

# Catholic Couples Sexuality

© 2008 Family Ministries Office, Archdiocese of Chicago  
www.familyministries.org



Dr. Gregory Popcak, author of many books on marriage and family, is the director of The Pastoral Solutions Institute. [www.ExceptionalMarriages.com](http://www.ExceptionalMarriages.com). Adapted from Dr. Popcak's new book, *Holy Sex! The Catholic Guide to Infallible Loving* (Crossroads).

## Holy Sex!

### One Rule for Negotiating Sexual Conflict

By Gregory K. Popcak

Disagreements about sex are among the most common problems afflicting married couples. Most couples will, at some point in their marriage, find themselves having differences about the frequency of their lovemaking, what positions are acceptable, or what kinds of affection are appropriate. The good news is that Catholics can rely on a few principles that can allow them to have a completely moral yet fully passionate and joyful sexual relationship.

### The One Rule

Let's clarify the boundaries that are set by Church teaching and objective moral principles. There is really only One Rule about which married couples need to be mindful. Combining the various magisterial teachings, the One Rule might be articulated this way: Every act of lovemaking must be respectful of the dignity of the couple, and must express both an intention for greater unity and openness to life.

Concretely put, this virtually means that a couple may do whatever they wish as long as both feel loved and respected and the marital act ends with the man climaxing inside the woman and in the absence of barrier or hormonal contraceptives. Everything else is left to the couple's prudential judgment.

Of course, saying that something is left to the "prudential judgment" of the couple is not quite the same thing as saying "anything goes." To that end, I propose a few criteria that couples may use to help guide their prudential judgment.

Assuming that the One Rule is honored, I would encourage a couple who is struggling with disagreements about their sexual relationship to resist the temptation to root sexual discussions in their feelings—which may be influenced by many things that have nothing to do either with love or what's truly in the best interest of each other—and instead consider the following Four Pleasure Principles.

**Principle 1:** There should be continuity between your daily relationship and your sexual relationship.

Too many people think of sex as a pleasurable activity. But Christians view sex as the way one whole and holy person expresses him or herself fully to another whole and holy person. The origins of frustrating or unsatisfying sexual relations often have little to do with sex. If a couple wants to have a more intimate, communicative, joyful, playful, satisfying sexual relationship, they need to begin, not by arguing about sex, but by finding new ways to have a more intimate, communicative, joyful, playful, satisfying marriage.

The sexual relationship is a microcosm of the couple's entire marriage. When one partner wants to introduce something into the sexual relationship that would be objectively moral but the other partner still finds objectionable on an emotional level, it often means that new idea seems to require more vulnerability, playfulness, or trust than seems to make sense in the current context of the entire marriage.

Couples would do well to address these disagreements, not by arguing directly about the new addition to their sexual repertoire, but—assuming the suggestion does not violate the One Rule—by discussing how they would need to strengthen their day-to-day relationship to make this new addition seem more consistent with the vulnerability, trust, intimacy, partnership, and joy they experience out of the bedroom.

**Principle 2:** While you should never be afraid to explore all the permitted pleasures, you should never be tempted to see each other merely as givers and receivers of pleasure. You must always respect the dignity of each other as persons.

Your spouse is a human being, and although your mate is capable of offering you much comfort and pleasure, your mate is not, nor is ever intended to be, your toy. Any time you are tempted to think of each other merely as givers or receivers of pleasure you are diminishing your mate's humanity and the dignity of your marital relationship. There are two common ways mates treat each other as givers and receivers of pleasure rather than as persons.

The first is when a spouse sees sex as payment for services rendered, for instance, when a husband is a little extra helpful around the house and expects, that night, to be "paid" with sex, pouting or becoming incensed if this doesn't happen. The second is when a spouse tries to pressure the other into some new sexual position or activity, making the entire relationship about that thing, rather than about love. There are ways to introduce new ideas into the sexual relationship, but emotionally blackmailing one's spouse is not among those ways.

Your mate is a person who deserves your love and service. Sex is a celebration of the partnership. It is neither a right, nor a payment for services rendered.

**Principle 3:** Any sexual positions, items, articles of clothing, manners of speech, or playful actions used to help you achieve the fullness of sexual pleasure should be used in a manner that helps you and your beloved draw closer to each other, not to the thing.

Things should never become the primary point of the sexual relationship. Rather, they should be seen as the means you employ to experience the fullness of each other's love.

Many couples are suspicious of pleasure, but they shouldn't be. There is an old Jewish proverb that says, "God will hold you accountable for all the permitted pleasures you fail to enjoy." The Catholic Church has taken this motto to heart. Catholicism is a very sensual faith, known for its smells and bells and celebrations. As Catholic poet Hillaire Belloc once wrote, "Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine, there is laughter and music and good red wine!"

In that same vein, while respecting the One Rule, Catholic married couples should feel free to celebrate all the permitted pleasures in their sexual relationship. That said, sex is not about staging an event, it is about celebrating love and honoring your spouse. While different positions, lingerie, passionate language, etc. can be things a couple uses to draw closer to each other, these things should never be the focus of the sexual relationship. I often encounter spouses who feel like lovemaking "doesn't count" unless it includes certain activities, positions, or accoutrements. This is entirely the wrong view. "Working on your sexual relationship" does not mean staging a more exciting event. It means creating a more passionate, loving, joyful, intimate, communicative marriage in which all the permitted pleasures can be freely enjoyed.

**Principle 4:** While a lover's comfort zones should not be the final arbiter in sexual disputes, feelings related to comfort zones must be respected. A lover's discomfort is reason enough to delay participating in some sensual activity, even if it is not enough to rule out future participation in that activity entirely. The couple should continue to evaluate all permitted pleasures in the light of the relationship and in a spirit of prayer.

This rule has two sides to it. First, couples should try to not set limits on their sexual relationship that the Church does not set. Too often a spouse will object to some suggestion from their mate, not on objective moral principles—which is their right—but based solely on their comfort or preferences, which could actually be an offense against the generosity required by healthy, happy marriages.

That said, a mate's comfort level should be respected. Even though an individual spouse's comfort zone shouldn't be the final deciding factor of whether the couple ever enjoys certain pleasures together, the couple should take a mate's discomfort about a sexual suggestion seriously. Assuming that the request is not objectively offensive, the couple should ask what qualities they need to develop in their marriage to help integrate the new suggestion more comfortably. Does a new position require more vulnerability or trust than the couple currently has in each other? What would they need to do to increase that trust and vulnerability in the marriage overall? Does the suggestion require the couple to be more playful than they usually are with each other? What does the couple need to do to increase their experience of joy in the marriage overall?

On the one hand, couples shouldn't treat an individual spouse's comfort level as the final say whether a couple can enjoy a particular permitted pleasure. On the other hand, couples should treat that discomfort as a sign that there is work to be done on the marriage before a particular suggestion made in the bedroom would make sense in the context of the marriage.

The One Rule, combined with these Four Principles, can help couples find objective criteria to assist them in overcoming the obstacles they face while pursuing the joyful and intimate sexual relationship God and his Church desire for them. Couples struggling to apply these principles are encouraged to seek faithful counseling to help them achieve the fullness of their marital intimacy.

*Appeared originally in the Summer 2008 issue of Catholic Couples. Used with permission of the Family Ministries Office of the Archdiocese of Chicago, [www.familyministries.org](http://www.familyministries.org).*