1. The Need for Balanced Information

"God is love and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image…God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion."

CCC 2331

A WEDDING DAY IS a day to cherish—a pocket of precious time to look forward to and look back on with excitement and reverence. Months of planning unfold into a colorful and flavorful assortment of smiles, tears, and dance moves we've never seen before. Even when

the celebration winds down, though, the party isn't over. It's just getting started. A new life begins as husband and wife are awarded the many privileges of the sacred Sacrament of marriage. We are also confronted with many challenges. Some we anticipate. Others, not so much.

How can we? Marriage is a learning experience where we get to put the lessons we've heard about and witnessed for much of our lives into practice, from combining bank accounts to sharing a bed. Hopefully, we've had good teachers. Most of us are aware that we need help with learning how to manage finances, resolve conflicts, understand the Sacrament, and develop good communication skills.

But despite being one of the most intimate and complex aspects of marriage, the topic of sex itself is often left relatively untouched. And I'm not talking about techniques, but healthy expectations. Even if our first time has already come and gone, we are frequently left with our own devices and perceptions to lead the way. The problem is, how do we really know what is

good—or, better yet, *normal*—about the act if we aren't all working with the same information? Sometimes, we do figure it out on our own, but it can take a long time. Sometimes, we limp through marriage without even realizing it.

Limping

Almost a year and a half ago and not long after celebrating nine years of marriage, I was diagnosed with vaginismus, a spasmodic contraction of the muscles surrounding the vagina in response to a physical insertion of something or the thought/anticipation of such. This can be triggered in regard to sex, tampon use, or a pap smear or physical exam. It is not always painful, but for some women, it can cause great pain. For reasons that I won't go into now and am still trying to unpack, I did my best to hide the pain from my husband and push through. Despite my best efforts to conceal what hurt, I was unsuccessful at times. He always stopped without skipping a beat.

After about eight to eleven months of pelvic floor physical therapy, much of which I completed at home almost daily, the pain was nearly gone (with ongoing work that I'm not always diligent with). The way my body responds to sex, however, still isn't normal. Fifteen months after my diagnosis, the physical problem has mostly been addressed, but the way my brain interprets the idea of sex is still dysfunctional.

This response to sex weighs heavily on me and begs the question: How the heck did I get here? I've spent the last year or so trying to figure out the answer to that question in counseling and through important conversations with medical professionals and other women. I've wondered if there aren't some common threads in other marriages, either with the same or different situations.

I'm only one person with only my experience. But there is a whole spectrum of physical, spiritual, relational, and emotional problems that are very real for an array of Catholic and Christian couples. Some of these faithful women have boldly started striking up

some honest public conversations about sex. And with that, it seems as though women are crawling out of the woodwork with important questions and concerns about pain, low libido, lack of sexual pleasure, and so-called "sacrificial love." Do men have questions, too? Why does there seem to be so much confusion? How did any of us get here?

In a *Legatus* article, Leila Miller details "How the Devil Works to Destroy the Family." This is no secret. A solid family unit living out marital love as God intends is one of his biggest threats, so it's no surprise that married couples are a large target of his attack. But there are various reasons for the confusion that has entered into some sexual relationships, and sometimes, the struggle is the result of something as simple as not having enough information.

Thankfully, the Church has some incredible warriors who continue to explain the Theology of the Body and true chastity in terms we can understand and that resonate deeply within us, laying a huge sledge hammer into the enemy's plans. They have helped

countless men and women, are a true gift to the Church, and have only grown in popularity. There is one other thing they have in common: The most recognizable and influential Catholic voices on this topic are men. In addition, many of our cultural ideas about sex emphasize the male point of view in ways I will explore throughout this short book.

Just to be clear: I'm not suggesting that there is anything wrong with these popular Catholic voices or the male point of view in general. These perspectives are valuable because we need to hear what men have to say. But the reality is that no man can ever relate a woman's experience of sex—no matter how holy, Catholic, or experienced he is. It is impossible not because men are lesser but because they are not women. The balance of a wide range of female perspectives is crucial and has been missing from these conversations for a long time—especially the perspectives of women who have suffered in silence.

We each bring something valuable to the table. You don't have to be a member of a certain sex to share the

Theology of the Body or God's design for sex and marriage. But, as the Theology of the Body points out, God is wholeness: the entirety of male and female. He made us male and female because we are created in His image and likeness, and our goal as married couples is to grow in unity with each other and God, toward wholeness. We need the male perspective. But without the woman's raw and honest perspective, too, our information is incomplete, and our expectations are unrealistic. We lack the fullness, or wholeness, of God's plan for sex and marriage.

"The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fecundity."
CCC 2335

We can, and should, read Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church directly to discover the wholeness of God's plan. It's all right there. But we also learn by witnessing the actions of others and listening to their stories and explanations. There is nuance! We absorb messages from our parents, our culture, our

friendship circles, influencers, people from various denominations, youth group leaders, and speakers.

It's not just about the words on the page but about how they play out in real life. And they play out in many different ways depending on the individual and the couple.

We need a variety of female perspectives to speak to situations that men can never experience themselves. And the voices of women who have suffered should inform any conversation that discusses a healthy sexual relationship between spouses, because previous messages, both intentionally and unintentionally, have not been balanced—or complementary, if you will. You might say there have been some missing pieces.

What Tends to be Missing From Male-Dominated Conversations About Sex

It struck me pretty hard one day as I considered my own perceptions of sex, both before I experienced it and then how it played out in our marriage: I realized that a large majority of sex talks within Catholic

communities, whether they are initiated by men or women, focus predominantly on saving sex for marriage. The conversation generally stops there.

This is certainly an important message to address and open up honest conversations about, but what about after you get married? The implication, and sometimes outright assurance, is that all of our hard work of remaining chaste, and/or going to Confession, or simply sliding that wedding ring onto our finger, will pay off in beautiful and pleasurable experiences both physically and emotionally. For some people, that is the case (at least, there is a spectrum).

But what about when it's not the case? What if you don't *just figure it out*? What if it's *not beautiful*, even in a good, loving marriage? What if it hurts? What about mismatched libidos? Is marriage the only prerequisite for beautiful sex? Does everything just fall into place physically? It's not talked about very often, but it takes time and effort from both spouses—and sometimes a lot of healing—to achieve the goodness of sex that is often professed.

Even when pleasure comes naturally for both the man and woman, it is not the only piece of the puzzle. So, *we shouldn't just focus on saving sex for marriage but also on what sex should look like within a healthy marriage.* In this book, I will take a look at how some of the differences between men and women play out in various scenarios and why it is so important to have knowledge of both perspectives. We'll consider having sex for the first time, how good sex doesn't *just happen*, the difference between sacrificial love and denying actual needs, and how important it is to understand what we are teaching our bodies over time.

This book is written from my personal experience as a cradle Catholic in pursuit of education, former youth group attendee, leader, and then minister for a short time, who got married 10 years ago and uncovered a mountain of truth about herself and sex over the past year. I have heard from many women on social media and have engaged in thorough conversations with trusted leaders in this space, as well as my experienced pelvic floor physical therapist who specializes in sexual dysfunction. I have been in counseling for years.

My perspective has also been fed by my experience as a Creighton Practitioner, which has given me unique insights into the lives of over 100 women from various faith backgrounds both before and after marriage, many of whom I taught before and after they had sex for the first time. What I have observed has fascinated me.

I don't intend to suggest that I have everything figured out but to take a look at the Catechism, share my perspective, and propose some questions to get us thinking more deeply about how we approach something as important as conversations about sex. Please read Church Doctrine yourself and continue to pursue good, holistic conversations! With something as intimate and sacred as sex, we have to get it right—or at least do better. There is too much at stake in the life of individual humans, marriages, and society to leave the way a woman's mind and body functions out of the conversation.

The next section will begin with an event that is meant to be precious and pined for but only sometimes follows through on its promises: the first time.