

Virginity for cash; a cause for pause

November 04, 2012 By Daniel J. Bauer

A news story about a 20 year-old Brazilian woman auctioning off her virginity for a documentary filmmaker in exchange for US\$ 780,000 drew mid-sized headlines in the China Post shortly over a week ago. I spend several hours a week in the presence of some 230 women students in the neighborhood of 20 years old. I happen to care about them very, very much.

You can understand then that a report of a young woman selling herself for a film has given me a bit to contemplate.

You might also imagine this story shocks me, but that by now I've managed to find a solution, a palliative of some sort to soothe an upset stomach, to steady my jangled nerves. No, that hasn't happened.

None of this surprises me so very much. The notion of someone selling their sexual charms for a goodly sum of money can hardly be astonishing in our mercenary, media-driven day and age.

The thought of anyone, male or female, doing something like this to themselves, leaves me feeling sad, however, and, almost illogically rattled.

Surely it is not enough here to look at other people and the decisions they make in their lives. Sooner or later, a news story such as this leaps before us and holds a mirror to our own eyes. We cannot help but see something in ourselves looking back at us.

To be sure, young Catarina Migliorini announced from the start that she intends to use 90% of the money she'll make from her project to help build homes for the needy in her hometown, which carries a name curiously similar to her own, Santa Catarina.

Say it ain't so, please! Doesn't "Santa" mean "saint" in Spanish? How ironic can this be?

Australian filmmaker Jason Sisley appears happy enough for Ms. Migliorini's auction success, even while expressing surprise that she wants to use the bulk of her earnings for charity. Internet reports say he is concerned she'll feel "trapped" by her promises. You have to wonder if his conscience is biting him. If his 20 year-old star does offer herself

in this very intimate, precious manner, but gives away the loot she earns for so doing, what will he do with his slice of the pie?

Mr. Sisley's projected documentary also focuses on a man selling his virginity. The same advertising scheme that organized the on-line bidding for Ms. Migliorini offered buyers a crack at the virginity of Alex Stepanov.

The financial details are interesting. The highest bid for the woman, as mentioned above, was \$US 780,000. The highest bid for Mr. Stepanov, paltry in comparison, was \$US 3,000.

What is it about a woman's body, her sexuality, and her allure that may make her so materially dear? When we reduce a woman to a market price, what are the chances that at the same time we can still regard her not merely as a commodity for pleasure, but as a human being, a whole person like you and me who is complete with a personality touched in moments by sadness and joy, a person with a psyche and a spirit, a complex combination of feelings and moods, of values and wants and needs? A deal such as this should cause us to pause because the buying and selling of a person is so dehumanizing.

In raw figures, this film agreement suggests that a beautiful young woman is 260 times more valuable than a young man of average appearance. (Published photos of Ms. Migliorini and Mr. Stepanov are available.) This says so much about the vulnerability of human nature.

Utilitarianism focuses on the results of human decisions. If the consequences of our behavior appear to be beneficial, say utilitarians, the behavior is right. I always urge my ethics students to be leery of this view. Can we really be completely sure of the outcome of our actions? Are we so very able to measure the harm we sometimes unwittingly do to ourselves and, perhaps, to others?

It would be interesting to interview Ms. Migliorini and Mr. Stepanov a few years from now. Who can say how they will evaluate their participation in this merchandising of themselves? They may one day look back and feel they did themselves no damage. Well, maybe. If so, call me surprised and skeptical. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. The fact that this beautiful 20 year old Brazilian woman is "selling" her first time to have sex with a man for \$US 780,000 may shock or surprise people. Are you surprised?
2. In the same on-line auction, a young man of average appearance "sold" his virginity for \$US 3,000. In comparison with the "market value" of the young woman, who will appear in the same documentary film with him, the male is worth so little. Why is this?
3. Is it possible to find cultural differences in how people may respond to this news story? Do Chinese or Taiwanese view this type of thing differently than westerners?

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