

The Sexual Orientation Gender Identity (SOGI) work group invites you to join in a community conversation around sexuality. This conversation most recently found voice at the “Being Sexual and Celibate” event held in Belmont from March 1–2, 2019 at which 100 of our sisters gathered for education and dialogue. Springing from this gathering, we’d like to share the videotaped presentation given by psychologist Sister Lynn Levo, CSJ, and a dialogue process that will draw you into the conversation, too.

We have called one another to dialogue through our *Chapter 2017 Recommitment*, in which we said: “We hear the cry of our suffering world. The impoverishment of peoples, the devastation of Earth, and oppressive social norms and systems call us in this moment to act ... to become better educated and to participate in engaged dialogue on gender identity and sexual orientation.” Our hope is that you will contribute to this important work by watching the video of Lynn’s presentation, reflecting on the material, and dialoguing with your sisters to deepen the Community conversation.

The SOGI work group recognizes that our conversations around sexuality have developed differently in the diverse areas of our Institute over the past few decades. We coordinated the March 1–2, 2019 education event with Lynn to update our education, provide a common base of experience that we hope will serve us in the Journey of Oneness and encourage open dialogue.

In her presentation, Lynn discusses the definition of sexuality and sexual orientation; defines gender, gender roles and gender identity; delves into relationship, intimacy and celibacy; and places our conversation in the caring, loving and merciful presence of our model, Jesus. To access the video, you will need to make a request to the workgroup by sending an email to SOGI@sistersofmercy.org. Lynn also provided a companion outline of the presentation, which immediately follows this letter. The video is approximately two-and-a-half hours. **Please do not share the link or the password.**

Included below are materials for a reflection and dialogue process that you are welcome to use to facilitate conversation. These materials contain prayer and questions for both personal reflection and communal sharing.

They are flexible enough to be used with five sisters, or 50. Here are a few ideas on how to begin:

- Watch the video on your own and reflect with the personal questions. Then join with about eight sisters, in person or through virtual means, to share in conversation around the communal questions; OR
- Take the initiative to gather many sisters in your area at a school, convent or other common place to have a day of education and dialogue. Watch the video together, pause for personal reflection, and share in conversation with about eight sisters at your table. Harvest the rich fruits with the large group. The video is divided into two segments. You could watch the whole video with conversation to follow, or invite conversation after each of the video segments; OR
- Design something else creative that best helps you to encounter your sisters in dialogue.

We are also including a brief optional feedback sheet so that the whole Institute can benefit from the wisdom of your group.

In the upcoming year, the SOGI work group is planning to further deepen our community conversation by offering opportunities for education and dialogue around sexual orientation and gender identity, more specifically. This current conversation is a common starting place. Also, *this particular conversation is intended only for Sisters of Mercy* because the SOGI work group promised Lynn, as a condition for agreeing to be recorded, that the video would not be shared beyond our vowed members. We hope to bring in the voices of our wider Mercy world as our work unfolds. The personal prayer does include voices of sisters, associates, companions and MVC alumna who identify as LGBTQ and allies, present at “*Every Life Cherished and Celebrated*” event held in February 2019.

As always, you can email any questions or feedback to SOGI@sistersofmercy.org.

Thank you for your generosity in engaging this conversation.

In Mercy,

Sisters Jennifer Lynn Barrow, Mary Kay Dobrovolny, Mary Hunt,
Betsy Linehan and Karen Scheer

(The SOGI Work Group)



Being Sexual And Celibate: A Psycho-Spiritual Perspective

Sisters of Mercy
Charlotte, NC
March 2, 2019

Lynn M. Levo, CSJ, Ph.D.
Consulting Psychologist
lynnlcsj@gmail.com

Jesus and our Humanity

At the foundation of Jesus' life was prayer, a continuous search for how best to live as an authentic human being, before a loving God
He was committed to helping people become whole and holy. Our Incarnational theology calls us to be companions with Jesus and to continue his mission – helping ourselves and others become fully human.

“We become fully human when we become more human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.” Pope Francis. The Joy of the Gospel, 8.

What does it mean to BE human: our first vocation?

- To love and be loved – to have enough sense of self and self-worth to be able to be intimate with others and act for their good; requires a personal life
- To discover our gifts and give them in service – to continue the Incarnation by creating a new world based on love, respect, equality, intimacy, reverence, mutuality and justice for all, without distinction; without excessive worry about self and one's competence
- To be in relationship with Mystery – to be in a relatively mature relationship with God and be able to foster this relationship in others; learning from Jesus who God is and who we are called to be now
- To meet human needs (identity, achievement, intimacy and generativity) in one's life freely

What does it mean to BE Sexual?

- From the Latin *sexus/secare* – suggesting we are **incomplete seeking wholeness and connection** that reaches through and beyond difference and divisions
- Sexuality is a beautiful good, powerful **sacred energy given us by God**, experienced in every cell of our being; it expresses God's intention that we become fully human not in isolation but in relationship
- The key integrating factor is not genital sex; it is the **quality of presence to oneself and others** that channels sexual energy toward personal and communal wholeness; it is about **giving oneself over** to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor and delight – so that with God, we can bring new life into our world
- Sexuality is redefined by its **emphasis on relationship, connection, communion, wholeness and presence to self, others and God.**

- All persons, including those called to celibacy, are **called to be sexually expressive** in healthy, appropriate ways – including, touch, various expressions of affection and conversations at deeper levels that include expression of feelings
- **Qualities that help foster healthy integrated sexuality:** emerging self-awareness, openness to feedback, willingness to self-disclose and seek help, responsible freedom, flexibility, developing creativity, ability trust self and others, and a deepening capacity for empathy, mutuality and intimacy.

Understanding Gender, Gender Identity and Orientation

Gender: what it means to be a man or woman – includes possibilities and limits

Gender Identity: refers to how a person defines, understands and experiences her/his gender; can be established as early as age 4 and may not be the gender they were assigned at birth; children learn gender role behavior at about this same age; for many, identifying with another gender may be temporary.

Gender Assigned at Birth	Self-identified gender	Term Used
male	female	Transgender female
female	male	Transgender male
male	male	cisgender
female	female	cisgender

Gender Expression: a person’s outward expressions (behavior, clothing, hair styles, name etc.) that communicate and express gender, often described as masculine, feminine, neutral or androgynous;

Origin of gender identity: likely biological and social, with no known links to trauma

A new reality and new terminology: many young people today are questioning a gender binary understanding and think gender is a spectrum and have adopted new terminology – e.g., gender nonconforming

Sexual Orientation is about attraction to others (external); it refers to a person’s physical, emotional, romantic, affectionate and erotic attraction to persons of their same sex (homosexual), the other sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual); some people who do not experience sexual attraction identify as asexual. Some individuals question a binary understanding of attraction, suggesting that attraction is more complex.

Pedophilia and Ephebophilia are considered disordered attractions.

Sexual Diversity and Ethical Living

- Psychology accepts that diversity exists both in gender identity and orientation; we are challenged and invited not to ignore the experiences of many who are trying to live authentically
- Many young people are questioning the binary nature of gender and have no issue with the diversity of orientation in their friends and family (being gay, lesbian or bi sexual is a non-issue for many)
- The Church is urged to read Scripture within a complex conversation that includes the voices of tradition alongside the witness offered in the contemporary world by human experience and reason. Theologians/the Church risk seeming deaf to the *voice of the living God* if they do not listen carefully to *what God might be up to in the sexual experience of actual humans and in the study of sexuality and gender offered by philosophy, anthropology, psychology and biology.* (Luke Timothy Johnson)
- The church cannot say yes to sexual behavior that is promiscuous, coercive, abusive, non-reciprocal and violent and it must listen receptively to sexual lives that are faithfully covenanted, that nurture life and that are chaste in manner. (Johnson)
- Margaret Farley RSM, offers a framework for sexual ethics based on the norms of justice (**Just Love**):

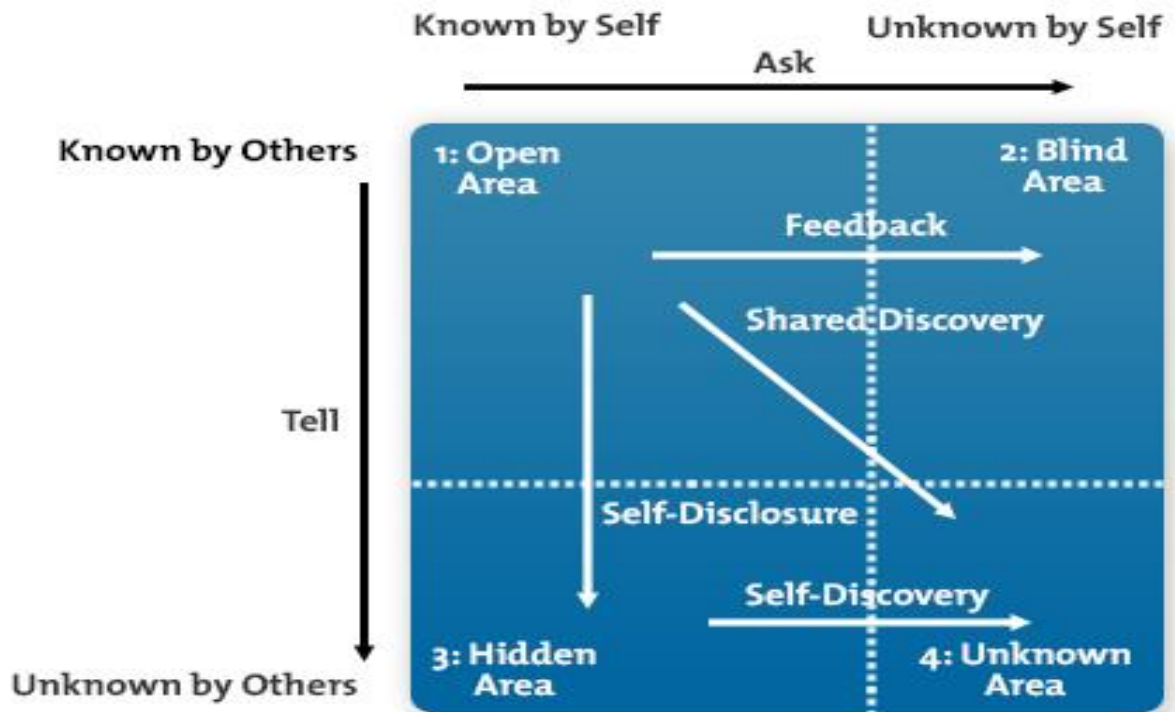
BASIS	NORM
Respect for autonomy & relationality & respect for their well-being	Do no unjust harm
Respect for autonomy	Free consent of partners
Respect for relationality	Equality Commitment Fruitfulness
Respect for persons as sexual beings in society	Social justice

Margaret also states that sex should not be used to exploit, objectify or dominate; and that rape, violence and harmful uses of power are not just; while freedom, wholeness, intimacy, and pleasure are values to be affirmed in relationships marked by mutuality and equality and some form of commitment.

INTIMACY WITH Self: a Key to Self-Awareness

- Requires a two-dimensional awareness: Recognition of the multiple movements within oneself in the present and a recovery of the influential events and forces in one’s past
- Includes greater understanding of current feelings, attitudes, choices, convictions, impulses, motivations, needs and behaviors
- Our pace is often frenetic and our response is mind numbing; both mitigate against reflection and self-understanding

- Most adults have a history with a dense accumulation of significant persons and events about which they are not intimate; Past events which shaped and continue to influence the present, especially the difficult, disruptive and painful ones, e.g., an abusive family, sexual abuse, death of a parent, regrettable sexual experiences are often not available to memory and kept *hidden*



The past is important psychologically and spiritually because the past holds a wealth of information useful for one's loving of and caring for self and others; the past serves as an important resource to one's personal growth. Robert Coles

Intimacy with Others

Qualities of an Intimate Relationship:

- Trust
 - Safety/lack of fear
 - Acceptance
 - Openness
 - Availability
 - Vulnerability
- AND
- Mutuality
 - Empathy
 - Balance of Power
- Intimacy comes from 2 latin roots *Intimus* – what is innermost an *Intimare* – to announce or make known; it means to make know what is innermost – in to me see
 - Intimacy demands that we take the necessary risks to grow in self and other awareness, and awareness of who and how God is with us.

- Born and based on the conviction that we are loved, beloved of God
- There are many opportunities to experience intimacy: emotional intimacy, intellectual intimacy, aesthetic intimacy, creative intimacy, recreational intimacy, work intimacy, crisis intimacy, conflict intimacy, commitment intimacy, spiritual intimacy, communication intimacy and genital intimacy.
- **Mutuality**, a way of being intimate in community, requires the telling and hearing of stories via self-disclosure and empathy and challenging one another to greatness in various ways
- Intimacy is more than personal – it is also social
- **Adult, mutual, friendship** is the most likely way to experience intimacy

Characteristics of Healthy Friendships:

- Communion
- Freedom and Discovery
- Faith in one another
- Forgiveness
- Truth
- Sacrifice
- Ability to include others
- Joy

As women religious, we are called to deepen mutually sustaining and life- giving relationships between and among us and with others.

Communion will open us to the vitality that lies deep at the heart of oneness with God, with one another and with the wider world. It will help us to be one with, without losing oneself; to be one with diversity, to speak new languages, and apprehend new images and tell new stories. It will remake us.

Pope Francis is calling and reminding religious everywhere that **our life – and each of us by virtue of our vocation are to be “experts in communion,” witnesses and architects of the plan for unity, of communion in and for a broken world.** Communion is **lived first and foremost within our respective communities when we eliminate criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy and hostility.** He challenges us to **create “alternate spaces”, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, connection, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive.**

Hope Is A Choice That Matters

Hope Not Despair - Hope is the refusal to accept or confirm the closed world of despair. Today we are called to be hopeful - the prospect of possibility assured to us by God’s promise of the future (Jer. 29:11-13) and also to be hope providers – helping others

- We will need to discover a new way, a dream not merely about survival - It is about a future flourishing of values, customs, memories and our charism in a new context.

- To be hopeful today is a humble stance, which involves “radical trust in God’s promise and clear recognition of what we do not know. (Denis Edwards)

Psychology’s Contribution to Understanding and Developing Hope

- Given our current reality, **Hope matters** today more than ever
- Hope is reality based and active - being engaged in the work of hope. This is consistent with hope as a virtue because a virtue is a strength or power that is developed.
- Hope is a powerful emotion that arises from the most basic human longings, resulting in a life-long quest for love, success and survival.
- Hope is about **mastery**, a feeling of empowerment, a sense of purpose that is collaborative and focused on higher goals; to know **we have choices**.
- Hope is about **attachment**, a belief in the continued presence of a loved one, a mentor, a friend, a caring community, an ally who fosters a sense of connection, trust and openness
- Hope is about **survival**, a belief that you will be liberated from harm, assured that you can care for yourself ; a sense of resilience and balance
- Hope is **spiritual**, a sense of meaning in life, a connection to something greater, cherished values, a belief in a benign universe and Creator.

Rebuilding Hope: What to Put in Your Hope Chest?

- Unearth, challenge and replace irrational beliefs and ways of thinking, especially individualism
- Develop supportive, caring, mutual, empowering and liberating relationships that supply what is necessary for life: trust, caring, belonging, courage, confidence and endurance
- Encourage spiritual practices that strengthen faith and connection with a loving God
- Develop resilience: an ability to cope with stress and anxiety, to rebound, bounce back from crises and maintain equilibrium in the midst of chaos
- Live a more balanced life
- Name and address fears: of being oneself, of loss, of success, of death

Hope As Ministry: Being Hope Providers

We will thrive in hope if we help others to be hopeful. What better way to be generative - to give life in today’s world. We can mentor hope in others by offering **Availability, Presence and Openness, and Contact**.

Suggested Process

The enclosed material has prayer and questions for both personal reflection and communal sharing.

Communal Process:

1. Gather and pray using the “Communal Prayer/Process”
2. Dialogue: Either watch the presentation by Lynn Levo, CSJ together, or in advance of the dialogue. Please see the SOGI Work Group’s letter to the community for some suggestions.
3. Complete the optional feedback sheet and return to SIGO@sistersofmercy.org by August 31, 2019

Personal Prayer for “Being Sexual and Celibate” Process

Call to Quiet and Contemplative Prayer: Chime

Opening Prayer: *“For the Traveler”* by John O’Donahue

Every time you leave home, another road takes you into a world you were never in.

New strangers on other paths await.

New places that have never seen you will startle a little at your entry.

Old places that know you well will pretend nothing changed since your last visit.

When you travel, you find yourself alone in a different way,

More attentive now to the self you bring along,

Your more subtle eye watching you abroad;

And how what meets you touches that part of the heart that lies low at home:

How you unexpectedly attune to the timbre in some voice, opening in conversation

You want to take in to where your longing has pressed hard enough inward,

On some unsaid dark, to create a crystal of insight you could not have known

You needed to illuminate your way.

When you travel, a new silence goes with you,

And if you listen, you will hear what your heart would love to say.

A journey can become a sacred thing: make sure, before you go,

To take the time to bless your going forth, to free your heart of ballast so that the
Compass of your soul might direct you toward the territories of spirit

Where you will discover more of your hidden life, and the urgencies that deserve to
claim you.

May you travel in an awakened way, gathered wisely into your inner ground;

That you may not waste the invitations which wait along the way to transform you.

May you travel safely, arrive refreshed, and live your time away to its fullest;

Return home more enriched, and free to balance the gift of days which call you.

Pause for Reflection

Readings: We invite you to listen to and reflect on the words from our LGBTQ Sisters, Associates, Companion and MVC Alumni and allies. Briefly pause between each reflection.

1. **Every time you leave home, another road takes you into a world you were never in.**

“At the core of our stories is: the need to find welcome within the community for who we are in every aspect of our life, including our sexuality; a willingness to take the risk to move out of silence and secrecy and into the freedom of saying who we are; a longing to find acceptance, not judgment; community, not distancing or isolation”

2. **New strangers on other paths await.
New places that have never seen you will startle a little at your entry.
Old places that know you well will pretend nothing changed since your last visit.**

“To not see and accept us as we are is to miss out on some amazing gifts that we are able to share... for the community to bring this topic into the open and have everyone explore who they are as sexual beings - no matter their orientation - is to bring this amazing energy, light and life... but also to be challenged in the process!”

3. **When you travel, you find yourself alone in a different way,
More attentive now to the self you bring along,
Your more subtle eye watching you abroad;
And how what meets you touches that part of the heart that lies low at home:**

“I think as Sisters of Mercy we have a proud history of involvement in many justice issues, but at this moment in our history, I also think we have a lot to learn, both individually and as a community, about human sexuality. It seems providential that our 2017 Chapter has called us, among other things, to a nonviolent stance and to strengthened relationships with one another, including 1) greater availability to one another; 2) healing of personal and communal wounds and 3) contemplative dialogue. What better tools than these for our efforts to become better educated and to participate in engaged dialogue on gender identity and sexual orientation!”

4. **How you unexpectedly attune to the timbre in some voice, opening in conversation
You want to take in to where your longing has pressed hard enough inward,
On some unsaid dark, to create a crystal of insight you could not have known
You needed to illuminate your way.**

“People don't tell their "story" to be emotional, moving, or unique - they tell the stories to change the sad reality of our current society and its devaluing of many groups of people. While I am glad that these lesbian stories are

being addressed, I also hope for better engagement on our racism, classism, etc. which often overlap one another.”

- 5. When you travel, a new silence goes with you,
And if you listen, you will hear what your heart would love to say.**
“The stories I heard told me that while our community may in some senses be very fragile and ‘in diminishment’, there is plenty of room for bravery of the sort that was exemplified by our founding women - numbers were not the most important part of the equation.”

- 6. A journey can become a sacred thing: make sure, before you go,
To take the time to bless your going forth, to free your heart of ballast so that
the Compass of your soul might direct you toward the territories of spirit
Where you will discover more of your hidden life, and the urgencies that
deserve to claim you.**

““Every Life: Cherished and Celebrated” weekend brought together almost equally women identified as lesbian and straight, vowed religious and married, associates, former Mercy Corps, various ages and unlimited experiences, each having or having had a sense of family in Mercy. Mercy grounded in justice seeking truth bound by love within our shared humanity. A story shared revealed our shared vulnerable humanity seeking mutual understanding and a shared desire for faithfulness in truth telling, risk taking and the celebration of small ever deepening steps toward affirming each other and all to continue the process with courage.”

- 7. May you travel in an awakened way, gathered wisely into your inner
ground;
That you may not waste the invitations which wait along the way to
transform you.
May you travel safely, arrive refreshed, and live your time away to its
fullest;
Return home more enriched, and free to balance the gift of days which
call you.**

“Let us celebrate one another and the risks taken to know one another truthfully and the joy of continuing the journey together. Our collective "images" about gift and challenges of being part of the Mercy Community call us to care for one another in the sweeps of emotions as we name challenges, conquer fear and step into a new day again and again.”

Quiet Reflection: 5-10 minutes

Questions for Personal Reflection:

1. What did you become aware of or want to linger with as the discussion of sexuality unfolded?

2. As you deepen your understanding of sexuality, what feelings arise for you?

Closing prayer: Words from Catherine McAuley (letter to Angela Dunne)

My Dear Sisters,

As you continue to deepen in this sacred conversation, I want to assure you of my presence and my love. Your desire is my own...that the Mercy Who calls us endlessly to the cutting edge of brokenness will unfold your path... always in union and charity. My gift to you is the warm, healing, affectionate legacy of mercy....the gift that is needed, neither earned nor deserved. It is the gift mirrored in Jesus, who taught us how to be human...to show us the way. May this legacy be your wisdom, your joy and your tender courage.

*Affectionately yours,
Catherine*

Communal Prayer/Process for “Being Sexual and Celibate” Process

Call to Quiet and Contemplative Prayer: Chime

Opening Prayer : *“For the Traveler”* by John O’Donahue

Every time you leave home, another road takes you into a world you were never in.

New strangers on other paths await.

New places that have never seen you will startle a little at your entry.

Old places that know you well will pretend nothing changed since your last visit.

When you travel, you find yourself alone in a different way,

More attentive now to the self you bring along,

Your more subtle eye watching you abroad;

And how what meets you touches that part of the heart that lies low at home:

How you unexpectedly attune to the timbre in some voice, opening in conversation

You want to take in to where your longing has pressed hard enough inward,

On some unsaid dark, to create a crystal of insight you could not have known

You needed to illuminate your way.

When you travel, a new silence goes with you,

And if you listen, you will hear what your heart would love to say.

A journey can become a sacred thing: make sure, before you go,

To take the time to bless your going forth, to free your heart of ballast so that the
Compass of your soul might direct you toward the territories of spirit

Where you will discover more of your hidden life, and the urgencies that deserve to
claim you.

May you travel in an awakened way, gathered wisely into your inner ground;

That you may not waste the invitations which wait along the way to transform you.

May you travel safely, arrive refreshed, and live your time away to its fullest;

Return home more enriched, and free to balance the gift of days which call you.

Quiet Reflection: 5-10 minutes

Questions for Communal Sharing:

1. As you deepen your understanding of sexuality, what does this mean for you personally and for us as Sisters of Mercy?
2. What did you hear in your group that you want to share with the broader community?
3. What potential impacts does this understanding have on our mission and ministry?

Sung Response for all that was shared:

“Ubi caritas, et amor, ubi caritas, Deus ibi est”.

(Live in charity and steadfast love, live in charity; God will dwell in you.)

Closing prayer: Words from Catherine McAuley (letter to Angela Dunne)

My Dear Sisters,

As you continue to deepen in this sacred conversation, I want to assure you of my presence and my love. Your desire is my own...that the Mercy Who calls us endlessly to the cutting edge of brokenness will unfold your path... always in union and charity. My gift to you is the warm, healing, affectionate legacy of mercy....the gift that is needed, neither earned nor deserved. It is the gift mirrored in Jesus, who taught us how to be human...to show us the way. May this legacy be your wisdom, your joy and your tender courage.

*Affectionately yours,
Catherine*

Closing Song:

“Ubi caritas, et amor, ubi caritas, Deus ibi est”.

(Live in charity and steadfast love, live in charity; God will dwell in you.)

FEEDBACK SHEET

As you deepen your understanding of sexuality, what does this mean for us as Sisters of Mercy?

What did you hear in your group that you want to share with the broader community?

What potential impacts does this understanding have on our mission and ministry?

Please send Feedback to SOGI at SOGI@sistersofmercy.org by August 31st, 2019.