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International Priests: Different Understandings of Sexuality and Gender Roles

According to recent estimates, about 5,500 priests from other countries serve in the United States with 380 to 400 new ones arriving every year. Dean Hoge and Aniedi Okure have researched the complex issues underlying the positive and negative consequences of this phenomenon (Hoge and Okure), and they along with many others recommend good orientation. As missionaries from Europe and North America for decades recognized the need for adequate training to minister in another context, the same is likewise essential for those coming to the United States.

One area to be addressed is the understanding of sexuality and gender roles. Formal orientation programs for international priests normally treat this issue from the moral and legal perspectives, including a review of the “Dallas Charter.” Without denying these essential points, one needs likewise to understand how deep-seated cultural and social factors shape and affect those coming from other countries. While this dynamic applies to all pastoral workers, the focus here is on international priests.

Culture, Sexuality, and Gender Roles

Culture is the world of meaning that all human beings need for identity and order. It offers guidance for dealing with ambiguity, sickness, death, natural disaster, or any form of disorder. People are shaped but not totally determined through the natural process of socialization. With age and experience, persons to various degrees can choose to alter their cultural thinking and behavior, such as when they encounter other cultures. However, their own culture continues to provide the foundational world of meaning.

The meaning of sexuality, as part of culture, shapes an individual’s sense of belonging, self-worth, and proper and improper behavior (Orobator). Furthermore, sexuality “is a product, or construction, of social and cultural influences during any specific historical time” (Irvine, 12). Slavery affected the understanding of sexuality and gender roles for African American men and women, as Confucianism did in China, and as double wage earners per household did in U.S. society.

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Culture consists of interrelated parts. Like a puzzle, each “piece” needs to fit with all the other pieces. In some cultures a man had the responsibility to take his brother’s wife and children into his household upon the death of his brother. This was society’s way of caring for widows and orphans. Unlike a puzzle, cultures and the individual “pieces” are living, changing organisms. For example, every culture/society changes in response to new generational understandings of sexuality and gender roles. How challenging for an outsider coming into this shifting picture! And one cannot fit a piece of one’s own “puzzle” into another.

In her book *Sexuality Education Across Cultures*, Janice Levine describes three levels of sexual scripts in every culture. First of all, *cultural scenarios* are collective patterns that specify appropriate sexual goals, objects, and relationships. These are the theoretical systems or “blueprints” for a culture. Secondly, *interpersonal scripts* enable people to function appropriately in sexual situations. This is the external level governing coherent cultural sexual interaction. Finally, *intrapsychic scripts* constitute an internal world of desires, fantasies, and wishes. This is the internal level of managing and ordering sexual desires.

Sexuality and Gender Roles Across Cultures

A priest from another country is “at home” in his own culture of meaning, identity, and order. He enters another cultural-social context that often contradicts what he learned. Levine’s three levels of sexual scripts provide a framework for understanding and engaging this difference. I will also use examples from my ministerial experience in Papua New Guinea (PNG) to illustrate the adjustment in reverse for an international priest ministering in the United States.

The cultural scenarios for understanding sexuality in PNG are based on the funda-

mental separation of the worlds of women and men—each with their own roles, powers, and rituals of initiation. Women’s sacredness is centered on their power to bring life through childbirth, while men’s is centered on their power to bring life through social ritual. The intersection of the powers of these two worlds is so dangerous that strict taboos keep them apart. Women in their menstrual cycle and in childbirth are strictly separated from men, their ritual activities, and the preparation of their food. At the same time, it is necessary to maintain a strong bond of men with men and women with women. What happens when a priest from a culture like PNG comes to minister in the United States? The conflict and confusion occurs not only in terms of the theoretical worldview, but more immediately on the level of behavior.

The interpersonal scripts are the easiest to identify since they are external and affect ministry immediately. Based on the cultural framework of PNG above, physical contact in public between men and women is forbidden. During six years in PNG, I only saw couples holding hands on six occasions and only in the city or on a college campus, that is, distant from the traditional village lifestyle. One of the European missionary priests who preceded me in the 1970s as a parish priest had the habit of putting his hand on the shoulders of older primary school children (boys and girls). When others told him that this was not considered appropriate in this culture, he responded that this was “their problem” and that the people should “get over it.” Quite soon the bishop removed him from the parish.

On the other hand, public physical contact among men and among women is considered natural. Two days after arriving in PNG, I was talking with a group of young men at a Teachers’ Training College. When one of them reached over and held my hand, my natural instinct was to pull my hand

away in shock. However, as I looked around the circle I noticed that a number of them were doing the same as they enjoyed the conversation. I realized that my discomfort and judgment was only in my head and heart, that is, in the sexual scripts of my culture. Even though I felt awkward, I didn't withdraw my hand and I learned an important lesson in adjusting to another culture.

Later in the pastoral setting I understood why couples didn't hold hands during the marriage ceremony, women and men sat on opposite sides of the church, and praying with a sick woman in her house was prohibited unless someone else accompanied me. On a deeper level, within Western culture spouses are expected to have a deep personal relationship. However, PNG understands marriage as a relationship between families, and primary relationships for the husband are with other men, not with his wife. Difficulties between spouses were addressed by the extended families and clans. The very rare individual "counseling" I did as a foreigner was with professionals married in a less traditional PNG way.

Intrapsychic scripts deal with the internal world of sexual desires and involve the deeper human desires for intimacy (not just genital intimacy) and spirituality—the yearning to love and be loved. While healthy appropriate relationships with women were life-giving within my own culture, social association with women in PNG was very limited. At the same time, I had to deal with my initial fantasies and feelings regarding the common sight of bare-breasted women working in the gardens and villages or breast-feeding their babies.

International Priests in the United States

The underlying dynamics and levels of cultural adjustment are complex. It is important for an international priest to under-

stand how his cultural understanding of sexuality and gender roles shapes him (Francoeur). This becomes clearer when he is outside it. Those of the receiving community need to be aware of the context of the international priests (Arbuckle). At the same time, the international priest needs to be open to understanding the situation in the United States. How challenging and difficult is it for him, with the sexual scripts of his culture, to understand the attitudes toward homosexuality, cohabitation, divorce, the church scandal of the sexual abuse of minors, the availability of sexual images in public and on the internet, and the role of women in the church and wider society within the U.S. context. While some aspects of this adaptation are quicker and fairly easy, others touch one's core and require much more discernment.

Furthermore, the context of a U.S. parish is complex with multicultural, multigenerational, and multitheological perspectives on sexuality and gender roles. How challenging this is for a U.S.-born priest, and how much more so for an international one! Beyond the significant skills and background required for preaching, liturgy, catechesis, and administration in a new context, how does one even approach marriage preparation, counseling, or even casual social interaction?

Beyond initial orientation, the ongoing mentoring of an international priest is essential in this process as with all areas of cultural and ministerial adjustments. Of course, this presupposes an attitude of respect and openness on the part of the international priest, pastor, pastoral staff, and parishioners. Gerald Arbuckle makes the following additional observation from the perspective of the receiving community: "If we are able to take up this challenge in relating to priests of different cultures in our midst, we will be able to relate to people of different cultures whom we serve in our ministries" (Arbuckle, 22).

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