

**(Re) Awakening of Sexuality and Intimacy Needs
Women's Experience**

**Jose Parappully SDB, PhD
sumedhacentre@gmail.com**

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this edition, I present Women's' experience of Sexuality and intimacy s at midlife.

For a woman, midlife is the period when her sexual drive (arousals, urges) and the demands for sexual pleasure is at their peak. Her sexual drive is awakened in the late twenties or even later and reaches its peak in the late 30's or early 40's. Midlife can be for a woman a time of sexual self-discovery, greater sexual enjoyment and adventurism, and sexually speaking, one of the richest and most fulfilling periods in her life. It is quite common for women at this stage to seek outlets for this increased sexual drive and longing for pleasure.

Experience of Married Women

For married women, age thirty-five begins the dangerous age of potential infidelity. Many midlife married women tend to be dissatisfied with their sexual relationships and may long for sexual intimacies outside marriage. There is ample opportunity for them today at work and elsewhere to mingle with men and the closeness and support they experience can lead to intimate relationships.

A wife is most likely to be unfaithful, if ever, in her late thirties and early forties. The desire for extramarital affair coincides with her sexual peak, which for most women as mentioned above, is reached in the late 30's. Her desire for genital pleasure peaks at a time when her man is experiencing a noticeable decline in his sexual drive.

At midlife a man's emotional intimacy needs come to the fore, while physical expression and satisfaction become more important to women. This can cause a mismatch in the sexual and intimacy needs of married midlife men and women, leading to discontent and desire for more fulfilling sexual experiences outside marriage. This sexual mismatch is often what leads to divorce, though other reasons may be put forward.

William Masters and Virginia Johnson, pioneering sex researchers, point to the increased sexual freedom that a woman enjoys at midlife. When she was younger, her sexual encounters were restricted by sexual inexperience, cultural prohibitions against female sexual indulgence and the pressure to please her male partner. But at midlife, she is more free to seek her own interests,

fulfil her own desires unrestricted by cultural expectations. She can now relate sex to her own wishes and needs, seek sexual pleasure the way she wants, experiment and enjoy herself with less inhibition or restraint.

Experience of Celibate Religious Women

"Any man will do!" Anne Marie, a midlife celibate religious woman, said during discussions at a workshop on Psychosexual and Celibate Integration at Midlife. What she meant was that her sexual urges were at times so intense that she would have been happy to have had a sexual experience with any man to satisfy those urges. However, she knew she couldn't if she was to be faithful to her vows. Not everyone might experience such intense urges, or dare to admit it in public if they do, but almost everyone experiences some form of sexual awakening or reawakening at midlife..

Many celibate religious women, who had no problems with sexual issues when they joined religious life, usually in late adolescence or early twenties, experience in middle adulthood a new sexual awakening. They can be confused and frightened by these sexual stirrings and longings. They may experience desire for genital intimacy with hitherto unknown intensity as was the case with Anne Marie. In midlife, may be for the first time, they recognise themselves as sexual beings. They may begin to experiment with or express themselves through genital sexual behaviour in response to these stirrings and longings. Some doubt their religious vocation, telling themselves, "If God really wanted me to be a celibate religious, I would not be having these urges and desires."

The lure of an affair can be true of the religious woman too. Working together with priests and laymen in various capacities is common experience for a woman religious today. Close collaboration and support can lead to an emotional bonding which becomes very satisfying at a time when she is struggling to negotiate the challenges that midlife throws at her. The physical sexual urges she experiences at midlife, can push her to seek genital intimacy as well.

What is said here about the religious woman may also be true of the single woman at midlife. However she may have freedom and avenues for sexual expressions that would not be open to the religious woman committed to celibacy. In this sense the experience of the two may differ.

Implications for Religious Formation

The foregoing has implications for the formation of women religious. Most female candidates enter religious formation in late adolescence or the early twenties. At this time their sexuality has not been awakened yet. When formators question them about their ability to live chaste celibacy, they are likely to answer that it is not a problem for them. They do not as yet know the nature of human sexuality or the cost of celibate chastity. As explained above, it is in their late thirties and early forties that women's sexual and intimacy needs come to the fore. The young candidates and religious have to be educated about the late emergence of sexual needs and not to be frightened or think they might have made a mistake in regard to their vocation when they begin to experience the stirrings of sexuality at midlife.

It is also important that religious women going through their midlife transition have the opportunity to share their struggles around sexuality and intimacy with trusted and well-informed

spiritual guides. This will help them better negotiate the sexual and intimacy challenges of midlife.

Midlife and Menopause

Often women tend to consider menopause as a midlife phenomenon. In reality it is not. Midlife can set in long before menopause. While the average age for menopause today is about 51, for most women the midlife transition occurs in the late 30s to early 40s. Research has shown that there is no relationship between the changes of midlife and menopause.

Most women take menopause in their stride without experiencing too much discomfort or distress. Many of them see menopause as a positive, adaptive life event. For many women menopause appear to bring greater sexual freedom and satisfaction.

Reflection Questions

- *What are the midlife sexual and intimacy dynamics you are currently experiencing or have experienced in the past? How do you feel about these experiences?*
- *How can you meet the sexuality and intimacy challenges at midlife in fulfilling ways keeping with your life-status— marital, religious, or single?*

Prayer

A scene of expression of great intimacy on the part of a woman is found in three Gospels – (John, 12, 1-8; Mark 14, 3-9; Mathew 26, 6-13). Jesus is so appreciative of the woman's gestures that he tells those present (in Mark and Mathew), that "*wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her.*" You could read any of these passages slowly and stay with whatever response/reaction you have to the scene. You could spend then some time speaking to Jesus about these as well as the sexuality, celibacy or intimacy challenges you are facing at this time in your life and listen to what he might have to say to you in response..

Have safe and happy weekend. Be blessed.
Thank you for listening/reading.

Jose Parappully SDB, PhD
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