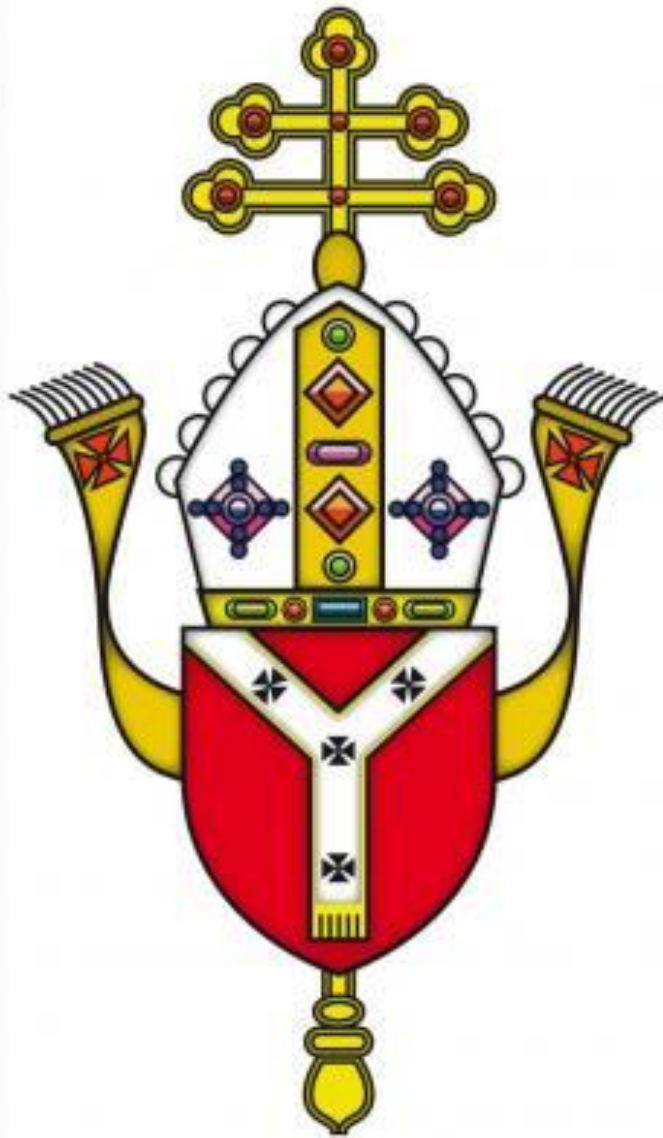


OCTOBER 1, 2020



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

RELATIONSHIPS AND SEX EDUCATION

DIOCESE OF WESTMINSTER EDUCATION SERVICE

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Purpose

This document is intended to help teachers to answer questions that may arise in relation to the RSE curriculum. This is by no means an exhaustive list but the questions included were the ones that teachers informed us they have been asked by children and young people and found challenging to answer.

The questions in this document have been answered in a way that is consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Sometimes this teaching may be counter cultural and at those times there has been an attempt to try to explain why the Church teaches as it does while recognising that this may be challenging for individuals. It is important that children and young people are provided with an accurate understanding of Church teaching but this must always be within the context of a pastoral approach which respects that their lives and the reality of their family situations may not reflect this teaching. An individual must never be made to feel wrong or inferior if this is the case.

It is not intended that teachers will cover all of the answers in this booklet with their students unless the questions are specifically raised. Some answers do however build on others so it is worth reading through the document as a whole at least once to ensure a fuller understanding of the approach taken.

Answering questions

Every question deserves a response but not every question deserves an answer. When pupils ask a difficult question be prepared to say *'that is a good question, I can see why you asked it, I'm going to get back to you'* or *'that's a good question but we aren't covering that until'*

You might then choose to have a conversation with the individual pupil to answer the question or, if appropriate, once ready with a response you may choose to address the whole class.

Please be aware that it is essential that answers to questions asked should stay within the parameters agreed with parents and carers during your consultation and information evenings.

If a child asks a question outside of the agreed limits you should inform parents and agree whether you will answer the question, or whether they will address it at home.

Sometimes a situation will arise in school that means the class or a group of pupils need to be addressed about a particular issue. This should happen in consultation with parents.

Safeguarding

If a pupil in class mentions an issue that raises a safeguarding concern, you must follow your safeguarding policy and procedures to report your concern.

Format of this document.

The Education Service has divided the contents of the CES model Curriculum into seven themes which are hyperlinked for quick reference.

- Human Value.
- Mental Health
- Healthy Relationships
- Biology
- Media and Technology
- Gender and Sexuality
- Common Good

The model curriculum has been mapped to these themes in the following pages. The questions that follow are then divided under the headings above.

The answers are written for teachers / older secondary students and pitched at an appropriate level. Teachers may need to use their own professional judgement to adapt the answers and language appropriately depending on the age of the students.

Section 1: Human Value

Made in God's image

What does it mean to be made in God's image?

Being made in the 'image' of God' does not mean that we look like God, but that we are a someone, rather than a something. Being made in God's image relates to our inner spirituality and the way we choose to live our lives. All people are made in God's image with a conscience to know right from wrong, reason to help them to think and work things out and creativity to create like God creates. These are the parts of being human that make us distinct from the rest of creation. To be made in God's image also means to have free will. We are not robots or puppets, but have freedom and with that freedom comes certain responsibilities. It is being made in God's image that makes every individual precious and destined to be in relationship with him – it is what we were created for.

'We humans are called to love one another. We are not called to dominate or oppress or use others, but to respect them as persons made in God's image and likeness' (Theology of the Body for Teens (2006) P6).

Are people who do terrible things made in God's image?

Being made in the image of God is not something that can be changed or lost. If we choose to, we can go against the image and then distort or spoil it. What we should be and could be, is denied. It is as though the image is tarnished but it is never removed. It is like covering a valuable jewel in layers of grime and dirt. The jewel is still there, even when people act very badly, but it can neither be seen nor can it shine. However, with cleansing, the jewel can be restored, just as when people are given the chance to be cleansed through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. No matter how deep the stain of doing wrong things in our lives, we can be forgiven and washed clean because God loves us so much and wants to be in a relationship with us.

The Body is a Gift

Are the bodies of those with disabilities or sickness a gift?

Everyone's body is a gift. Not everyone's body works as well as they would like it to and not everyone is happy with their body.

Those with disabilities are of course still made in God's image and their bodies are still a gift, even though they may work differently to others. Disabled people are to be loved, can love greatly and have gifts and insights of their own. For example, a blind person can sense much by touch and hearing, that sighted people do not. A disabled person may have great creative or intellectual gifts, or be physically able to train for competitive sport. However, their value and worth is inherent and built in to who they are and not linked to what they can or cannot do or achieve.

Even when a person's body causes them great pain or suffering, it is still a gift as without even an imperfect body, we would not have life. It can be a challenge to see the positive when someone is in pain or suffering, but many inspirational people show astounding strength and courage through such difficulties. Life is a precious gift from God, no matter what the circumstances. We must always try to be compassionate and make sure we try to really support those who face additional challenges because of disability or illness.

Why are some people disabled?

Living with disability, illness or pain is not what we want for the people we love. Christians believe God loves us more than we can possibly imagine and far more than we are able to love each other. It is hard then to believe that God wants us to live a life of suffering or pain either. Christians sometimes just have to be honest and say that we simply don't know why things are a certain way. So instead of focusing on the 'why', we focus on other aspects of this issue, such as what our own response to those people living with disabilities should be. Faith can provide us with valuable lessons about how to act, even if it cannot tell us why something is as it is.

The Catholic faith teaches that every single person is made in the image of God, has dignity and is precious. In our culture sometimes we place too much importance on what a person can do or how useful they are. When we focus on these things it is easy to miss the things that make disabled people special or precious.

Disabled people have ambitions and aspirations and we have a responsibility to help them achieve them despite all the challenges they may face. Those who believe that we are created in the image of God should respect and work to support disabled people, to advocate for them and to ensure their voices are heard.

There are disabled people who show great inner strength, courage and wisdom in the face of adversity. Some have outstanding talents; music can be played brilliantly, and paintings can inspire. However even if they don't have such talents, all disabled people are precious, unique individuals whatever gifts or lack of them they may have. They have something to give that makes a difference to someone, and therefore to the world.

Life is a precious, sacred gift from God for every person no matter how challenging this life on earth may be. Whatever they can or cannot do, they are who they are and every single person without exception deserves dignity and respect. A basic moral test for society is how the vulnerable and most in need are treated.

Section 2 Mental Health

Unique individuals

What if there is nothing special about me?

When you look at yourself in the mirror, who do you really see? A child of your parents? A person liked by their friends? A face anxious about its appearance? But if you look closely you will see that you are someone more. You are a child of God. That is who you see in the mirror each morning. It is God's life that is within you. When you understand that, everything changes. This is why you have such respect for yourself in every aspect of your being, and in your future. This is also why you have respect for your family and for every other human being - for they too have the same dignity as you. This truth lies at the heart of every decision you make, about every aspect of your life.

Fully Alive (2008)

People have different talents and skills, but not everyone has the same gifts. Some talents are more obvious than others e.g. academic, sporting or musical gifts. However, there are characteristics and things about us that we may have that are no less valuable but perhaps less obvious. Perhaps we are humble, we are thoughtful, approachable or sensitive to the feeling of others.... All individuals are unique. There never has been nor will there ever be anyone exactly the same as anyone else in the entire history of the universe.

It may not always be obvious to a person what is special about them, but there absolutely is something and there will be people who they meet who will appreciate and love them for it. God is the perfect creator and his creations are all beautifully unique and precious.

Young people really need to know that having respect for themselves is incredibly important. Self-respect helps to set the standards by which we live but true self-respect can be difficult to achieve. So many things can make people doubt themselves, making them feel confused about who they really are and what they really want. Self-respect is something that individuals grow into gradually; as they come to accept and appreciate the abilities and character they have been given. We mainly learn how to respect ourselves from those who love and care for us, but can sometimes lose sight of it when we feel rejected or misunderstood.

People do not always see themselves in a positive light and sometimes this can be because of mental ill health. People with mental ill health really need to be supported, so that their mental health issues can be addressed.

Suicide and self-harm

Are people who hate their bodies or who harm themselves doing something wrong?

In our society people can feel incredibly pressurised in terms of body shape and size and it is easy for people to feel that they do not meet some of the unrealistic standards set. There are a lot of people who have quite a negative view of themselves and of their bodies feeling that if they were only taller, thinner, more attractive... then they would be happier and more lovable. There are a lot of people who appear very confident and self-assured, but deep down struggle with body image too. It is a very common problem and can sadly lead to unhealthy and dangerous conditions such as eating disorders, steroid use or even hurting themselves in other ways. When supporting people with body image issues, we need to have compassion and understanding, and try not to be judgemental.

It is not necessarily wrong if someone does not feel that they love their body, but they may need help to have a healthier attitude towards themselves. If we could only see in ourselves what God sees in us, our bodies are not the problem, but some of the unrealistic or harmful expectations are.

Our body is a gift and gifts need to be taken care of, treasured and fully appreciated. When people self-harm, they do so not because they are deliberately doing something wrong, or choosing to reject God's gift, but simply because they are troubled and struggling and possibly suffering from a mental health issue. If we know someone who is self-harming it is really important to tell a trusted adult so that they can seek help. People need help to stop and to overcome the negative feelings and know how precious they are!

Do people who die by suicide go to heaven?

Some people mistakenly think that a person who dies by suicide cannot go to heaven as this was taught many years ago. Nowadays, our understanding of and compassion for mental ill health has developed and this has also affected how the Church teaches about suicide. The Church understands that although suicide is harming God's creation, a person who thinks about or attempts suicide is usually experiencing overwhelming physical or mental stress or they may be suffering from mental health issues. The Church understands that individuals under such pressure may not be responsible for their own actions and therefore trusts in God's mercy and love for them. If we know anyone who is thinking about suicide, then it is important to tell a trusted adult so that they can seek help.

Death and Suffering

Why would a good God allow us to suffer?

Sometimes the bad things that happen in our lives are caused by other people who make wrong choices and hurt others. This happens because we all have freedom and sometimes can choose to use it in the wrong way. God does not limit our freedom, although sometimes we might wish he would as we do not always do the right thing or choose what is best for us.

Other bad things that happen can be caused by seemingly natural causes, for example illness, and that can leave us with lots of questions. Why would a good God allow this to happen?

Suffering is a mystery but the Church teaches that God is there in the midst of it, whatever its reason. Jesus experienced real suffering when he was on earth and therefore God knows and understands what it is like to suffer. Many people are comforted by the belief that God is not uncaring or distant from us, but willing to suffer on our behalf and to be with us in our own pain. Some people argue that suffering can sometimes even lead to good things. Even if this is true in certain circumstances, it can be very challenging and hard to hear when you are in the midst of pain.

Often when people suffer they do not need answers, they need compassion. Listening to, being silent with and offering practical help are most important. It is okay if people feel hurt or anger towards God. There were many examples in the Bible of people who were angry or upset with God, for example Job and Jacob. We need to understand people's pain and their possible anger and not just ignore or make judgements about it. God loves us unconditionally and he is more than able to cope with our honest pain.

What happens when we die?

The Church teaches about Death, Judgement, Heaven, Purgatory and Hell.

Death and Judgement

The Church teaches that when we die we will meet God's love as we leave this world. God will know exactly what kind of person we are and the kind of life we have lived. We are utterly who we are without anything hidden. If we still reject his love, then we could be without God forever – God gives us this freedom to reject him precisely because he loves us so much.

Heaven

People do not know what heaven will be like “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

Heaven is beyond our understanding or imagination as it is ultimately about being in the eternal presence of the love and light of God. We are completely with God and nothing more can separate us from him.

Purgatory

This is not a temporary hell, but a place of cleansing and healing to allow people to enter into the presence of God in heaven. Turning from sin, admitting our faults and being made whole can sometimes be painful and a struggle, but it is God's love in action.

Hell

Hell is the state of being separated from God forever. God created us with free will. He wanted us to use that free will so we could love authentically, but ultimately we have the freedom to choose to reject love and to even refuse God's light and love. The Church teaches that hell is a possibility but does not make us believe that anyone is actually there. Perhaps

the love of God is so huge that the most sinful, rebellious soul can turn and repent as they pass over. The Church says that there is no possibility of repentance after death, but during the process of passing over such a change may be possible as the soul begins to encounter God's love.

Summary

We cannot really understand what an after-life is like. It is beyond our knowledge when we live in this physical universe. Think of caterpillars turning into butterflies as a limited, earthly example. If they could think like we do, they would never comprehend what was coming next. We change, become new, and cannot die ever again. (There is a useful book for explaining death to young children called *Water bugs and Dragonflies* by Doris Stickney [here](#).)

Can everyone go to heaven?

Only God knows who will go to heaven and who will not. If we read the account of the Last Judgement in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus questions whether people have fed the hungry, given shelter to the homeless, etc. Christians are taught that the way we live our lives and how we treat other people affects our chances of being judged favourably by God. However, it is not just about outward actions and seemingly good works as only God knows the heart of each person and how they have responded to his grace. Even the person who has committed the most serious of sins may be forgiven if they are truly sorry and therefore may have an opportunity to be with God in heaven.

The Church teaches that Jesus died for everyone and therefore, the Church, sharing in Jesus' mission, continues to intercede for everyone by praying for them. We are all created for the same purpose which means there is a great possibility, through Christ's sacrifice and the Church's intercession, of heaven for those who are not Catholic or Christian. Importance is placed on the desire in each person's heart to seek the truth and do the will of God, even if they don't know about Jesus or his teaching.

What is limbo and who goes there?

Some people used to believe in 'limbo' to explain what happened to babies who died before they had been baptised or indeed people who lived after Jesus but died without Baptism. It was a place that was thought to be neither heaven nor hell.

The Church has said however that limbo is *not* part of Church teaching. The Catechism of the Catholic Church does not include teaching about limbo and it was never an official part of the Catholic faith. Instead the Church teaches that the souls of unbaptised babies are entrusted to the loving mercy of God. This means that we really don't know and cannot say for definite who is in heaven, but we can be hopeful, because of what we can glimpse about the merciful and loving nature of God, that those babies and others who die before Baptism are with him in heaven.

Why doesn't God answer our prayers?

We pray for lots of different reasons. Asking for things (known as petitions) is one reason to pray but we should also remember to say thank you and sorry and to praise God in our prayers as well. Sometimes we pray for things to happen and they don't. This is something that can be hard to accept, but prayer is not magic. It cannot make things happen. Prayers can request, but not demand. We can and should pray for what we need but our prayers do not tell God something he doesn't already know and they also do not create a greater sense of urgency on God's part. We obviously do not know the mind of God and why he seems to answer some prayers and not others, but perhaps:

- God has a plan for each of us which is beyond our understanding and our expectations.
- What we have asked for would be the wrong thing for us even if we cannot see this for ourselves
- We need patience or to learn through a difficult situation
- Our prayers are heard (Jn 15:7, 17; 16:26), but the answer we receive is not necessarily the one we want.

Section 3 Healthy Relationships

Prejudice and discrimination

Why are there different races in the world?

Different races exist because human beings developed in different parts of the world. We have our differences of skin colour, physique, height, and facial features for example. We have our own racial/cultural identities with customs and stories of who we are. These differences are complementary and not in opposition. We can learn from each other and can learn to live together because we are all human beings created by and loved by God, the God of the whole earth and not just one race. Cultural diversity is a gift to be celebrated.

Our Catholic Faith does more than condemn racism, it also calls us to challenge racism, to eliminate its causes and to heal the wounds it brings. We each have a part to play, first by making sure that we think of every other person as someone worthy of respect. We uphold the rights, the equality, and the sanctity of every human life. To God, and to us, every life is a gift and irreplaceable

Letter from Bishops of Southwark Diocese to students in Catholic schools (2020)

If we do find that we have prejudices relating to race it is important to think about where they have come from and work towards changing them. Any behaviour that undermines someone's dignity must be challenged as unacceptable as it certainly has no place in a Christian community that is supposed to be modelled on God's love and compassion.

Religion

Which religion is the right one?

Obviously everyone believes their religion is the right and truest one otherwise they would not choose to identify with and follow it. Catholics believe their faith to be the fullness of truth and so should follow its teachings to the best of their ability and pray for God's grace to help them.

Just over 50 years ago, the Catholic Church gave a lot of thought to its relationship with the modern world and particularly with how it related to other religions. A document called *Nostrae Aetate* (In Our Time) was written

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings, which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men.

Those within the Catholic Church should not judge other people and their religious practices, even if they clash with their own traditions. Everyone should respect the faith of others and look for the good within it and within the community of believers. We are all children of God made in God's own image and likeness. This is the theme of Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, promulgated 4th October 2020, in which he recalls his joint declaration with Grand

Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb that “In the name of God, who has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and who has called them to live together as brothers and sisters, to fill the earth and make known the values of goodness, love and peace” (*Fratelli Tutti*, 285).

Why can't women be priests in the Catholic Church?

Men and women are equal and can share all kinds of jobs and occupations. There is no doubt that there are women in society who would be far better preachers and far better at the pastoral aspects of priesthood than some priests who are male. However, being a priest is not just a 'job' or a skill set. It is not just a calling either, it is a sacrament,

“Being a Catholic Priest is a way of following Jesus Christ with your whole life, body and soul. The priesthood is a relationship not a career.”

<https://www.ukpriest.org/on-being-a-catholic-priest>

The Church teaches that as Jesus was a man, priests should be male as they act *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ). Also, Jesus did not ordain any women or appoint any women to be one of his twelve apostles which suggests priesthood was reserved by Jesus for men. Some people do question this and argue that it only mattered that Jesus was a human being and not that he was specifically male. They also point out that women in Jesus' day would probably not have been respected or listened to, so Jesus perhaps would not have included women in his twelve disciples even if he wanted to. Others counter this by saying that Jesus did often break some of the cultural norms of his day and so would have ordained women if he wanted to.

When exploring this issue, it is important to understand the difference between Church discipline and Church doctrine. A discipline of the Church is something that can be changed. For example, there have been times in the past when the Church has allowed priests to marry and not required them to be celibate. The practice of not allowing Catholic priests to marry may change in the future as it is simply a discipline and not the way things have to be.

There are certain teachings however that the Church believes it does not have the authority to change even if they are unpopular in society. Those particular teachings cannot change as they are based on divine law i.e. the doctrine comes directly from God. For example, the fact that priests act *in persona Christi* and Jesus was a male, and that he chose all men to be his twelve disciples means that the Church sees the male priesthood as something chosen by God and therefore not something that can be changed.

The Church accepts that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, however equal does not necessarily mean the same. The leaders of the Church, or the hierarchy, recognise that the role of women within the Church is incredibly important, but must be lived out in a way that does not involve being ordained as a priest.

Many people within the Church feel strongly about this issue and many struggle with the Church's teaching when other Christian denominations have changed their position in relation to the role of women. Members of the Church can also feel concerned that the male

hierarchy and leadership of the Church does not reflect the Church itself. This is even more of a problem with the worldwide decline of female religious orders i.e. fewer women are choosing to become religious sisters or nuns. There was a time when women were very powerful in the Church despite not being ordained to the priesthood. Female religious, people like Hildegard of Bingen, for example, had a tremendous influence on theology, liturgical practice, and the pastoral works of the Church. The lack of a female voice now is something that worries a lot of people and is something many feel needs to change if the Church is going to be able to minister to everyone.

Marriage

Should everyone get married?

For a couple who love each other and want to spend their lives together marriage is a public commitment and declaration witnessed by family and friends. A Catholic marriage is not only about the civil or public ceremony however, but about the spiritual blessing that is received as a sacrament. In fact, in a Catholic marriage the couple do not just receive the sacrament, their lives become sacramental by living the **sacrament day by day**. i.e. they become an outward sign of God's love. Their love for each other reflects the love God has for us. So marriage is certainly a good and precious thing, however that does not mean it is necessarily the right thing for everyone. Just as there are people who wish to dedicate their lives exclusively to one person in marriage, there are other people who feel called and happy to remain single.

From the earliest days of the Church, there have been many people who chose not to get married, either because they wanted to join a religious order or the priesthood, or because they felt they were not suited to marriage. There is nothing inferior about remaining single if that is what individuals feel is right for them.

God has a plan for each of us, whether that be to find a life partner or to remain single or with others in a community. God's plan is always about what is good and will make us truly happy. No one is under any obligation to get married. In fact, one of the conditions for getting married is that it is freely chosen, and not something that someone is forced into.

What if there are serious problems in a marriage?

Marriage is something to be taken very seriously as in the eyes of the Church it really is a life-long commitment. The marriage preparation a couple take part in is incredibly important so that issues can be discussed and expectations worked out beforehand. However even with preparation and the very best of intentions marriage will be challenging at times. Both partners must be committed to spending time working on the relationship, and keeping communication open so problems do not fester and become too serious.

Often the message from society can appear to be that marriage is something that doesn't have to be taken as a lifelong commitment, but the Church teaches that marriage is a sacrament, and that it cannot be ended. It is important to remember that there are two

aspects to marriage, the religious and the legal. As well as being a sacramental union (if between two baptised Christians), marriage is also a civil and legal contract. Although the sacramental nature of marriage cannot be ended until either the husband or wife dies, the legal aspect can be brought to an end through divorce.

Although the Church takes marriage incredibly seriously, it does recognise that sometimes marriages break down with little or no hope of being able to reunite or live happily together. When there is violence or other forms of abuse within a marriage, it may be that the safest option is separation or divorce. The idea that a couple should stay within an abusive relationship is a misunderstanding of Church teaching. Violence, or abuse within marriage is never to be tolerated. It is both a sin as well as a crime. We should be clear that the Catholic Church's teaching on the permanence of marriage does not require someone to remain in an abusive relationship.

The Church does not judge or condemn people when their marriage breaks down. Instead there should be compassion and support provided to help individuals to be happy and to provide a loving and secure environment for any children.

It is important to understand however that even if the marriage is legally ended through divorce, the sacramental nature of the marriage remains. A couple may be legally divorced but in the eyes of the Church they are still married and therefore they are not free to enter into another sexual relationship. This can be very challenging for people especially if the person who wishes to marry again was not in any way at fault.

The Church will however investigate whether a marriage was valid to begin with and if it was not, then the marriage could be annulled. If the Church concludes that the marriage was never a marriage to begin with, and grants an annulment, then the individuals would be free to marry somebody else, sometimes with particular conditions imposed. For example, if someone was judged to have been immature at the time of the attempted marriage, then a likely condition imposed on them before they could marry would be to seek permission from the local Bishop. He would want to be convinced they were now mature enough to understand the commitment.

Can divorced people remarry?

A marriage conducted in a Church is a blessed relationship, and is a sacrament of the Church if between two Christians. In fact, the couple themselves become the sacrament insofar as they are an outward sign of God's love - a love that is eternal and never ends. When a couple marry they give themselves completely to each other and the *'two become one flesh'* Mk 10:8. Once joined in this way by God, the Church teaches that someone cannot simply break that union because they have changed their mind.

However, the reality is that some couples do separate and no longer want to live together or perhaps even be married to each other anymore. Divorce is permitted within the laws of this country and once finalised a couple are allowed to remarry legally. The Church cannot stop a couple from going through the legal process of getting a divorce, however it does not agree

that once a divorce is obtained that the marriage itself is over. In the eyes of the Church the couple are still married to each other and therefore they are not free to marry someone else.

However, if there was a problem when the couple got married there could be grounds for annulment. If the annulment is granted by the Church and the divorce granted civilly, then the couple would be free to marry, again, sometimes with particular conditions imposed.

Family

Why are there so many different types of families?

Families come in all shapes and sizes and are all to be welcomed and celebrated as it is the first and fundamental unit for society. The most important thing is that the family unit, whatever it looks like should be a happy place where people feel secure and loved and children are nurtured.

A family often consists of a mother father and children, who may or may not live with or near extended family members including grandparents. For various reasons, some children will be brought up in a home where only the mother or father can look after them. These are known as single parent families. Sometimes the single parent may find a new partner who may or may not have their own children. These reconstituted families may include step parent and sibling relationships. Children may also grow up in families with same sex parents and other children are raised by members of their extended family or by foster parents.

In all these situations, the most important thing is that those within the family unit, particularly the children, should feel loved and secure. Under no circumstances should Church teaching in relation to sex outside of marriage, remarriage or homosexuality ever be used as a reason to make someone feel inferior to those living in other kinds of family arrangements.

Sexual Relationships

Are we really supposed to wait until marriage to have sex?

Society today can be very sexualised and it may seem that everyone is having sex and that it is not realistic to wait until marriage. Sex can sometimes be portrayed as something that is not a big deal or anything special and the idea of waiting for marriage can be seen as outdated.

Sometimes people think the Church's teaching about sex as something that is judgemental or negative. On the contrary, the Church's attitude to sex is not a negative one at all, but very much a positive one. Sex is a wonderful thing as it is created by God and can be an amazing source of joy and pleasure. It is precisely because of the high opinion the Church has of sex that it believes that it is best suited to a particular context.

It is important to understand the purpose of something before we make decision about how or when we should act on it. The Church believes that the purpose of sex is two-fold, to

enable a man and a woman to express their love and commitment to each other and for the purpose of procreation.

For that reason, the Church believes that marriage, a loving, exclusive, permanent relationship is the proper context for sex. It believes that sex should be about self-giving, and not just self-satisfaction. When a person loves and has committed to someone for the rest of their life, then they can enjoy an intimate fulfilling sexual relationship without lots of the worries that come with a more casual approach to sex.

So the Church's teaching is not a negative one but actually a positive one that seeks to guide people to want the very best for each other and for themselves. The Church believes that waiting until marriage to have sex will ultimately lead to being more fulfilled and will therefore likely lead to longer lasting happiness.

It isn't easy to live your life in a way that is different to some of the powerful messages in society, but there are signs that the tide is beginning to turn and that even many people with no religious beliefs are beginning to see that the widespread use of contraception, the frequency of abortion, the high divorce rate and the consequences of family breakdown may mean that it is worth exploring another approach to sex.

There will of course always be people who believe that life is about instant satisfaction and that the idea of waiting is absurd. It is important however that even if that is their perspective, those who wish to wait must never be pressurised in to something that they do not want or feel is right.

[As long as both people consent isn't it okay to just have sex for pleasure?](#)

See above. Pleasure is by no means a bad thing or something people should feel guilty for experiencing. Pleasure is a wonderful thing and the fact that God created sex to be pleasurable is not something that we should ignore or deny. There is a physical dimension to sex, which is why people view sex as sating a physical urge, as a stress reliever, as a comfort or as a pleasure. However, we are more than just physical beings and the sexual act is more than just purely physical too.

Even when two people consent to casual sex there are enough books, movies and songs written about the emotional suffering that can result when one person is more invested than another. The language that the body is speaking through sexual intercourse can mislead others as to the true nature of their feelings. When we remove the love, the commitment and the permanence from a sexual relationship, people become vulnerable as it is an undeniably intimate act. Sex isn't a neutral act and even if someone consents to sexual intercourse they may not be prepared for the emotional consequences of this step, or indeed the potential physical ones.

The Church teaches that sex is more than just a pleasurable thing to do because it has the power to unify (bond together) and to procreate (create new life). It is precisely because of the powerful nature of sex that the Church wants to make sure people use it in a way that will really make them happy in the fullest sense.

When it comes to sex, people often speak a lie with the language of their bodies without even realising it. Whether we know it or not, the true language of sex says “I am completely yours, I belong totally to you”. But this is often not what people really mean to say. Consider the situation of two teens having sex. They are physically doing the same thing as a married couple, but they do not mean what their bodies are saying because they have not made the marriage commitment.

(Theology of the Body for Teens (2006), P84).

Why does the Church say that we shouldn't masturbate?

During puberty, sexual development takes place and a young person may begin to experience a whole new set of physical urges and sensations. These feelings are part of the drive to reproduce, which is both natural and necessary – otherwise the human race would be extinct!

A lot of young people discover that touching their genitals can provide a kind of pleasure they have not experienced before. Deliberately touching oneself in order to experience sexual pleasure is called *masturbation*. It can be quite a difficult topic to talk about as it is something that is private and some people find it a bit embarrassing.

It is natural to be curious about the body and the new sensations, but it is also necessary to develop habits of self-discipline. We are more than just physical beings; we are body/spirit persons created in God's image. We understand sexuality as a gift of the whole person, not simply a matter of physical desire and pleasure.

As people get older and mature they develop an understanding that sexuality is not something that is solitary, but relational. It is meant to be about being in relationship with another and expressing love for another person. Masturbation can lead people into self-centredness, but God's gift of sexuality is intended to lead us toward others. Masturbation is not a self-giving act, it is purely about the individual and their own pleasure. While the Church doesn't trivialise masturbation, since it sees the consequences of where it can lead and the harm it can do, it recognises that for many reasons it is possible that the person would not be wholly at fault. For example, 'taking into account affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety or other psychological or social factors can lessen, if not reduce to a minimum, moral culpability' (CCC 2352).

Section 4 Media and technology

What is wrong with pornography?

Human sexuality is a gift from God. It isn't something to be ashamed of or to be viewed as sinful. It is an amazing and precious gift. Pornography however separates sex from its true nature and purpose. Pornography damages the physical gift of sex but also the emotional and spiritual element as it treats people on a purely physical level.

Pornography objectifies and misrepresents people. Those involved in the creation of pornography are not treated with the dignity that a human person deserves as a person is meant to be loved, not used or viewed as merely an object for enjoyment. Aspects of their bodies are focused on rather than the person as a whole. A human being is far more than just their body and by ignoring the other aspects someone is treated as an object and not a person.

Also the world of pornography is a fantasy world. The behaviour is a distorted version of reality. It can give, especially young people, a distorted view of what the human body looks like and what sexual intercourse is like. The Church teaches that sexual intercourse should be about expressing love and wanting the best for another, but pornography takes the sexual act and turns it into something that is often degrading and aggressive.

Evidence shows that pornography is addictive. It can lead to people watching more and more extreme pornography to achieve the same level of arousal. People become desensitised to the shocking images they see, start to believe it is acceptable behaviour and then perhaps most worryingly feel it is appropriate to act out that sexual behaviour.

Pornography does not reflect the high value that should be placed on the gift of sexuality, and it can sadly also impact current and future relationships. Habitually watching pornography can corrupt a person's understanding of sexuality and of relationship. Genuine relationships involve self-sacrifice and compromise, but the virtual reality of this industry presents a false way of relating and ultimately makes it harder for people to recognise and express genuine love.

The pornography industry is a lucrative and powerful one. When people watch, demand increases so more material is produced and the cycle of the violation of human dignity continues.

“There is no dignity when the human dimension is eliminated from the person. In short, the problem with pornography is not that it shows too much of the person, but that it shows far too little”

(St John Paul II).

Section 5 Biology

Contraception

Condoms can prevent STI's. Isn't that a good thing?

The Church teaches that the right relationship and context for sexual intercourse is one where the couple have made a lifelong exclusive commitment to each other i.e. marriage and where they are then in a position to be able to be open to having children. There are many who do not live their life in this way and would instead argue that sexual intercourse is simply a pleasurable activity that one can share with another consenting person. Those people who do not necessarily see commitment as a necessary part of sex will often turn to artificial contraception as a way of trying to prevent pregnancy or avoiding STIs.

The Church obviously does not want to leave people exposed to STIs, but also feels that contraception such as condoms will never be the complete answer either. Firstly, not all methods of artificial contraception provide absolute protection against STI's. Although condoms can help prevent the spread of some STI's they can also sometimes give people a false sense of security that leads to people not really considering the significance or the risks associated with sex. The Church teaches that there are better and more effective ways to stop the spread of STI's which include avoiding casual sex and being faithful in marriage.

[Is it okay for a married couple to want to limit the number of children they have?](#)

The issue with artificial contraception for the Church is that it places a barrier where there should not be one. If sex is, as the Church teaches, a total self-giving within a permanent and exclusive relationship, then there should be no real need for contraception.

Many Catholics accept the teaching of the Church on artificial contraception in relation to casual sex or sex outside of a marital relationship. Some are however challenged by this teaching when it comes to wanting to responsibly limit the number of children conceived within a loving marital relationship, perhaps for health or financial reasons.

For this situation the Church would encourage the use of Natural Family Planning (NFP) and see this as a moral alternative to artificial methods of contraception for married people. NFP is a way to avoid or achieve pregnancy based on awareness of a woman's fertility and requires time, effort and mutual co-operation to ensure its effectiveness. NFP is based on the fact that a woman's body gives certain signs about the different phases of her monthly fertility cycle and that they can be observed and interpreted to determine when a woman is fertile. To achieve pregnancy, you should have sexual intercourse at the peak of this fertile time. To avoid conception, avoid intercourse during the fertile time.

Reproduction

Isn't it unfair that some people can't have children?

It does feel incredibly unfair and for some couples is a source of constant pain and suffering. This pain can be made even worse by the apparent injustice of unwanted pregnancies or parents who abuse or neglect their children. Loving couples can feel abandoned and so desperate for a child that it can become all-consuming and affect mental health.

Like all suffering (see previous answer on suffering) it is incredibly hard to accept but some people find comfort in believing that God has a plan for them, of which this is a part. It is not the plan they had for themselves however and can be very difficult to accept and be at peace with.

For some couples, though it must be stressed, not for all, the answer may be adoption. This will enable them to have children they can love and provide a home and family for.

Why doesn't the Church allow In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF)?

This is a really difficult teaching for those who feel desperately that IVF may be their only chance to become parents. When a couple are so desperate to have and love their own child they may feel that it doesn't matter how the child is conceived. But for the Catholic Church, how the child is conceived *is* important. The Catholic Church values new life and wants children to be raised in loving families, however the Church teaches that conception should occur within a wife's body using her egg and the sperm from her husband. The separation of procreation from the sexual act is seen as a problem as it threatens the dignity of the human person. The act which brings the child into existence is no longer an act by which two people give themselves to one another in the marital act, but instead becomes a medical procedure.

Another serious challenge to IVF is that to maximise the chance of success, usually several eggs will be fertilised and embryos formed. If the embryos are not transferred into the womb they are destroyed or suspended in a frozen state indefinitely. This is not acceptable to the Church as life begins at conception and therefore the embryos need to be treated with the dignity we all deserve and not used as a means to an end.

It is very important to note that even though the Church does not accept this method of fertilisation as moral, this does not mean that a child conceived in this way is any less valued in the eyes of the Church. Every child is precious in the eyes of God and deserving of dignity.

Is it wrong to not want children?

Accepting the possibility of children into marriage is a fundamental part of what a Catholic marriage is. It is actually stated in the marriage vows and is actually one of the main purposes of the act of sexual intercourse. If a couple decide together in advance of marriage that they do not want to have children, then they do really need to explore whether they actually want to undertake a Catholic marriage.

If one person in a Catholic marriage does not want children, then this could be grounds for annulment as being open to procreation is such a central part of the nature of Catholic marriage.

Abortion

Why isn't abortion ever allowed?

Abortion can often be seen as a debate about a woman's right to choose what is best for her body. The Catholic Church is strongly opposed to abortion and sometimes this is unfairly seen as a male led organisation just wanting to oppress women's rights. The Church would argue however that in opposing abortion they are by no means denying the rights of women, but they are simply recognising that there is another person whose rights also need to be considered, those of the unborn child. There are two people involved who are both precious, who both have dignity and a right to life.

The Church considers the life in the womb to be a person, an unborn baby, a life created by God and therefore sacred. The Church does not place value on life because of its stage of development. The life of the unborn child is viewed in the same way as that of the new-born baby, the young child, the middle aged person or an elderly person close to death. All are completely precious and worthy of protection because of their inherent dignity as a child of God. An abortion is therefore the unjust killing of innocent life which in the eyes of the Church can never be permissible.

So the Church recognises the rights of the unborn child, but also those of the mother. The Church therefore ministers to women who are struggling with unplanned pregnancies, those who are going through the adoption process, those who are struggling to care for and provide for a new child and those who are recovering or healing from an abortion experience. The Church has a responsibility to not just oppose abortion but to be committed to all women who are pregnant and in need, to help and support them in a meaningful way.

Why should a rape victim be forced to carry and give birth to the child of her attacker?

This is a situation that some feel justifies abortion because they feel so desperately for the victim of an horrendous violation who then faces the further trauma of carrying and giving birth to the baby of their attacker. The Church absolutely recognises that rape is an abhorrent and criminal act that is extremely traumatic to the victim. At the same time, the life of the unborn child conceived in the womb is still precious and therefore just cannot be ended no matter how tragic or painful the situation may be. Victims of rape must be supported and accompanied however, regardless of whatever decisions they make.

Isn't abortion kinder if the child in the womb is disabled or is not going to live?

The Church teaches that all life is precious, no matter what quality and for how long it may last. We therefore do not have the authority to make decisions about who is and who is not worthy of life. The decision to end a life does not rest with us and we must trust fully in the will of God.

Is abortion acceptable if the pregnancy risks the mother's life?

The teaching of the Church on this matter is often something people struggle with. Simply put however, the life of the unborn child and the mother are of equal value. We would not judge someone's life to be of less value because they are younger, less capable or more vulnerable than another. The life of the unborn child is of no less value than the life of the mother and therefore the mother's rights cannot therefore be put before the rights of her unborn child. The Church therefore does not permit deliberate abortion in order to save a mother's life. For example, if it was discovered that the mother's heart was under strain from the pregnancy it would not be permissible to terminate the pregnancy to protect her health.

However, an important distinction is that there are medical interventions that can take place that are intended to treat a condition but may cause an abortion as a side effect, for example undergoing chemotherapy to treat the cancer – not to end the pregnancy – or an ectopic pregnancy, in which the embryo implants itself outside of the womb, usually in the fallopian tube. In these cases the abortion is a foreseen but unintended side effect of the treatment and would therefore be permissible. The intention of the act is what is important and this is called the principle of “double effect”.

What if you don't want an abortion but your parents or boyfriend want you to have one?

Becoming pregnant can leave some women in a very vulnerable position. They may face pressure from those around them to have an abortion even if it is not what they want for themselves or their baby. It can be incredibly difficult to stand up to such pressure but there are several charities that offer practical help to girls/ women who find themselves in a situation where they have little or no support and are pregnant. Anyone who is in that situation must speak to an adult that they trust. No one should ever be forced to have an abortion against their will and must be supported to be able to resist the pressure they are under.

Section 6 Gender and sexual orientation

Sexual orientation

Is it okay to be gay?

The Church accepts without reservation those who experience homosexual feelings. The Church clearly teaches that homosexual persons 'must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity' (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2358).

A gay person should never be made to feel that they are somehow inferior, that they should feel negatively about their sexuality or that they do not have the potential for love. The Church strongly teaches that gay people should never be subject to persecution or discrimination. Young teens who are coming to terms with being gay are significantly more likely to attempt suicide or self-harm. The Church has a responsibility to do everything it can to accompany individuals pastorally and to ensure it does not contribute in any way to the marginalisation of gay people.

The school should be mindful that the Church teaches that homosexual inclinations are not sinful. For older pupils who may publicly identify themselves as such, Catholic schools should be havens of respect and custodians of the true dignity of each human being. They should be as attentive to the possibility of homosexual pupils being marginalised and bullied as they are to discrimination based on religion, gender, race or disability.

Made in God's Image (2018, page 5)

Why doesn't the Church allow gay relationships?

The Christian God is a personal and relational God and, as made in his image, human beings were also created for relationship. The Church recognises that everyone, straight or gay, needs love and need people in their lives to whom they are special and who make them feel special. It is therefore not entirely true to say the Church does not allow gay relationships.

However, the Church teaches that sexual intercourse should be reserved for marriage between a man and a woman, as its purpose is to create a lifelong bond between two people of the opposite sex and at the same time to bring new life into the world. This can feel very challenging for a homosexual couple who cannot marry within the Church and are therefore being asked by the Church to commit to live a life of celibacy. It may feel to a gay couple that their loving relationship and the sacrifices they make as part of their commitment to each other are ignored or disregarded by the Church.

The Catholic Church teaches however that everyone is called to chastity according to their state of life. For a married person this means they are faithful within their marriage, for an unmarried person, straight or gay, it means that they live a celibate life of abstinence. This can undoubtedly be a struggle and a sacrifice for people.

Is sex between people of the same sex okay?

Sexuality is a gift of God to the human race by which the two sexes, male and female find themselves drawn to the other sex to find their happiness in a faithful, exclusive and lifelong relationship in marriage. Sexual intercourse is a physical action by which these two lifelong partners express and deepen their total self-giving to each other, and in the same action cooperate with God in creating new life through the joining of the man's sperm and a woman's egg.

This is not possible between people of the same sex because their bodies are not different from each other. Even though they may bring temporary pleasure, they cannot convey that total gift of self to another and be open to the gift of new life. But homosexual people can find various other ways to express their love, affection and commitment to each other.

All people need intimacy. Sometimes we confuse our need for intimacy with our need for a sexual relationship. It can be a cultural problem, that we think that the only way to have any intimacy is in a sexual relationship. Many who learn to live a celibate life hold that if a person can find ways to address their need for intimacy without sex, then the desire for sex decreases substantially. Of course, even then, such a life is not an easy one – in fact, it is a sacrifice. But the Church teaches that for everyone, homosexuals and heterosexuals, our own sexuality isn't supposed to be all about how to find personal happiness for ourselves. Our sexual expression or our abstinence from it is supposed to be about how to be faithful to God, our spouse (if married) and others in total self-giving. Sometimes it means sexual intimacy; sometimes it means celibacy.

Can gay people get married?

Same sex marriage is often seen as flowing from a commitment to equality in society. A difficulty for Christians therefore can be that any perceived opposition to the marriage of gay people can be labelled as bigoted or homophobic. The Church however, as can be seen from answers above, does not condone homophobia or any form of discrimination towards gay people and has a responsibility to advocate for those whose rights are being denied or who seek freedom from discrimination.

The Church does however have a particular understanding of the nature and purpose of marriage and has a theological understanding of marriage. In the Catholic Church it is not just the wedding ceremony that is the sacrament but the marital life of the husband and wife themselves. They are the visible signs of God's grace. Their love is not only permanent and faithful, but it is also *fruitful*. Because of this Catholic understanding of marriage, the Church accepts that gay people can love and commit to each other and may be able to marry legally, but such a relationship would not be recognised as a sacramental marriage.

(Trans)gender

Is it okay to be transgender?

In our society, people have much more choice than they used to about many aspects of their personal lives. Some people even feel they can choose to change the gender they were born in, though it is not an easy or quick process. Most people who change their gender were born with the definite sexual organs of a boy or a girl but at some point as they grew up they began to feel that they were really the opposite. These are known as transgender people.

There are three steps they may take:

- First they begin dressing as a boy or girl and asking people to refer to them as him or her, usually with a change of name;
- Next they may begin taking hormones to suppress the sexual characteristics of their birth gender and increase those of the opposite gender;
- Finally, they may ask for surgery to replace their sexual organs, though many never get that far.

It is very important that people do not rush into these changes and seek the time to understand how they feel. Sometimes, but not always, the feeling goes away after a while or lessens, and they decide to remain in the gender of their birth.

The Catholic Church teaches that God created human beings and he created them to be either male or female. *“God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them”* (Gen. 1:27). Gender is therefore not something that can be seen as separate from the biological sex a person is born to or to the spiritual reality of the person. For this reason, the Church does not teach that a person’s gender can be different than their biological sex, that it falls onto a spectrum, or that it can be fluid. *“Biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated”* (*Amoris Laetitia* 56).

So, in responding to issues of transgender the Church would emphasise that each individual is created by God. Just as this is used to emphasise the fact that sex and gender are not distinct, it is also used to emphasise how each person is indeed a child of God and must be treated with dignity. Individuals who identify as transgender should be treated with great respect and compassion, as there is often a great deal of uncertainty and suffering involved. Accordingly, these individuals should be accompanied within the Church, without judgement and with compassion, as they discern their way ahead.

Some individuals who have completed the process feel very happy that they have done so, while others continue to suffer and may even ask for the process to be reversed. The scale of people identifying as transgender within society has escalated incredibly quickly over a relatively short time. For this reason, there are many issues that need to be addressed by society and also by the Church to be able to provide dignity and clarity to those involved.

We recognise that there are people who do not accept their biological sex. We are concerned about and committed to their pastoral care. Through listening to them we seek to understand their experience more deeply and want to accompany them with compassion, emphasising

that they are loved by God and valued in their inherent God-given dignity. There is a place of welcome for everyone in the Catholic Church.

CBCEW Statement on Gender

Section 7 Common Good

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Is FGM acceptable as it is an aspect of someone's culture?

FGM is an illegal ritual carried out for various religious, social and cultural reasons. Some communities and families believe that FGM will help prepare the girls for marriage or childbirth in some way. However, there is absolutely no medical justification for carrying out FGM. It is used to control female sexuality and can cause long-lasting damage to physical and emotional health. It is a harmful practice that involves mutilation and can even lead to death.

FGM is a barbaric form of child abuse, and a criminal offence in the UK. FGM does *not* need to be tolerated just because it is a part of the culture of certain people.

FGM rejects people's freedom and dignity and in the eyes of the Church any act that harms another in this way is contrary to the will of God. FGM is illegal in this country and if someone is aware of a person who might be or has been affected by this, they must tell an adult that they trust.

Honour Based Violence

Is honour violence acceptable as it is an aspect of someone's culture?

Honour based violence relates to predominantly women killed for perceived immoral behaviour, which is deemed to have breached the 'Honour' code of a family or community, causing shame. Someone who is at risk of 'Honour'-based violence is at significant risk of physical harm (including being murdered) and/or neglect, and may also suffer significant emotional harm through the threat of violence or witnessing violence directed towards a sibling or other family member. Murders in the name of 'so-called 'Honour'' are often the culmination of a series of events over a period of time and are planned. There tends to be a degree of premeditation, family conspiracy and a belief that the victim deserved to die.

Honour based violence is completely unacceptable and does not need to be accepted just because it is a part of someone's culture. Honour violence rejects people's freedom and dignity whilst causing great harm and even death. In the eyes of the Church any act that harms another in this way is contrary to the will of God. Honour violence is illegal in this country and if someone is aware of a person who might be or has been affected by this, they must tell an adult that they trust.