

## **The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture**

An Unexpected Prophet: What the 21st-Century Church Can Learn from Youth Ministry

### Introduction

Youth ministry is not just about youth. It's about ministry, period. By its very nature, adolescence embodies, sometimes acutely, fundamental concerns about being human: Who am I? Whom can I trust? What does it mean to be in communion with others? As a result, youth ministry invites transformation for the entire church and not for youth alone. As we look for ways to renew the church in Christ's name, we can't afford to overlook a prophet in our hometown: ministry for, by, and with the young people among us.

The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture have significant implications for ministry with youth, but they are no less important for the church at large. Kenda Creasy Dean suggests that youth ministry is the point at which Christians should reclaim a theology of desire—not for the sake of youth ministry, but for the sake of the church. Dean then posits that the postmodern crisis of fidelity calls the contemporary church to reclaim holy friendship as central to the life of faith.

Jürgen Moltmann reflects on Jacob's struggle with God at the Brook Jabbok, on his own journey to faith as a young prisoner-of-war, and on prayer as watchful expectation. He calls Christians to watch for the hidden "yes" in the suffered "no" of God. Moltmann also addresses how one becomes a "true" theologian, exploring the personal side of theology and its existential depths.

Cynthia Rigby unpacks the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for youth ministry and for the church and demonstrates how this doctrine can help us understand the mystery of our friendships with God and with one another. She then looks at the doctrine of the incarnation from the perspective of young people seeking relevance for today and arrives at timeless truths for all God's people.

Eugene Rivers calls the church to move from a ministry of church maintenance to a ministry of true reconciliation and justice. He challenges us to listen to those beyond our comfort zone that we might serve as faithful witnesses to Christ in the new millennium.

May you find these lectures to be unexpected prophets, calling you to new understandings and new forms of ministry.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn  
Director of Leadership Development  
Institute for Youth Ministry

## **1999 Lectures**

Kenda Creasy Dean  
Holding On to Our Kisses: The Hormonal Theology of Adolescence  
The Sacrament of One Another: Practicing Fidelity through Holy Friendship

Jürgen Moltmann  
Praying and Watching  
What Is a Theologian?

Cynthia L. Rigby  
More Than a Mystery: The Practical Implications of the Trinity in Ministry with Youth  
More Than a Hero: The Practical Implications of the Incarnation in Ministry with Youth

Eugene Rivers  
Youth Ministry for the World in Which We Live  
New Wineskins, New Models, and Visions for a New Century

# THE SACRAMENT OF ONE ANOTHER: PRACTICING FIDELITY THROUGH HOLY FRIENDSHIP

Tell [God] all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart to a dear friend... People who have no secrets from each other never want for subject of conversation. They do not...weigh their words, because there is nothing to be kept back. Neither do they seek for something to say; they talk together out of the abundance of their heart—without consideration, just what they think... Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved intercourse with God.

*The Spiritual Letters of Archbishop  
Fenelon: Letters to Men  
Letter LXXXVIII<sup>1</sup>*

I learned about chastity from *The Sonny and Cher Show*. One night somewhere in the dark recesses of the 1970s, back when teenaged girls smelled like Love's Baby Soft perfume and teenaged boys wore platform shoes, Sonny and Cher introduced their cherubic blond toddler named Chastity to a live television audience. My mother sniffed, "Chastity? That's not a name—that's what you do so you won't have a baby to introduce!"

In an era when infidelity makes national headlines, at a time when American presidents are best known for domestic affairs, chastity seems quaint, like chamomile tea. After all, isn't everybody "doing it"? Maybe not. Chastity has gained a modest momentum in popular culture, and it remains normative for married couples. The landmark "Sex in America" study at the University of Chicago in 1994 found that 75% of married men and 85% of married women report that they have never cheated on their spouses. The people having the most sex—and the people happiest about their sex lives—are monogamous couples.<sup>2</sup> Studies published by

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1998 indicate that the percentage of teens engaging in sexual intercourse has dropped for the first time since the 1980s: high school students who say they have never had sex are now in the majority (52%), with little statistical difference between boys and girls.<sup>3</sup> Twenty-three-year-old Wendy Shalit's 1999 book *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, advocating a return to a more conservative sexuality among young people, received acclaim from publications ranging from *Cosmopolitan* to *Group*,<sup>4</sup> and generated a storm of Internet controversy. Abstinence education and "second virginity" movements are on the rise in religious communities and public schools alike, primarily defensive in nature but decidedly chaste in approach.<sup>5</sup>

Despite affairs that have sundered relationships dear to me, and despite some contestable but highly publicized studies suggesting that evolution has not wired men for fidelity and therefore men should be expected to "roam" (equating the male libido with a cellular phone),<sup>6</sup> as a Christian I actually believe that chastity is possible, and what's more, that humans are called to practice it. Married or single, celibate or sexually active, *because we are vowed to God* Christians have at our disposal a gift that puts fidelity well within our reach: God's sanctifying grace. We may not be capable of fidelity, but God is, and sanctifying grace, without which virtue (let alone chastity) would be impossible, gives Christians the strength to be true to one another. Only by the grace of God, but certainly possible by the grace of God, Christians *can* live lives of fidelity (*fidei*, faithfulness) as a witness to adolescents, whose identity—not to mention whose faith—absolutely depends on it.

If youth ministry is to help the twenty-first-century church recover a theology of desire rooted in the God who desires us, then we must begin by offering youth a way to approach intimacy that maintains the deep connection between sexuality and spirituality as divinely appointed routes to God. Chastity (from the Latin *castus*, meaning "pure" and *carere*, "to be without") is the virtue of creative fidelity, and it begins not in sexual abstinence but in friendship, a relationship in which people deeply desire one another but do not rely on genital intercourse as the means to communion. While secular chastity movements view chastity as a form of empowerment (specifically, as a way to empower teenagers to resist cultural pressure for premature sexual activity), Christians extend the definition of chastity to all human relationships. As a spiritual power acquired in the practice of joyous self-giving and willing self-mastery, chastity provides the basic parameters for holy friendship. Only in the context of friendship's selfless companionship and loving accountability is fidelity, the art of being true to one another, possible.

In short, if the church is to expect chastity of teenagers, then we must look carefully at our doctrine of friendship as a positive statement of desire. If history is any indication, this will not be easy. Church historian Martin Marty has pointed out

that *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has 8,412 columns of entries, but no category for friendship. *The Encyclopedia of Great Ideas* lists 102 great ideas, but friendship isn't one of them. In the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Friends" are Quakers and "Friendship" is a ship in Baltimore. In the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, prospects improve slightly: of almost 9,000 columns, almost two deal with "friend" or "friendship." The list continues, but Marty's point is well-taken: the world's greatest religions and philosophies basically treat friendship like wallpaper—expendable, though nice to have around.<sup>7</sup>

## GROWING UP "POSTMODERN": A CRISIS OF FIDELITY

For teenagers, friendship is anything but expendable. Teenagers treat friendship as holy ground, a sacred trust not to be breached by church, parents, or personal ambition. (To test this theory, try criticizing one of your teenager's friends and gauge the reaction on the Richter scale.) Fidelity is part of the developmental canvas of adolescence. Erik H. Erikson considered fidelity "the strength of disciplined devotion," the capacity to be utterly true to oneself and to others, as "the vital strength which [youth] needs to have an opportunity to develop, to employ, to evoke—and to die for."<sup>8</sup> Fidelity enables us to be "for" another, and it is discovered only in the experience of someone who is "for" us. In other words, before adolescents can love something or someone enough "to die for" them, someone must love them enough to die for them first.

This, of course, is Gospel: God's fidelity to us is demonstrated on the cross through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet the most pressing psychological and spiritual crisis facing postmodern adolescents is a crisis of fidelity. Forty years ago, the dominant cultural milieu in the U.S. provided most adolescents with a series of reasonably stable (if not altogether satisfying) relationships with caring (if not completely "cool") adults. In this context, the crisis of adolescence focused on meaning. Adolescents in the 1950s and 1960s sought causes in which to invest themselves, critiqued government policies that made no sense to them, experimented with alternative lifestyles that seemed more just, more authentic, and more significant than the lives of their parents. Identity formation, Erikson noted at the time, required not only developing the strength of fidelity, but also investing that fidelity in an "ideology" (a coherent belief system) worthy of one's deepest commitments.<sup>9</sup> For all its importance to the developing self, Erikson more or less assumed the development of fidelity. The ultimate object of the adolescent quest for identity, and the sign that an adolescent was no longer an adolescent, was the investment of fidelity in an ideology, a coherent system of beliefs that gave life meaning.

For postmodern youth, however, the tables have turned. Postmodern adoles-

cents—our nation's first generation of widespread latchkey children, divorced parents, absent adults, and virtual pets—are consumed with the quest for fidelity. They cannot seek content for a fidelity they do not possess. The question of postmodern youth is not "Will my life have meaning?" but "Will you *be there* for me?"<sup>10</sup> Postmodern youth share a common sense of existential abandonment. In addition to increasing numbers of teenagers abandoned to poverty and violence,<sup>11</sup> adolescents in the late twentieth century feel abandoned by economic, educational, and social structures; by institutions like families, schools, and religious communities that seem to disintegrate before their eyes; and, above all, by adults so distracted by their own quirky (and often adolescent) predicaments that they leave growing up to their children to figure out. Indeed, this supplies the premise for a host of teen-oriented television shows—*Dawson's Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Party of Five*—in which adults are notable mostly for their absence. Unfortunately, art imitates life. Listen to the outrage in this letter, written to Abigail Van Buren by a twenty-three-year-old on behalf of two younger teenagers:

Dear Abby,

I am absolutely outraged. I...was brought up by parents who knew my whereabouts every minute of the day until I was married. Now, as the manager of a suburban, fast-food restaurant, I am the supervisor and confidante to a number of fine teenagers.

These kids come from well-to-do homes, but their parents are totally irresponsible.... My current pique stems from a robbery ten days ago. I and two coworkers, both seventeen-year-old girls, were closing up late Friday night when we were confronted by several armed men.... The three of us were taken into the back room, bound hand and foot with duct tape, gagged, and left hog-tied on the floor.

My husband was working night shift and would not miss me—but surely, I thought, the girls' parents would come looking for them. As we huddled together, unable to do much more than mumble through the tape on our mouths, I listened for the sound of cars and the girls' worried parents. I figured it would be an hour at worst. Abby, **THEY NEVER CAME!** The phone never even rang. Workers arriving at 6 a.m. found us still bound and huddling. We had spent the entire night tied up on the floor, and the girls were apparently not missed.

At this point, I feel more anger toward the parents of these girls than [toward] the men who robbed us. But what kind of parents are unaware when their teenagers are gone all night?

Bound and Boiling in Pennsylvania<sup>12</sup>

What kind of parents? Quite ordinary ones, it seems. Journalist Patricia Hersch's study of teenagers in suburban Reston, Virginia, found that while adolescents distance themselves from adults pretty much the way they always have, in the late twentieth century *adults* began pulling away from *youth* in unprecedented degrees, surrendering teenagers to "a tribe apart" of peers and those alienated from adult society.<sup>13</sup> The abandonment may be subtle, as parents choose to prolong their own adolescence at the expense of a "disciplined devotion" on behalf of their children. Four months before President Clinton admitted his affair with twenty-two-year-old intern Monica Lewinsky, a Bennington College senior told *Rolling Stone*: "Adults no longer behave like adults. We have no models; they're talking about sex and therapy and substance abuse, just like us."<sup>14</sup>

It is not that contemporary adults love their children less than parents of other generations. Rather, fidelity—the strength of a "disciplined devotion," as Erikson put it—eludes us in a culture that eclipses practices of chastity and acts of self-mastery and self-giving with self-actualization and fulfillment. "To be without," as the Latin root for chastity implies, is unthinkable in modern relationships predicated on "having it all." To be sure, many adults do sacrifice for their children and for the children of others; often their love is the closest thing we know to fidelity, a love worth dying for. However, to habitually approach relationships as opportunities to practice fidelity—the self-denial that accompanies sacrificial love, not victimization—is virtually unknown in our culture of excess.<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, many adults lack the ability to convey love to their children through ordinary acts of self-giving and self-mastery that can be pursued without erotic give and take. If chastity is "the spiritual power that frees love from selfishness and aggression," as the Pontifical Council on the Family suggests,<sup>16</sup> then it must be practiced by all Christians and not just by careful lovers if the crisis of fidelity is to be redressed. Postmodern youth simply have not experienced enough fidelity on their behalf to acquire it for themselves—a rather damning proposition since fidelity, the capacity to be utterly true to something, enables us to make the enduring commitments of adulthood and to leave adolescence behind. As a result, postmodern culture increasingly approaches adolescence as a *lifestyle*, not a *life stage*, as an option available to adults and youth alike—as a persistent condition, rather than a transitional period in the lifecycle.

In light of such abandonment, it is no wonder American youth are literally

dying for intercourse. Despite the encouraging turnaround in the statistics, premature sex among teenagers remains rampant: by age eighteen, the statistics reverse again, with the majority (63%) of youth engaging in sexual activity.<sup>17</sup> By the twelfth grade, 17% of girls and 38% of boys report having had four or more sexual partners.<sup>18</sup> One in ten adolescent girls is infected with chlamydia, and gonorrhea, down among adults, is rising among teens.<sup>19</sup> What they seek in all this sexual activity is intercourse, communion—physical, visceral, spiritual oneness and the release, and even the relief, that accompanies it. Postmodern youth are not dying for a date, but for a love worth dying for. They are looking for someone who will be there for them, who will be faithful and true, who embodies fidelity, a love worth dying for.

## FIDELITY AND THE INTIMACY OF GOD

This means, of course, that youth are looking for God. Only God can love them the way they need to be loved, with utter fidelity, despite our best efforts as parents and youth leaders and teachers. Jesus is “to die for” precisely because Jesus died for us first. This should force some soul-searching on the part of youth ministry:

- Does the church offer youth something “to die for”—or pizza?
- Do youth see in the church someone who will “be there” for them—or is the church too preoccupied with its own self-preservation to even know where “there” is?
- Do we enact fidelity in a way that can point beyond our own failures to the unwavering fidelity of God?

If not, we may expect youth to look elsewhere for fidelity—to their friends, to virtual relationships, to the media, to sex. If, however, Christians were to become known for their chastity and to practice creative fidelity in relationships that acknowledge varying degrees of sexual attraction, then the church might find in its own tradition of “holy friendship” a time-honored way of “being there” for youth. When teenagers ask the question of fidelity that haunts postmodern culture—“Will you be there for me?”—they hear Christ’s resounding reply, “Yes, I will” in the practices of holy friendship. And in these practices a chastened church can add, “And so, by the grace of God, will we.”

The power of chastity has its roots in holy friendship—friendship in which partners openly practice joyous self-giving and willing self-mastery out of sacrificial love for one another, not out of a defensive need to resist personal temptation. Holy friends, above all, desire communion with God for themselves and for us. As they grow nearer to Jesus, they draw us into God’s intimacy with them. Holy friends help



one another remain clearly focused on the cross—the love worth dying for—and in so doing they help keep love “pure,” i.e., undistracted and undiluted by cultural norms that cloud the vision of sacrificial love. The goal of holy friendship is being known, quite literally “in the biblical sense”—being known by another who treasures vulnerability, familiarity, and intimacy with us. Such relationships approach the friendship of God, the Friend who knows us and will “be there” for us, no matter what:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 You discern my thoughts from far away.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,  
 And are acquainted with all my ways.  
 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord,  
 You know it completely.  
 You hem me in, behind and before,  
 And lay your hand upon me.  
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
 It is so high that I cannot attain it.  
 Where can I go from your spirit?  
 Or where can I flee from your presence?  
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
 If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there...

For it was you who formed my inward parts,  
 You knit me together in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
 Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

Psalm 139:1-8, 13-14, NRSV

In these ten brief verses, a form of the verb “to know” appears five times, and synonyms appear three times. In celebrating the friendship of God, the psalmist sees no contradiction in combining spiritual and sexual imagery, shifting in verse thirteen to the life-giving nature of God's intimacy, the wonder of God's “being there” with us even before birth, creating us to enter the world “wonderfully made.” In short, the psalmist describes the boundless joy and deep satisfaction of “being known” by a trustworthy God.

The media's perspective on friendship also conflates spiritual and sexual imagery, but with different results. Media culture shares with the church the view that friendship and sex are closely linked through the desire for intercourse, though without acknowledging the need for the chastity that begets fidelity. The television

sitcom *Friends* freely mingles friendship with sexual activity, considering friends and sex partners virtually synonymous. Listen to this excerpt from *My So-Called Life*, in which fifteen-year-old Angela Chase confesses to her best friend, Rayanne, that she is smitten by Jordan Catalano, a smoldering youth who writes “really short” sentences and whose primary virtue is the way he looks when he leans:

Rayanne: You wanna have sex with him.

Angela: Who?

Rayanne: Who? Jordan. Catalano. Come on, I'm not gonna tell anyone, just admit it.

Angela: I just like how he's always leaning. Against stuff. He leans great. Well, either sex or a conversation. Ideally both.<sup>20</sup>

If we are to believe most of American popular culture, true human fulfillment lies in orgasm, not in union with God. Since we live in a culture of self-fulfillment, the syllogism goes something like this: 1) Orgasm is the route to human fulfillment; 2) Society teaches that human fulfillment is right and good; 3) Therefore I need an orgasm. Yet what Angela seeks is *intercourse*, not orgasm, and she correctly identifies both conversation and sex as impulses toward this communion. Conversation, in fact, is the primary venue through which humans create intercourse, often regarded as a surrogate for genital sex. As one savvy youth leader put it in a recent adolescent sexuality seminar:

Question: What is a four-letter word for intercourse ending in 'K'?

Answer: TALK!

At the same time, however, the consumer ethos of popular culture treats intimacy as an object: it is something we have, or we do not have, and because we are a consumer society, what we do not have we are expected to acquire. Reducing intimacy to a product socializes youth into believing there are only two kinds of relationships: those that have intimacy and those that don't. There are friends, and there are lovers, there is talk, and there is sex—and there is precious little in between. These messages overwhelm the obvious fact that intimacy has a range. As a result, youth fail to recognize that the satisfaction of “being known” by another is available in a myriad of human relationships and is the fruit of trust and vulnerability, not necessarily (or even primarily) the result of genital contact.

## HOLY FRIENDSHIP AND THIRD-ORDER CONSCIOUSNESS

Kathleen Norris, a Presbyterian poet and author, writes that “at age sixteen, I was, indeed, a sophisticated moron.”<sup>21</sup> When most of us look back on our own relational histories as adolescents, we are tempted to groan and concur. Not surprisingly, sixteen-year-olds hold a different view—not because they’re morons, but because *they hold a different view*. It is not that adults and youth have different *ideas* about sex; they *think differently* about sex because their brains organize meaning differently. Until recently, cognitive psychologists believed that adolescents “matured” cognitively when they acquired formal operational thought, the capacity for abstract thinking, beginning around ages ten or eleven. We now know that cognitive development, like other forms of human development, continues throughout the life-cycle. Specifically, adolescents are still in the process of developing what cognitive psychologist Robert Kegan calls “third-order consciousness,” the form of reflection that allows us to see our present actions in light of a future that shapes the now. Without third-order consciousness, self-reflection that can lead to internal conversation about what is actual versus what is possible cannot take place, because no “self” is yet organized that can put these two categories together.<sup>22</sup> As a result, teenagers make decisions based on an immediate reality rather than on future consequences, unable to engage in the kind of reflection that connects the two. Early antismoking campaigns, for instance, emphasized the long-term health risks associated with smoking, but had little impact on teenagers. The American Lung Association’s current advertising campaign targets teenagers more productively by claiming that smoking makes them ugly and smell bad.

Kegan likens second-order consciousness—the form of knowing characteristic of adolescence—to the thinking of sociopaths, people who cannot envision the relationship between a present situation and possible outcomes. Observes Kegan: “In actuality, the sociopath is not without morality; he is simply without the one we want.”<sup>23</sup> If you were to shine a flashlight into a mirror, the mirror would reflect the light back on you. Third-order consciousness would enable you to see a relationship between shining the flashlight into the mirror, and the fact that a light now shines on you. Second-order consciousness, however, finds it impossible to connect the light reflecting back on you with the act of shining the flashlight on the mirror in the first place. Practically, it works this way: An adult who becomes a vegetarian sees a connection between his or her action and a different kind of global future. Adolescents who become vegetarians see a connection between their actions and the immediate salvation of a cow. A number of political issues may inform an adult’s decision to support or object to a war; an adolescent, on the other hand, is more

likely to base his or her feelings about war on the immediate fact that people are getting hurt.

The dilemma comes from the fact that adults actually expect youth to behave in ways consistent with their beliefs. Yet congruence between action and attitude requires an inner consistency beyond the cognitive reach of most adolescents. We teach youth the Ten Commandments and then actually expect them to follow them, not just out of obedience to God, but for “their own [presumably future] good” and for the well-being of the community. Moral instruction on sexuality is no different. Adolescents’ high view of relationships often causes them to prize sexuality as much as adults do—but they do so using entirely different categories of meaning. Adults tend to describe sexuality through categories of future risk (“The girl will get pregnant.” “You could get AIDS.”). Adolescents, on the other hand, use categories of present experience (“It feels good.” “I will be accepted.”). In another scene from the television series *My So-Called Life*, Angela and her mother, Patti, talk past one another because Angela uses categories of acceptance in discussing sexuality, while her mother uses categories of risk:

Patti: I can accept that you have a boyfriend—

Angela: I don’t have a boyfriend!

Patti: Fine. A pal. A male pal. Whatever word you want to choose. The point is, I’m your mother, and I don’t think you’re ready—I, I don’t think you’re ready—

Angela: Mom, *pleeeeeeaaase*—

Patti: But—but I have to know if this is what’s happening, because I don’t think that I can keep you from—

Angela: Mom, I beg you to stop—

Patti: I need to know if you’re using—I mean, I remember. How this feels. I do. But it’s the times that we live in—

Angela: Mom, please—

Patti: Honey, I know you don’t want to think about these things, I know you think you’re invulnerable—

Angela: I don’t think that! You have no idea!

Patti: You have to use some kind of protection, if you are going to be—

Angela: Mom! I’m not having sex! All right? Really! I’m not even close. To an embarrassing degree.

Patti: Oh!—okay—I’m sorry, honey, I just want you to be prepared, when the time comes, *whenever* the time comes—

Angela: It’ll never come. Not with Jordan.

Patti: Is that what’s bothering you?

Angela: Mom, you couldn’t possibly understand or help, so please.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary American society holds two prevailing norms about adolescent sexual activity. The first norm is abstinence, advising youth to “hold their kisses,” to “just say no,” to practice “saved sex” rather than “safe sex.” The second norm advocates responsible sexual activity, rather than abstinence from sexual activity. “Safe sex” is presumably more realistic than “saved sex,” so the goal becomes teaching teenagers ways to engage in pleasurable genital activity that will not result in pregnancy or illness.

There is much to commend in both of these perspectives—but neither view adequately acknowledges what the world looks like to an adolescent, either physically or cognitively. Both of these stances, Kegan points out, assume the presence of third-order consciousness, the ability to see a relationship between the future and present action—and therefore, while these arguments make perfect sense to adults, they are largely lost on adolescents. Abstinence denies the irresistible pleasure of sexual expression. Teenagers have entered into a delightful new realm, and there is no going back. They naturally seek ways to enjoy their developing bodies. For adults to categorize this emerging sexual desire as a “problem” distances them from adolescents’ perception that sex is fun, and only convinces youth that adults simply have no idea what sexuality is like. As Angela puts it, “Mom, you couldn’t *possibly* understand or help.”

On the other hand, safe sex assumes an order of consciousness capable of far-sightedness and future-mindedness that most adolescents simply do not have.<sup>25</sup> “*Even when judgment is free to do its best work,*” stresses Kegan—i.e., even when alcohol, spontaneity, ignorance, or a love for risk-taking do not enter into a teenager’s decision—“[adolescent judgment] is constrained by an order of consciousness that considers the future as the present-that-hasn’t-happened yet rather than as something real, right now, and commanding their attention.”<sup>26</sup> Angela’s mother wants her daughter to be “ready”—an ambiguous hope, at best—but whether being “ready” is objectively known or subjectively felt, whether it means being mature or being prepared, is altogether unclear to Angela and her mother alike.

## HOLY FRIENDSHIP: THE PROMISE OF BEING KNOWN

Here Kegan stops, but the church must begin. What adolescents need, and what Christian teaching can offer, is a transitional ground for teen sexuality in which adolescents may explore the pleasure of intimacy while acknowledging the connection between sexuality and spirituality, body and soul, without doing violence to either one. In short, adolescents need a context in which they can safely be “sophisticated morons” in their decision-making without irreversible consequences like pregnancy, chronic illness, or death. Holy friendship offers a kind of “holding environment” for the emerging sexual and spiritual self, what Kegan calls “an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over.”<sup>27</sup> Holding environments foster developmental transformation by providing a safe space that is at once supportive and challenging. Holy friendship offers such a bridge precisely because, contrary to popular culture, it does not equate human fulfillment with genital pleasure (hence, the challenge), while at the same time it acknowledges adolescents’ most prized experience of fidelity: the loyalty of friends (hence, the support). Holy friends hold out the promise of “being known,” not through orgasm but through communion—first with God and, through God, with one another.

In a world in which adolescents sense the profound abandonment of institutions and adults who love them, teenagers long for intercourse with people who “know” them. The murders at Columbine High School in the spring of 1999 were the treacherous result of two “unknown” teenagers. Unknown by classmates (who described Dylan Harris and Eric Klebold as students “you just didn’t notice”), unknown by parents (who had no inkling of the pipe-bomb manufacture going on in the garage), unknown by teachers and juvenile authorities (who failed to take seriously the violence described in class projects and web sites), for one tragic day these two unknown boys chose to be noticed. Incredibly, as a spate of school shootings have demonstrated in the past year, youth often perceive violence as a vehicle to “being known,” confusing notoriety on the evening news with the deep satisfaction of intercourse with people who love them.

## CHRISTIAN CONCEPTIONS OF SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

Were Christian tradition less ambivalent about the role of friendship in the life of faith, the relationship between holy friendship and desire might be more obvious to the postmodern church. The truth is that Christians have struggled with the proper place of human friendship alongside the friendship of God. Sixth-century pope Gregory the Great defined a friend as “the guardian of the soul.”<sup>28</sup> Augustine saw human friendship as a metaphor for, and conduit to, life with God.<sup>29</sup> Western

monastic tradition adopted Augustine's assumptions throughout the Middle Ages; one historian dubbed the twelfth century the "age of friendship" in Western Europe,<sup>30</sup> a reform championed by the Cistercians under the influence of Bernard (who, not surprisingly, entered monastic life accompanied by a host of friends). Aelred of Rievaulx's *Spiritual Friendship*, the most important of the monastic treatises on friendship,<sup>31</sup> set out to unite Christian devotion with classical conceptions of friendship, defining spiritual friendship as the joining together of two souls in Christ, acknowledging true friendship as "a path to the love and knowledge of God."<sup>32</sup> Despite Aelred's sexism in regard to spiritual friendships (he believed male friendships enriched the spiritual life, but that close bonds between the sexes inevitably led to sexual sin),<sup>33</sup> Western monastic sources also defended male/female spiritual friendships, a position that—thanks to the Ciceronian premise that friendship can only exist among equals—had the effect of according men and women a degree of equality unusual for the period.<sup>34</sup>

In the Eastern monasteries of the early church, however, the desert abbas and ammas discouraged friendships between monks, unless with a spiritual mentor, on the premise that preferring one person above another violates a Christian's duty to love all people equally. By the thirteenth century, Western enthusiasm for Christian friendship began to wane;<sup>35</sup> by the 1500s we hear Teresa of Avila advising her nuns to avoid preferential friendships, adding the practical caveat that in large convents, friendships may be permissible, but in a small convent nuns should "refrain from making individual friendships, however holy, for even among brothers and sisters such things are apt to be poisonous, and I can see no advantage in them."<sup>36</sup>

If the church's view of friendship has historically responded to changes in the social context, then the postmodern crisis of fidelity calls the contemporary church to reclaim holy friendship as central to the life of faith.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, because friendship is such an important component of adolescence, youth ministry has much to offer the church in this regard. Unlike the Greeks and the Romans, who viewed friends as like-minded people, similar in almost all respects,<sup>38</sup> Jesus calls Christians to befriend even those we dislike, even those who differ from us, even those outside the communion of faith. Jesus, in fact, raises the stakes on friendship considerably, calling us to nothing less than the kind of love that enables us to lay down our lives for our friends. Jesus' understanding of friendship is that it is something "to die for"—an act of fidelity—and he called those who follow him to witness to the fidelity that surpasses our own.

Christianity, therefore, reinvests friendship with both body and soul, making it a life and death proposition in obedience to God. This embodiment also enables Christians to acknowledge the role of sexuality in human attraction, which figures into all human friendship to some degree and needs some latitude to develop.

Adolescent girls go to the restroom in packs, and adolescent boys bond in the locker room, because in these inner sanctums youth ritualize both their friendship and their emerging sexuality. Same-gender friends often develop strong bonds from shared experiences around gender roles in a given culture. The “otherness” inherent in male/female friendships accounts for part of their allure, whether or not romance is a factor. Research on married couples identifies a couple’s friendship quotient as the most important factor in a successful marriage.<sup>39</sup>

Still, as my colleague James Loder likes to observe, “Spiritual heat is hotter than sexual heat, every time.” Holy friends can rival lovers in intimacy and passion, as a glimpse at early monastic correspondence between spiritual friends confirms.<sup>40</sup> Friends who act as “guardians of the soul” practice a creative fidelity that extends light years beyond making out—or not—in the backseat of a car. These friendships create a “space” in which eroticism is not equated with orgasm, but with communion, oneness with others through God. The primary friendship to which all of us are called is friendship with the Triune God who has befriended us—a friendship as life-giving as sexual intercourse, that transforms us as surely as falling in love.

## **PRACTICING HOLY FRIENDSHIP: LESSONS FROM ADOLESCENCE**

Becoming a person—as every adolescent in the throes of identity formation intuitively—requires being in relationship with others. We learn to become human by actively cultivating friendships and participating in practices that develop and sustain these relationships. Although there are physical expressions of friendship just as there are spiritual expressions of sexuality, holy friendship is primarily concerned with uniting souls, not bodies. As we have seen, this requires a slightly different set of skills than the practices of friendship suggested by popular culture, where intimacy is viewed as an object and intercourse is limited to sexual activity. Holy friendship, in contrast, is sacramental. It serves the church as a means of grace, a sign pointing beyond our friendship to the desire of God, an ordinary vessel through which God imparts strength to the Christian community for the otherwise impossible task of living faithfully. Holy friendships also serve as “holding environments” for youth that honor both the acute sexuality and the acute spirituality of their personal desire, while leaving a margin of error for inevitable poor judgments along the way. This margin of error—altogether absent in a culture of popular desire—gives youth a crucial chance to recover from their relational mistakes, to experience forgiveness, and to start again in a community of love.

Before we can expect youth to live chastely in relationships, the church must help them cultivate holy friendships and the practices that sustain them.<sup>41</sup> Lest we forget, teenagers themselves have highly developed skills of friendship, which



makes ministry with young people a natural place to begin to cultivate chastity. There are many ways to begin: by observing strategies by which teenagers themselves sustain friendship, by noticing how they adapt these strategies for the sake of sexual intimacy, and especially by discerning those historic practices of Christian community that might “baptize” practices of adolescence for the life of faith. Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, the historic practices of *koinonia*, compassion, justice, and worship all find their way into a curriculum for holy friendship and offer youth ways to enact chastity that ring true across a spectrum of relationships.

The church need not merely observe and critique practices of adolescence. These practices may cause us to look more deeply into our own practices of faith in which our desire for one another points to the desire of God. Because teenagers are so invested in relationships, practices of holy friendship are the church’s natural points of entry for adolescent faith. As a form of intimacy that does not require “waiting until we are ready,” the danger of making decisions with irreversible or life-threatening consequences in the context of holy friendship is minimal. Nor does holy friendship require protection, since by definition it is a form of care. Holy friends practice joyous self-giving and willing self-mastery, and because of their chastity we delight in “being known” by them. Such friendships lead to life-creating, sexual, and spiritual paths to the God who desires us. And because these friendships take place against the backdrop of a community in which we are called to lay down our lives for one another, holy friendships reclaim for postmodern adolescents the fidelity they seek. The friendship of God is “to die for,” precisely because God died for them first.

*Holy Friend, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away. No matter where I go, near or far, heaven or hell, you are there for me. I delight in the way you know me, Lord. Show me the purity that leads to your heart, that our friendship will last forever. Amen.* ❀

## NOTES

1. Archbishop François Fénelon, *The Spiritual Letters of Archbishop Fénelon: Letters to Men*, trans. H.L. Sidney Lear (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), pp. 177-178.
2. See Edward O. Laumann, et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). This study was the first using a random sample to study American sexuality. For a review of studies with supporting results, also see Tom W. Smith, “Adult Sexual Behavior in 1989: Number of Partners, Frequency, and Risk,” National Science Foundation, presented to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, New Orleans, February 1990, pp. 1-21 (Internet).

3. Reported in *Youthworker* (July/August, 1999), p. 12.
4. Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: Free Press, 1999).
5. In Protestant churches, the most publicized of these is the "True Love Waits" campaign, a program originated by Southern Baptists but that has taken hold ecumenically. "True Love Waits" invites youth to sign a pledge card that reads: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, and if God calls me to marriage, my future spouse and children, that I will, with the grace of God, live a chaste life, as a single person, or within a faithful marriage relationship." In public schools, "chastity educators" tend to freelance rather than participate in national campaigns; speakers like international educator and grandmother Molly Kelly, "The Chastity Lady," visit schools and community organizations to inspire rather than to propose specific programs. Kelly, for instance, advocates "saved sex" as the best way to combat the spread of HIV, STDs, teen pregnancy, and abortion. See Ruth Lambert, "Choosing Chastity," *West Chester, PA Daily Local News* (Sunday, July 11, 1999), p. 1, col. 1.
6. This work frequently comes from the field of evolutionary psychology and should not be dismissed out of hand; rather, facile attempts to use this literature to explain male sexual infidelity overlook the role of human community in shaping sexual behavior. Proponents of this view of human sexual behavior include David M. Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1999); *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); and Helen Fisher, *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* (New York: Fawcett, 1995).
7. Martin E. Marty, *Friendship* (Allen, TX: Argus Communications, 1980), pp. 41-44.
8. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 233. *Italics mine.*
9. Erikson, pp. 189-191.
10. For a discussion of this question's impact on Generation X, see Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). The argument throughout Beaudoin's book is cultural, not psychological, but the connections are unmistakable.
11. Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Nonschool Hours* (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1992), p. 26.
12. "Dear Abby," *West Chester Daily Local News* (Wednesday, September 1, 1999), p. D5, col. 1.
13. Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1998).
14. "The American Dream 1998," *Rolling Stone* (May 28, 1998), p. 96.
15. One of the most devastating consequences of globalization is the increase in ethnic tension and economic unrest, as "have nots" around the world—relentlessly marketed to desire products well beyond their reach—enact their frustration through violence. See Malcolm Waters, *Globalization* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) for two analyses of this cultural change.
16. The Pontifical Council on the Family, "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education within the Family," chapter 2, #16 (Internet).
17. National Survey of Family Growth (1995), cited in Douglas J. Besharov and Karen N. Gardiner, "Trends in Teen Sexual Behavior," *Children and Youth Services Review* 19 (1997), pp. 341-342 (Internet copy).
18. National Survey of Family Growth (1995), cited in Besharov and Gardiner, p. 343 (Internet copy).
19. *The Chicago Tribune*, Sec. 13, p. 4 (July 25, 1999), cited in *Ivy Jungle* (August 20, 1999), p. 2.
20. *My So-Called Life*, pilot episode.
21. Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), p. 259.
22. Robert Kegan, *The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 39.

23. Kegan, p. 40.
24. *My So-Called Life*, "Guns and Gossip" episode.
25. Kegan, p. 60.
26. Kegan, p. 60.
27. Kegan, p. 43.
28. Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience 350-1250* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), p. xv.
29. See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 98-110.
30. McGuire, p. 231.
31. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Mark F. Williams (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1994).
32. Mark F. Williams, prologue to Aelred, p. 19.
33. McGuire, p. 389.
34. An eleventh-century collection includes a letter from the Bishop of Worms written to a superior of a woman's monastery in which he defends spiritual love among men and women (McGuire, p. 188); by the twelfth century, concern for the spiritual direction of religious women used the prototype of Christ and Mary Magdalene to justify spiritual friendship between a subordinate woman and a male superior (McGuire, 390). By the thirteenth century, a new attitude toward women encouraged by Dominic and Francis led to more egalitarian, and more familiar, spiritual friendships between monastic men and women (McGuire, 394). Correspondence of the Dominican Jordan of Saxony to the nun Diana of Andalo between the 1220s and 1230s, for instance, consistently describes the sisters as "spouses of Christ," while the friars are given the status of friends of the spouse.
35. McGuire, pp. 387-388.
36. She makes an exception in this rule for the relationship between a nun and her confessor. Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, translated and edited by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1964), pp. 55, 63.
37. The late twentieth century has seen a resurgence in interest in friendship by scholars across a range of fields. See McGuire, xliii; for further references to (and an example of) twentieth-century reflections on friendship, also see Diogenes Allen, *Love: Christian Romance, Marriage, and Friendship* (Cowley Publications), 1987.
38. See Cicero's *On Friendship*, ed. J.G.F. Powell (New York: Aris and Phillips, 1991).
39. See Barbara Kantrowitz and Pat Wingert, "The Science of a Good Marriage," *Newsweek* (April 19, 1999), pp. 1-4 (Internet).
40. Evidence of attraction abounds in monastic literature. Guibert, Benedictine abbot at Gembloux (in Belgium), who wrote to Hildegard of Bingen and a nun named Gertrude as well as to many men, offers women the same status as his male friends. To a certain magister named Joseph, Guibert writes: "Drawn by [your] attractions I desire and yearn to see you, to embrace you, to speak to you, but I do not yet grasp you, I do not get hold of you as I desire. Uncertain and changeable between faith and affection, between hope and fear I do not know what to choose or to obtain.... What is even more serious, affection is afraid of being forever cheated" (cited in McGuire, p. 378). The Cistercian Adam writes to Agnes, a nun at Fontevault: "In my own way, most beloved, I wholly cling to you, and on your soul, mine depends. In this joining of individuals, the love of Christ has made itself our bond" (cited in McGuire, p. 391). Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to Peter the Venerable: "If I had perhaps grown cold toward you, as you reproach me for having done, there is no doubt that cherished by your love I shall soon grow warm again.... I must say I enjoy your fun" (cited in McGuire, p. 255).

41. For a more complete discussion of the role of Christian practice in shaping and identifying people as followers of Jesus Christ, especially in regard to youth ministry, see Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999); Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul-Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1998).