



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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HE WAS a 68-year-old married security guard with a 17-year-old mistress in Batam. He visited her fortnightly and gave her \$300 a month to have sex with him exclusively.

Mr Chua's story appeared in The Straits Times on March 22, 2004. He was quoted as saying: "My wife, 63, and daughter, 38, know about her as well as the previous girls I've had. They don't mind at all. My wife says as long as I don't bring back any disease or get cheated – by buying a house in Batam for my girlfriend – she is fine with it. My daughter, whose son is six, says that since Daddy is already so old, it's okay to let him have some fun. And that is really all there is to it. Visiting Batam is just an entertaining and relaxing pastime for an old man like me."

It is a fairly common view that adultery is a betrayal of one's spouse and therefore immoral. But what about someone like Mr Chua, who says his wife does not mind? Does that become a case of live and let live, or everyone living happily ever after?

Let us examine more closely what it means for a married person to be involved in an extramarital affair, why it is considered immoral, even if both spouses involved claim to have no issues with it.

Fidelity – promised and compromised

When two people marry, they commit themselves to loving each other freely, totally, faithfully, and fruitfully till death. Sex, then, becomes a renewal of their vows, restating the promises they made on their wedding day.

To share the act of sex with someone outside of marriage cheapens the expression of love meant to be shared only with one's spouse. What it becomes is a self-satisfying act that does not communicate love, understanding or respect, and an expression of selfish lust rather than selfless love.

Cheating on a spouse is clearly an offence and an injustice to the spouse who deserves the fidelity promised to him or her.

Even for someone like Mr Chua, who says his wife does not mind his having a mistress, adultery is wrong for different reasons. When one partner condones the other's infidelity, what the couple is really saying is that their promise of fidelity no longer applies, even if they continue to live under one roof. Their marriage vows were either never cherished the way they should have been, or have been discarded. It is, in fact, a dissolution of their marriage vows.

Can extramarital sex be okay?

Is it all right for a married man to have an affair, if his wife does not mind? In this continuing series on values, we examine why extramarital sex is wrong in the eyes of the Church.



But it's just sex, not love

Suppose a couple remains faithful to each other at all other levels except for sex because both parties agree that extramarital sex is not a big deal and therefore, all right. What's wrong with that?

What such a liberal couple believes is that sex is not necessarily meaningful and intimate unless they choose it to be so. But could sexual acts be non-personal and non-intimate, like everyday mundane activities? For example, a dinner for a couple can be a meaningful, special and romantic time, but the same dinner can be dull and impersonal when shared with strangers.

The question is: can sex be likened to casual dinner encounters? Can one switch on the meaningfulness of sex only when one fancies it? Or is our sexuality always wired to express unequivocally our personal intimacy? It is not difficult to see that rape is considered much more than a physical aggression. It is universally viewed as an invasion of the personal intimacy of the person and always penalised.

It points to the fact that we are wired, by nature and not by choice, to associate our sexuality with something personal and intimate and not something merely physical. Our human bodies are not merely animal bodies, but personal stuff.

The recognition that the intimacy of the body speaks for the intimacy of the person helps crystallise the understanding that it is impossible to objectify sex as something only the body engages in. A sexual act is an act that involves a person's being, not just his or her body alone.

Extramarital Sex in a Nutshell

What It Is

■ Extramarital sex is when a married person engages in sexual activity with a person other than his or her spouse. It is also referred to as adultery and infidelity.

The Current Landscape

■ Due to its sensitive and secretive nature, there are few official statistics on adultery. While traditionally women have been the victims of adultery when their husbands stray, the incidence of female adultery appears to be rising.

■ Adultery satisfies one of the legal requirements for divorce. In Singapore, it accounted for 3.7 per cent of divorces in 1997 and dropped to 1.7 per cent in 2007. The figures do not reflect the real picture as parties often go for uncontested divorce instead of washing dirty linen in public.

■ Adultery is a criminal offence in some countries including North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India and some states in the United States (though rarely prosecuted).

Arguments For Extramarital Sex

■ **It's human nature.** Some scientists argue that monogamy is not natural and that biology predisposes us to seek multiple sex partners. After all, man is just an animal and some animals are not monogamous.

■ **It's the other spouse's fault.** Some who commit adultery blame it on their spouses: "There is something lacking in our marital relationship and the third party provides it." Or, "She makes me feel special in a way whereas my wife takes me for granted."

■ **It's psychologically beneficial.** Some people claim it is beneficial to have extramarital affairs to "spice up" their lives.

■ **Such is life.** It is unrealistic to expect that love lasts for all couples all the time. Some couples need to fulfil their emotional and personal needs outside of marriage.

Arguments Against Extramarital Sex

■ **Marital vows.** Adultery breaks the promises of fidelity that spouses make to each other.

■ **Risks of sexually transmitted infections.** When a person has more than one sex partner, the risk of sexually transmitted infections increases significantly.

■ **Breaks families.** Adultery breaks up families and brings insecurity and emotional distress to everyone, especially children.

■ **Immoral and illegal.** Most countries and cultures find adultery morally unacceptable, and even illegal.

What the Church Teaches

■ **Adultery is wrong.** "When two partners, of whom at least one is married to another party, have sexual relations – even transient ones – they commit adultery. Christ condemns even adultery of mere desire." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2380)

"You have heard how it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I say this to you, if a man looks at a woman lustfully, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28)

■ **Adultery hurts the other spouse, the institution of marriage and the Church.** "Adultery is an injustice. He who commits adultery... does injury to the sign of the covenant which the marriage bond is, transgresses the rights of the other spouse, and undermines the institution of marriage by breaking the contract on which it is based." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2381)