

# DATING

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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— Dating  
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# DATING

**A Guide for Parents**

*by Ed Willock*



**AVE MARIA PRESS**  
**Notre Dame, Indiana**

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Censor Deputatus

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Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend

November, 1960

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Fifth Edition, March, 1964  
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Deacidified

In my mother's house, for many years, there hung a huge ugly picture.

It was a photograph of an ancient Roman ruins, in grim black and white, under glass, and set in a massive ornate frame. Mother, apparently, had allowed nostalgic sentiments to collect around this picture of ruin. The rest of us had learned to live with it and hardly noticed it.

But when my older sister's boy friends began calling for her at the house, the picture began to be a problem. Almost overnight Sue became aware that the picture was ugly and pleaded with my mother and dad to get rid of the monstrosity. She finally had her way; Dad took the picture down and stored it away, but the problem still remained.

Now we had a big rectangular square of discolored wallpaper staring us in the face. Once again Sue resorted to tears. We either had to repaper the room or find another picture the same size to cover the spot where the Roman ruins had hung. Repapering the room was out of the question and after several attempts we gave up trying to find another picture to fit the spot. In the end the monstrosity came back to its old place on the wall.

And so often that's the position we find ourselves in when we get rid of old-fashioned things without much forethought. We're left with a vacuum in our lives that

is not easy to fill. And this is particularly true when it is a matter of discarding old-fashioned customs. Unless we replace them with something better, we often find ourselves unequipped to handle situations that used to be handled according to the customs we were in such a hurry to get rid of.

### **Out with the Old-Fashioned**

“Dating,” for instance, is one such area where we are all pretty much lost these days. All of the old-fashioned customs surrounding courtship have been discarded. Parents and their eager offspring are left floundering as they try to approach this explosive, emotion-charged problem.

As things stand, courting puts too much strain upon the individual parent. Even Solomon would be hard put to come up with precise answers to precise situations: “Why can’t I go out with Johnny? I know he’s a non-Catholic, but after all, I’m not going to marry him!”

“Why can’t I go on a date? I’m 14. Other kids date when they are in grammar school.”

“Don’t you think I’m old enough to go steady? At my age (16) it’s hard to have to hunt around for a different girl every Saturday night!”

“Do you think I should stop dating Judy? Her parents are afraid to let her

out, so we have to sit in a dark room all evening while they watch television.”

“Can I take the car tonight, Dad? We have a double date and I don’t like to go in Al’s car. He drinks too much and drives like a cowboy.”

The parent of teen-agers longs wistfully for the “good old days” when dating was strictly for grownups, when kids did not drive cars, when a teen-age girl was always at home “after dark,” when a kiss meant a promise of marriage, when boy friends and girl friends were chosen from among one’s own neighbors, or even for the long-forgotten custom of unmarried women never being without a chaperone.

Don’t misunderstand me. I am not arguing for the revival of old-fashioned customs. I am only complaining that we really haven’t any new customs to replace them. At present, anything goes! There simply are no customs! Things would be much easier for us parents if the modern world presented us with a set of customs we could evaluate. At least we would have something to work from!

### **What Time to Get Home?**

From my own experience in this matter, I find there is currently no customary time at which teen-agers should get home from a date. There is no approximate age set when youngsters should start dating.

It is not a question of criticizing the narrowness or the broadness of the limits. There are no limits. *That* is our problem.

When I say problem, I feel very strongly that it is a far greater problem for our youngsters than for their parents. They're going through the growing pains of reaching maturity in their emotional and sexual lives. We all had to go through this, but a generation ago the courting customs of the time protected us against the dangers in dating, courting and hasty marriage. Our society has gotten rid of these customs without really substituting anything worthwhile for them, so our teenagers today find themselves without very much protection in trying to reach maturity without being badly hurt in the process.

We Catholic parents have got to help them. And this means that we have to evaluate once more the whole pattern of courtship. And it's not at all merely an academic question. Two facts are completely clear: Christianity is here to stay and courting is here to stay. Therefore, courtship should be a Christian practice.

Many modern parents and their teenagers cannot see why so much fuss is being made today about a problem that has been common in every generation.

Haven't juveniles always adopted new customs different from those their parents



regarded as fitting and proper when they were young? Haven't parents always been inclined to forget the restlessness of their own youth and become overly cautious about the actions of their own children?

### **Okay for Parents — Not for Daughter**

I know two parents who themselves were hastily married while in college 30 years ago. But when their own daughter recently asked them if she could quit college and get married, they raised a real storm. I think it is generally true that parents who have been unconventional in their own youth tend to think that their children should be much more conservative.

Actually, whatever real problems exist between today's parents and their children are aggravated by the fact that today's parents are more than usually cautious and today's teen-agers are more than usually rebellious.

But there is also another factor that makes the parent-juvenile relationship of today more than ordinarily strained. This century has seen tremendous technological changes take place. And this technological progress has brought about very rapid social changes. The world in which our youngsters are growing up is as different from that of my youth as the world of my youth differed from that of George Washington.

Twenty-five years ago we didn't know what television was. Drive-in theaters were nonexistent. Very few teen-agers had cars readily available. And these are just a few of the countless changes that complicate the process of emotional and sexual maturing, and that make the dangers of dating and courtship much greater than we had to face.

And so we have the picture of parents conservatively trying to hang on to what are or at least seem to them to be basic and changeless values. Their children, on the other hand, are much more impressed by the new fads and fashions, eager to adopt them or at least to try them out.

But if we are going to protect our children, if we are going to pass on to them the social and religious values we so cherish, we have to make an heroic effort to understand their problems in the light of the world today and work with them to reach a solution to these problems.

### **Modern Society Confused**

If there is anything certain about the world today it is that modern society is completely confused about this matter of sex. Books, movies, TV and advertising are filled with sex, but most of it is perverted sex.

We Americans think that we are "enlightened" on this subject, but actually we

don't really know much about it. This habit of knowing the "hows" and "whats" of a situation without any concern for the "whys" provides modern man with a remarkable amount of experience and an incredible lack of knowledge.

The Catholic today finds himself squeezed between two sentimentalists: the Prude and the Libertine. These two groups constitute the bulk of the population, and neither has a recognizable concept of sex. And because they have no concept, but merely strong reactions to sex, they simply do "what comes naturally" without regard for how unnatural it may be.

Catholics on the other hand have a concept about sex, a theory based upon a knowledge of human nature. It begins with the fact that God created sex and therefore it is good — when used and not abused according to God's plan for it.

And when we leave the theoretical plane we have some very practical conclusions too: sexual intercourse is exclusively a marital function; and misuse or abuse of sexual privileges and appetites is a threat to the institution of marriage; all behavior between the sexes should be prescribed by customs that will safeguard the virginity of the unmarried and the fidelity of the married.

The average teen-ager is quite bewildered when you bring up these principles

with regard to dating. They answer: "We're only having a little innocent fun! It's normal for boys and girls to have fun together! What's all this jazz about marriage or pre-marital relations? Nothing is further from our minds!"

### **All Kidding Aside . . .**

But let's not kid either ourselves or them. Too often their protests are nothing less than famous last words. I am sure no driver of a car sets out from home with the intention of having an accident. Yet, millions of drivers do have accidents. That is why we have rules and regulations about driving.

When we are driving a car, we are making use of a powerful force which, if not controlled, can destroy us and in fact, does destroy many each year. Likewise in dating a similarly powerful force is involved: the attraction of one sex towards the other. This force (not easy to control) has ruined many lives. Sure it's a good thing, but only when carefully controlled. That's why there needs to be limiting customs in dating, and the limits have to be based upon the theory of sex and its ultimate purpose: marriage.

We hold that there is a purpose and a cause-and-effect relationship between all practices that are sexual in nature. The ultimate purpose of marriage is to beget

and educate children. The ultimate purpose of engagement is to get married. And while part of the reason for dating may be to gain emotional and social maturity, its ultimate purpose is to find a partner for marriage. This is the chain of cause and effect.

Consequently, dating should be recognized as a preparation for engagement, engagement as a preparation for marriage and marriage as a preparation for parenthood.

We parents can see this fact plainly in retrospect, but it's hard for young people to recognize it. So they must learn to trust their parents' judgment concerning the likelihood of dating ending up in marriage and act accordingly. When they date, they must face the fact that marriage might be the ultimate result. A second or third date makes the likelihood even greater.

### **Marriage Results from Dating**

And this likelihood should not be put in the category of "danger of an accident" such as one must realistically face whenever one takes a car on the highway. This would be a perverse attitude toward dating. Marriage is an *expected, normal* consequence of dating. Any youngster who will not face this fact is simply too young to be dating!

# Prayer Be

O Mary, Mother of us all, your friendship by your constant concern primarily your own Divine Son. genuine interest, generosity, court

Mary, help us to make this day our hearts. Only then will it be worth the pledge of our respect for Him and an occasion of grace to each other and us. Protect us body and soul. Make us in one another.

Keep us chaste, O Virgin Mary  
Make us wise, O Virgin Mary  
Brighten our day with laughter

We will then be richer in mind and in other's company. We will be stronger for your Son, and for each other.

(Approved by Archbishop)

## re a Date

ve taught us the meaning of true  
for helping and pleasing others,  
our life is a perfect example of  
, warmth and unselfishness.

strengthen true friendship in our  
to be offered to your Son as a  
for each other. Help us to be an  
to all who share these hours with  
us aware of the presence of God

st pure.

prudent.

er, O Cause of our Joy.

and heart for having shared each  
thened in true friendship for you,  
rough Christ our Lord. Amen.

p William O. Brady)

, 2120 Park Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota

At first, it sounds altogether innocent and charming for a boy or girl to say about their dates, "Who's thinking about marriage? Don't worry, Mommy, we're just having fun!" Parents who have fears of the danger of a hasty, premature marriage may actually sigh with relief when hearing this childish remark. This is unfortunate, because hasty marriages are probably the least of all dangers risked in habitual dating.

Habitual dating puts the Catholic youth into a whirl of practices that are utterly irresponsible. Some of these "practices" are known as "running around," "petting," and "going steady." These are "practices" as distinct from "customs." A custom springs from a theory of life. It is a wisely thought-out way of doing things. A practice is a *habit fallen into* by people who don't particularly know what they are doing.

"Running around" is the habit of endlessly taking part in boy-girl affairs, night after night and week after week. It is dangerous in that it is without purpose; the head is left at home while the heart and glands are allowed to romp playfully. At any one point on this merry-go-round, everything might be quite innocent and Coca-Cola-ish. And actually, many boys and girls go through years of this without any apparent "trouble." The thing



that happens inevitably is that the youth who "runs around" is squandering the best years of his life.

### **Needed: A Grain of Salt**

Often, adults tell teen-agers, "Enjoy your youth while you have it!" That's not bad advice, *if taken with a grain of salt*. Teen-agers should be having fun, but it can easily be overdone. The energy and enthusiasm used in teen-age "running around" is the same energy and enthusiasm upon which adult competence is founded. At no other time in life is there such "get-up and go" of the kind needed to do the spade work for a vocation or a profession.

Anyone who is on the way to becoming a lawyer, doctor, mechanic, engineer, priest, writer, parent, musician (you name it!) in his early 20's is a lad or lass who has been too busy during the teen years to "run around." And the boy or girl who has passed these years running around without acquiring the sense of responsibility, competence, and maturity necessary to fill professional shoes, and raise and support a family will feel a great sense of loss. If they haven't worked at becoming a competent adult during their teens, it is unlikely that they will ever be competent or adult. The energy and

enthusiasm that make a person "run around" is the same stuff of which genius and sanctity are made.

"Petting" is another danger of constant dating. It usually refers to happy, care-free (and careless), childish playing with adult things. "Petting," properly understood, is a preliminary to sexual relations and for that reason belongs to marriage.

"Going steady" is a childish playing at marriage. No one should expect a girl friend or boy friend to "*be their property.*" It is convenient to have one's escort for dancing, dining, skating, chatting, etc., but it is an unfair childish advantage to take of a person's misplaced affections.

### A Twofold Solution

So that's the situation we're in today. Society has thrown away the safeguards surrounding dating and courting a generation ago and has found nothing to replace them. Teen-agers have to fight their own natures and the current "practices" foisted upon them by an un-Christian world. How can we help them? The solution to this difficult situation seems to be twofold, within the family itself and on the community scene.

To begin within the family, what both youth and their parents have to keep in mind is this: courting is not for children. It is a situation, once begun, over which

parents have little control. Their main responsibility is advisory. And they have to make their young adults aware of two facts. First, that they are doing something adult in which they must make the decisions and live with the consequences; secondly, that they should look for advice from parents at every stage of development.

The ideal situation is when the parents meet, know and discuss their youngsters' girl friends and boy friends as a regular part of family routine. In this way parents are in daily touch with what is going on. This ideal situation is only possible where an intimate affection already exists between parents and children.

It is also helpful if parents have acquainted their children with other adults (priests, neighbors, uncles, aunts, school-teachers, and so forth). Often a young person prefers to confide in some adult other than his own parents. This should definitely be encouraged. There is an old European custom whereby godparents exercise this function of being advisor and confidant of their youthful godchildren. Young people, often with good reason, fear that their parents will treat them like children.

### **Children Should Be Trusted**

Too, parents should "trust" their own

children during the courting stage. Too often they transfer their own uncertainties to a son or daughter just at the time when the youth must make his or her first adult decisions. Young people tend to be cocky or shy in order to compensate for their lack of experience. A parent must see through this sham and yet generate a sense of trust to lend courage to the newly-adult.

There is a basis for this trust. Young people have natural safeguards against indiscretions, a sense of shame and self-containment. We can also presume they have graces sufficient to their temptations. In many ways, they are better equipped for prudent courtship than are the middle-aged.

Furthermore there is the idealism of youth that the middle-aged are inclined to underestimate. I would say that a proper nurturing of this youthful idealism is the key to successful courtship. Young people have, generally, a far greater *capacity for greatness* than older people. They are considerably more "serious" than their elders. All their gaiety and practiced cynicisms are quite often just shells behind which they hide their serious idealism. Perhaps at no other time in life is it so easy to desire sanctity or great personal achievement! Elders who have permitted their idealism to languish are

often taken in by the contrived gaiety of youth, attributing an empty-headedness to heads that are very full.

Much of the confusion that confronts Christian parents today in regard to dating is their failure to recognize that dating as such is more than just a family situation. It is actually more a *social* problem.

### **Your Rules Should Conform**

By the time a boy or girl has reached the dating stage, parents have become used to laying down the law and making the rules to which their youngsters are required to conform. But at this stage a new factor enters the picture. Rules regarding dating will apply to other children as well as your own. In other words, it affects people beyond the limits of one's own family. When, for example, you charge your daughter that she must be home from dates by 11 o'clock, this decision of yours affects your daughter's boy friend and has some effect upon the other girls and boys with whom your daughter associates.

And since these dating questions are social or community matters, it is very helpful if they can be attacked at that level. Teen-agers are very much aware of community customs. And if your "rules" are the same that other parents in the com-

munity have laid down for their children, they will be much more effective and easier for your child to follow. Otherwise, if each parent in a community has his own set of rules, this can work a great and unnecessary hardship on teen-agers.

For example, I once set down the rule that my son work around the house and yard Saturday morning and then he was free the rest of the week end. I understood my son's protests when I learned that several of his buddies played baseball on Saturday morning and worked at home on Saturday afternoons.

No family is an island. The ideal situation is for the parents in a community to attempt to set rules upon which all will agree. Otherwise, each child finds himself marching to a different drum. And it's still better if the teen-agers are asked to come and participate with their parents in drawing up this set of community rules. It is a great tribute of respect to their young hearts and minds. And besides, it helps them to see that such rules are not merely due to the idiosyncracies of their own parents, but are set up to solve what is really a social problem.

### **Influence of Secular Culture**

The reason I insist so much on this last aspect — treating the question of dating

as a social problem — is the result of my observations of the last few years. Many couples I know have teen-age children as I myself do. I've known these people for years and have watched their conscientious efforts to keep Christian ideals alive in their homes.

Yet, in many cases I have noticed that their teen-agers have been deeply influenced by the secular customs they have come in contact with outside their own homes. One can see in these youngsters much of the same rebelliousness that has infected the majority of modern youth.

Now, I would not say that the parents' conscientious efforts have gone for nothing. Teen-age behavior is seldom indicative of what the mature adult will be. However, for years now, many of the leaders in the Church, including the Popes, have been urging us to work for *social* reform rather than concentrating solely upon our own souls and our own families. I am convinced that in these failures with our teen-agers we have proof of the failure of the old-type method of each couple worrying about their family only. As Father Joseph Fichter, S.J., pointed out in a talk to a national Christian Family Movement convention, "Tending the Christian needs of one's own family is no longer enough."

It is the neighborhood, the community

that stands desperately in need of Christian reform. Individual families acting alone can do very little to bring about social changes. And it is only through socially oriented groups such as the Christian Family Movement, Cana Family Action groups, Mr. and Mrs. clubs, Holy Family guilds, Cana Conferences and others like these that such changes can be made.

### **Regulations Must Fit Situation**

I'm tempted to outline a set of rules here, but it would most likely be useless. A set of rules that would suit my community probably would not fit yours. But I will give a few examples of what can be done and has been done here.

A young curate in the parish instituted a weekly dance for young people where teen-agers could take their first steps in the social amenities.

A young man and woman of the parish started something on their own. When they became engaged they solemnized it publicly. In addition to having a party at the girl's home, on Sunday afternoon the pastor, at their persuasion, conducted a church ceremony to which they invited their friends. In this way the entire parish observed the solemn significance of pre-marital affection. This solemn engagement demonstrated that dating and court-



ship contain some of the sacredness of marriage. Too often, it looks as though nothing is sacred until the marriage ceremony.

It is possible for youth to *aspire* to Holy Matrimony. They are able to look upon family, children, home and parenthood as something *great*. And it is because of this idealism, which is so precious and a more than adequate antidote to the poisonous secularism surrounding us, that the growing custom of the solemn engagement should be encouraged. If engagements are made public and festive religious occasions, as can very well be done, a new monument on the road to marriage can be built in what is now a desert of purposeless dating and running around.

### **Solemn Christian Engagement**

The custom of entering solemn legal engagements has never been common in our country — as it has in others — but in recent years a formal betrothal, with religious ceremonies or blessings, has become more frequent. Grailville Publications of Loveland, Ohio, has a pamphlet of such ceremonies, *Promised In Christ*. It is taken from the translation of *The Roman Ritual*, Volume 1, by Father Philip J. Weller (Bruce, Milwaukee). It also has a ceremony for the coronation of a bride on the eve of her marriage.

Young people looking for a marriage partner can aim at the solemn engagement. The solemn engagement can be followed by a preparation for marriage course. The solemn engaged couples in a parish could become a nucleus around which all boy-girl affairs can be built. Here we have the skeleton frame for a whole new set of courting customs which will be clothed with idealism, festivity and an awareness of the sacredness of marriage.

Such a set of courting rules or customs have to be worked out in groups, within the framework of a particular community, but this can be done. It must be done. Otherwise, our youth will have to continue to fight to retain their virtue and their idealism while being inundated by a sea of "running around," "petting," and other practices of the sex-confused world we live in.



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