

Recovering intimacy in a lonely world

In the early 1990s, the famed mystery author P.D. James published “The Children of Men.” Set in the year 2021, it describes a dystopian world where the human race had become incapable of reproducing itself.

The scientific reason for this sudden and total collapse in the birthrate was unknown, but the story’s narrator concludes: “Pornography and sexual violence on film, on television, in books, in life, had increased and become more explicit but less and less in the West we made love and bred children.”

James wrote this book well before the rise of the internet, but like all good science fiction, she had a glimpse of a possible future world. It wasn’t pretty.

Not quite three decades later, and James’ dystopia seems to be arriving right on schedule. Sex, love and marriage all are showing troubling signs of decline, according a recent article in The Atlantic magazine. Titled “The Sex Recession,” the author, Kate Julian, actually ends up reporting on an even more worrisome decline in intimacy. It’s not just in the United States, and it’s not just among millennials.

The author at first takes a rather head-scratching tone: Why aren’t these young people having more sex the way they are supposed to in our enlightened age? But the research she quotes shows that rates of sex are declining for all age groups and in many Western countries.

Despite the increasingly graphic presentations of popular media, despite the multibillion dollar and increasingly perverted pornography industry, physical and psychological intimacy are on the skids. People are hooking up less, dating less, having sex less, enjoying it less.

Masturbation, coyly called “self-pleasuring” but referred to in slang as “fapping,” is no longer taboo. In Japan, where the birthrate has plummeted to near demographic extinction, self-pleasure aids are booming. Of course, this is what porn is ultimately all about, but in Japan, porn involves not just human actors, but animated fantasy

creatures, making the experience singularly unreal.

Back home, the report tells us, dating and hookup apps and ubiquitous smartphone screens aren't making things better. What they are doing is degrading the ability to simply approach another person and have a conversation or suggest a date.

In fact, teens who report going on dates are decreasing. College classes now instruct students on the lost art of dating. Even at Catholic universities, kids are looking for how-to instructions on negotiating this suddenly strange terrain. In the world of #MeToo, asking someone out seems less like an invitation to coffee than potential harassment.

That license has led to lassitude is not likely to shock the church, which has two millennia of wisdom when it comes to human nature and sex. Sexual love is meant to be expressed in the context of marriage, the church teaches. It is meant to be at once total, faithful, exclusive and fecund.

In his much-abused encyclical "Humanae Vitae," Pope Paul VI talked about the "inseparable connection" in marital love between the "unitive" and "procreative." For the past century of birth control, the battleground has been about the procreative aspect. Now the other shoe is dropping.

The "inseparable connection" has been severed. Society has become increasingly efficient at separating conception from sex, and as Pope Paul predicted, the unitive aspect that is lifelong intimacy is eroding.

The collapse of intimacy that The Atlantic describes may be an opportunity for the church to recast its message. Rather than "Thou shalt not" as its battle cry, the church can offer a genuinely positive vision of "the joy of love," a holistic understanding of sex and intimacy for a society increasingly despairing about both.

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