Is Sex Different After Marriage?
by James Healy, PhD

The Catholic Church’s position regarding sex before marriage is clear. Despite that, many couples who marry were sexually active before marriage. Does sex change after marriage? I think it can, it does, and it should. Let me explain.

When I was younger, I read somewhere that the male reaches his sexual peak at age 18, and it slowly diminishes from that point. That was bad news for me, since I was in the seminary until I was 22, and didn’t get married until I was 31. I used to say that I slept through my sexual peak.

I needn’t have worried. I’m 62 now, and I still haven’t reached my peak.

Does that sound like bragging? It’s actually just the opposite.

Making love is the closest we come to physically becoming one person. Indeed, on occasion, making love does become one person: a unique blend of our two bodies, born nine months later. By its very nature, making love is other-oriented and future-oriented: an intense and complete giving over to each other. We long to live out what our bodies express so intensely. Because of that, at the moment we commit ourselves to each other in marriage, our bodies and our lives come into deep agreement.

But it’s a process. At 62, I have finally been married as long as I was single. But there are still ways I need and want to be a better husband. I’m still too selfish; my life still hasn’t fully caught up to what my body is saying. But the closer I get, the more overwhelming and profound our sexual life together becomes.

Bringing our bodies and our lives into alignment is hard work—the work of a lifetime. The passion and intensity of married love increases, not so much because of improved technique, but because we are giving ourselves to each other more and more deeply.

Yes, we can go back to church and renew our marriage vows, but, really, every time we make love, we are renewing those vows. We are saying, “What we are doing with our bodies, we intend to do with our entire lives.” The poet Robert Bly says, “I am the one who will love you when your hair is white,” and that is what we say when we make love.

For a short while, I gave a talk entitled, “Want to improve your sex life? Come hear Jim Healy talk about the Golden Triangle!” Perhaps they were disappointed to find out that the Golden Triangle that improved their sex life was the way they cooperated in managing work, parenting, and household management. If that triangle of responsibilities felt lopsided to one of the partners, then that person...
was usually either too tired or too angry to feel like giving themselves to the other sexually. Managing responsibilities equitably is an ongoing process in marriage, but sometimes small adjustments can pay a big dividend.

For us Christians, the stakes are even higher. Jesus went through His Transfiguration, His Crucifixion and His Resurrection. In other words, he underwent a mountaintop experience where everything was perfect, a dying experience where everything seemed to be going wrong, and a rebirth experience where new life came directly out of his suffering. Married couples experience the same progression over and over in their marriage. If we believe in Jesus, we can ask him to help us “lean into” the mystery of our own glorious moments, our suffering moments, and our joyous moments, being faithful to all of them.

I believe our sexual lives together are cumulative. When I make love to my wife, I am holding in my heart all the times we've made love before, at every stage in our marriage, during times of celebration and during times of forgiveness, and that adds additional depth and resonance to the present. When I was in Trinidad recently, I got to see something wonderful that reminded me of this cumulative effect.

Trinidad is the only place outside South America where a bird called the scarlet ibis lives. I caught sight of one ibis disappearing into the woods, and the color was so brilliant, so outside of my experience, that it almost sent me into a trance. By late afternoon, though, thousands of them had come winging in to roost on the same island. The sight was overwhelming.

Each married couple’s sexual life is something like that island. Each time we make love, we add another incandescent moment to that island of memories, each moment both celebrating and promising the commitment we've made to each other.

Does married love inevitably go that way, where our bodies and our lives speak the same language? No indeed. But the closer we get to that, the closer we are to our peak.

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