dating can also be something else. While dating may not be inherently wrong, it is so often bound up with actions that are wrong that dating seems beyond redemption at times. Violence, premarital sex, and masturbation (either by one's self or as a couple) seem so much a part of contemporary dating that often people assume that the Catholic Church's teaching condemns dating in judging these activities unfit for the good of the Christian and Gospel living.

While not prohibiting dating *per se*, the Church does condemn relationships, any relationships, including dating relationships,

that include these actions. Thus, no truly Catholic perspective of dating can include such activities as intercourse, oral or anal sex, mutual masturbation, or violence. The Church holds these teachings because it is concerned, as the Catholic theologian William May put it, that humans do nothing against their own good.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the Church condemns any relationship that does not help us to be genuinely concerned about ourselves and others.

For example, part of the Church's logic behind its prohibitions of premarital sex is that those who engage in it do not take their partner or the potential children from such a union as seriously as love demands. The Church easily says if you love someone, you can have sex with them. The trick is that the love required for sex demands that you commit to the other person in front of God and family, to be there in good times and bad, riches and poverty, sickness and health, and welcome the children born from the union. To paraphrase Saint Augustine, "love who you date and do what you want." The Church reasons that if you truly love another, you will avoid those very same practices that the Church condemns. You will avoid them not just because they are sinful or the Church tells you to do so, but because you love the other person. This is what the Church wants: not imperfect actions which cause you to "fear the pains of hell" but perfect actions that you do because you "love God."

This proposal—if you truly love someone, you will treat that person in a certain way—is, in part, what Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* is about.<sup>13</sup> John Paul II said that the way we treat people reveals whether we truly love them. For example, the body language of sex implies a corresponding spiritual language. Both should say, "I give myself to you completely." Yet, when

contraception is used or there is no marriage, people are speaking a lie. They may be saying with their bodies that they give themselves completely but their actions say they are holding something back. This dishonesty, as is the case with all dishonesty, damages trust and thus the relationship.

Thus, a Catholic perspective of dating is incompatible with any sinful act. Dating, if it is to be a joyful practice in Christian love, cannot be reconciled with sin or evil.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE CATHOLIC APPROACH**

This booklet is a practical guide, and often practicality is best understood in terms of what is the case and what should be the case. Throughout, I have indicated the practical implications of this Catholic perspective on dating. Here, I wish to highlight five practical implications that flow through almost everything that has been said.

*Dating relationships should strengthen friendships and family relationships.* If dating is truly a practice in Christian love, then it should build up our relationships with others, especially those close to us. If the time a couple spends together undermines their relationships with their families and friends, their relationship is going awry. Disapproval from family and friends ought to be a warning sign about the relationship. While I do not believe the 1880's practice of "keeping company" is the ideal, hanging out with families or friends is an excellent dating practice. It teaches the couple how to relate to each other in the context of a broader community.

Of course, this openness of dating to family and friends has a corresponding responsibility for the family and friends. Both friends and families ought to be open to dating relationships. They must trust their child or friend and do all they can to



support them. Any criticisms and concerns must be motivated out of true compassion and not driven by any ulterior motives. Families and friends also need to take dating relationships seriously, inviting conversations about them as well as giving the couple some space.

Finally, and this cannot be stressed too much, the key role for parents is to model a good relationship. People first learn how relationships work from their parents; hence, parents must constantly work at their own relationships so that they show forth the love of Christ as best as they can. Parents should adopt Saint Francis' dictum to "preach the gospel at all times, and use words if necessary."

*Dating relationships should be connected to parish life.* If the Catholic practice of dating should be open to family and friends, it should even more so be open to the Church in the form of the local community. The parish is where all sorts of people gather to worship Jesus and reflect on the implications of their faith in the risen Lord for their life.

Parishes can provide peer groups for couples to talk about their faith and their relationships. They can share common struggles and difficulties as well as successes and triumphs. What is perhaps even more valuable is that parishes can also provide couples with opportunities for prayer and service. So often in dating, we default to movies and flowers, where, as Christians, we should spend more time in service to neighbors, strangers, and our enemies. Parishes often have countless outreach programs that would make great "dates" for couples.

Like the openness to family and friends, openness to parishes means that parishes have a responsibility to dating couples. If parishes have a large number of people dating, the community

ought to offer opportunities for them to participate in the community as couples, perhaps through peer groups, perhaps through service. Whatever it is, parishes need to recognize the importance of dating, just as dating couples need to recognize the importance of the parish.

*People who date need to know forgiveness.* Since we are broken creatures, we often fall and sin. This is true in general but also in dating. While we should not overlook sin and failure, and should be clear about what we should and should not do in dating, we should also be ready to suggest repentance and offer forgiveness. This is especially the case because often when people sin in their dating relationships, they already know that they have done wrong and feel bad about it. They have already convicted themselves, so the parent and friends need to communicate their love and acceptance. The importance of the sacrament of reconciliation should not be overlooked. The sacrament not only gives people a chance to recognize their wrongs and move on, it actually offers God's forgiveness and a deeper incorporation into the Church community. The power of this sacrament is too often overlooked.

This forgiveness should extend especially to situations in which a pregnancy outside of marriage occurs. Catholic communities should do everything morally permissible to ensure that this does not happen, but once it happens, our responsibility is to care for the mother and the already conceived child. Catholics should never let their opposition to premarital sex in any way compromise their commitment to life. Abortion is never an option. Thus, parents, friends, and even parishes need to be prepared to deal with the occasional pregnancy in ways that express Christ's forgiving love.

Finally, sometimes forgiveness needs to be known even if there is no sin. Guilt and responsibility are often the predominant feeling

with those who have been raped. Even though these women did nothing wrong, they need to know that they are still loved and accepted by the community. We Catholics should make sure that they do.

*Dating changes over time.* Dating is by no means a required activity to learn love. Friendship, celibacy and perpetual virginity all have a revered tradition in Catholicism that speaks of their ability to foster a genuine Christ-like love. Thus, no individual should feel that they must date, or that something is wrong with them if they do not date, or be ashamed if they cannot find a date. The call of the Christian is to loving discipleship and this call is open to all by the grace of God.

Many people do date in our culture, however. And since dating spans the time period from the early to mid teens almost until thirty, dating itself changes and thus the issues surrounding dating do as well. In the teenage years, people are distinguishing themselves from their parents and trying to discern who they are, and what they value. Thus, at this age, dating is often new and connected with people's exploration and development of their identity. Since Christians believe that discovering ourselves is not an isolated endeavor but done through serving others, dating should not be an isolated endeavor. It should be done in the context of the home and with friends. These communities will both help in the discernment of self and good dating relationships. Moreover, since teenage dating relationships rarely last, families and friends can encourage the one who dates to treat those whom he or she dates with the love and respect due to every human being.

The late teens through the early twenties, the college years for most, are slightly different. People are less likely to be living at home than in dormitories or apartments. This autonomy brings

added responsibilities as well as increased vulnerabilities. People at this age are better able to make choices and stand up for what they believe in, but there are others who exploit this newfound freedom. They manipulate and prey on others. The fact that dating violence is higher on college and university campuses than the wider culture is telling. Thus, people who date during this time must have a clear sense of what they believe is right and wrong. They must develop close friends to help in the discernment of good and bad relationships. Dating is so often fraught with exploitation during this time period, and there are often so few community checks on such sins, that people who date during this time period should be aware of the realities of date rape and violence, and find good people to trust and help them.

Finally, dating in the post-college years, the twenties, is also slightly different. People have more autonomy with their own source of income and own place to live. People are usually more aware of who they are and what they believe. Often when people are dating during this time period, the question of marriage comes up, if not by the couple then by others. Since people are statistically most likely to get married in their twenties, the question seems natural. The question, though, is misplaced. People's concern should not be whether you fit into the pattern of graduating from college-dating-marrying but rather if the person you are dating is good and good for you. The question of marriage in a dating relationship should arise from the mutual love of the couple and be discerned with friends and families. Others should not be pushing people into marriage because marriage is what normally takes place.

For each of these stages in life, and especially for the time after college, people should not become isolated from family, friends,

and communities. People should have a network of relationships, and dating relationships should support these networks. If they do not, this is a warning sign. The parish community can gather people who are focused on Jesus. Thus, this community can help in the discernment of dating relationships. If you are connected to the parish, the person you are dating should help nourish this commitment rather than draw you away from it. Does the person make you more joyful? More attentive to the needs of others? More faithful in attending Church? More reflective about your relationships with Jesus? These questions are important throughout your life, and all good dating relationships support them. After college is when we are most independent and thus establish many of the patterns that carry us through our adult life. Thus, we should be maturing in our faith and thus be dating people who support rather than detract from our faith.

*God is Love.* Dating for Catholics should be a joyful practice in Christian loving. Despite all the potential dangers and missteps, the faulty cultural models and condemnations of the practice, dating can lead us to love and to God. We learn to love and find God in relationships. As the first epistle of Saint John says, “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 7-8). Although John was not talking about dating, his words capture what dating from a Catholic perspective should be about: if you date, you must strive to genuinely love the one you are dating, and if you do so, you are also striving for God and to know God.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This history is based on Mary Ann Schwartz & Barbara Marliene Scott, “Dating, Coupling, and Mate Selection,” *Marriages and Families: Diversity and Change, Fifth Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Schwartz & Scott’s *Marriages and Families*, 158-161.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (1988).

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, n. 12: “This particular doctrine, often expounded by the Magisterium of the Church, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act.

“The reason is that the fundamental nature of the marriage act, while uniting husband and wife in the closest intimacy, also renders them capable of generating new life—and this as a result of laws written into the actual nature of man and of woman. And if each of these essential qualities, the unitive and the procreative, is preserved, the use of marriage fully retains its sense of true mutual love and its ordination to the supreme responsibility of parenthood to which man is called. We believe that our contemporaries are particularly capable of seeing that this teaching is in harmony with human reason.”

<sup>7</sup> This description of “practice” is derived from Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

<sup>8</sup> “Evidently, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.

“Two things emerge clearly from this rapid overview of the concept of *eros* past and present. First, there is a certain relationship between love and the Divine: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Yet we have also seen that the way to attain this goal is not simply by submitting to instinct. Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or “poisoning” *eros*, they heal it and restore its true grandeur.” Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Stanley Hauerwas: A Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 524.

<sup>10</sup> David Popenoe & Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, “Ten Important Research Findings on Marriage and Choosing a Marriage Partner,” Information Brief from the National Marriage Project’s Ten Things to Know Series at the State University of New Jersey: Rutgers, <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/pubtentthingsyoungadults.htm>, downloaded 4/9/07.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Sayers, “Problem Picture,” *The Whimsical Christian* (NY: Collier Books, 1987), 133.

<sup>12</sup> William May, *Catholic Sexual Ethics*, (Knights of Columbus’ *Veritas Series*, 2001), 13. May is actually using a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas: “God is offended by us only because we act contrary to our own good” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 3.122).

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body According to John Paul II* (NY: Pauline Books & Media, 1997).

## FOR FURTHER READING

There are very few books dealing directly with dating and even fewer that bring the Catholic tradition to bear on it. Below is a list of books that address important dimensions of love and relationships that are useful in understanding dating.

*Deus Caritas Est* (2005). The first encyclical by Pope Benedict XVI talks about the very nature of love and how this love manifests itself in the world.

*Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006. This collection of the Pope John Paul II's reflections illuminates the interconnectedness of love, sex, and marriage.

*Virtuous Passions: The Formation of Christian Character* by G. Simon Harak. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001. This book talks about how our relationships form and shape our affections and our character.

*Friendship and the Moral Life* by Paul Wadell. University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. This book discusses the role of friendship in the Christian tradition and the importance of friendship for shaping our Christian character.

*Save the Date: A Spirituality of Love, Dating, Dinner, and the Divine* by Jason King & Donna Freitas. New York: Crossroads, 2003. This is one of the few books on dating that engages the Catholic tradition.

*The Long Loneliness* by Dorothy Day. New York: HarperOne, 1997. Dorothy Day is renowned for the Catholic Worker movement. This book is her spiritual autobiography and discusses how her common law marriage led her to commitment to God. This edition has an introduction by Robert Coles.



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jason E. King graduated from Berea College in Kentucky with majors in Mathematics and Philosophy. After college, he volunteered at Saint Pius V grade school in Chicago teaching students who were behind in math and reading. He then went to Washington, DC, and earned a Ph.D. in Catholic theology from The Catholic University of America. In 2003, he co-authored the book, *Save the Date* (Crossroads). King is now an assistant professor of theology at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, PA. He is married with two children.