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Forbidden Wedding: Movie Review

Reviewed by Mitchell S. Tepper, Ph.D.

Directed by Flavia Fontes, 2001
56 minutes, Means of Productions Inc.
209 East 81st Street, #5D
New York, NY 10028
<<http://home.earthlink.net/~ffontes/>
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When Flavia Fontes, an independent filmmaker, read about the Church denying a Brazilian paraplegic man, Hedir Antonio de Brito, the right to marriage because of an archaic Canonic Law against impotence, she was angered. Ms. Fontes seized her camera equipment and flew to Brazil determined to publicize his plight. Fontes shadowed Hedir and his fiance Mara for a week before the outlawed wedding and returned to Brazil two more times over a period of 4 years to finish the film.

Brazilian born Fontes, who produced, directed, edited, and photographed this film, was critical of Roman Catholic Canon Law 1084. She was drawn to this story as she was astounded the Church would waste time with old Canon Law that meddled in people's most private affairs with so many other global problems to focus on.

In *Forbidden Wedding* Fontes captured the view of the Orthodox Roman Catholic Church and intimate personal insights into sexuality, love and disability. Ultimately the film tries to reveal what might be behind the Canonic Law 1084.

Hedir's story began when he became a paraplegic after being shot on the way home from the movies at age 15. His father had died the year before and he was already struggling with trying to support the family and maintain his studies. It was a testimony to his strength of character that he battled through 25 surgical operations in 32 years becoming a leading disability advocate in Brazil.

He met Mara Elzimar Serafim two months after her husband died when she came to his town seeking work. She was initially hired as his personal care assistant. Within a short time they realized they were in love and wanted to marry. To suddenly be denied the right to marry because he was sexually impotent was not just hurtful to his pride, but evidence of archaic and inhumane church laws not reflective of reality.

Marriage, according to St. Paul, describes the union between Christ and the Church and is believed to be a sacrament. The Catechism describes "the three goods of

marriage": indissolubility, faithfulness, and fertility. These "goods" are expressed verbally in the vows taken and love for each other expressed. These "goods" are expressed physically when a couple consummates the marriage. For a couple to enter validly into the "Sacrament of Matrimony" they must offer their consent in the exchange of vows and consummate the marriage in the physical act as husband and wife and to continue to be a sign of their sacramental union.

A person who suffers from impotence either physically or psychologically cannot enter into marriage because they cannot physically consummate the marriage. According to the Code of Canon Law 1084, antecedent and perpetual impotence at the time of marriage invalidates the marriage. What this means is that a person who is impotent cannot enter into marriage validly. However, infertility does not prevent a person from validly entering into marriage.

During the film Hedir related how they were required to take a marriage preparation course, prepared the wedding, sent out invitations and were in the throes of preparation when the clergy approached Hedir. He received a letter from the Bishop saying he could not get married because he was sexually impotent.

Hedir felt the church was humiliating him and other disabled people so he took action starting with writing a letter to his local radio station. The incident awakened Brazil to the plight of this couple in love. Mara said most people understood that they had the right to get married and that it was only important that she loved him.

Father Nereo and Father Claudio, both Roman Catholic priests interviewed in the film, agreed with Mara and Hedir. Father Nereo argues from a practical standpoint, "The Vatican cannot demand that this law be enforced because they would need inspectors all over the world." Friar Claudio sides with compassion, "This law is just a piece of paper. Our salvation, history, and humanity are interwoven so you cannot coldly enforce this insignificant law."

However Father Vinicius insists on rigid adherence, "The Catholic Church must follow the canon law. According to the Vatican, any man or woman who is impotent and is unable to have intercourse cannot get married. This is not a secret law in the Catholic Church."

"Can't the church agree there are many ways of having sex? Not just the traditional penis and vagina. Sexuality is the whole body. It is your smile, your hands, the way you look at one another. We do have sex, she is happy with me. I'm also happy with her. We have pleasure together," says Hedir.

Critique of Cannon Law was the impetuous for Fontes telling this story. However, from my perspective as a sexuality educator and advocate for sexual expression of people with disabilities, this documentary is first and foremost about love.

Forbidden Wedding captures the experience of trying to find love as a person with a disability, to the love of a

community, country, and filmmaker. Love for others comes together to support a couple brave enough to fight a public battle to sanctify their love for each other and for freedom of sexual expression. In the end, *Forbidden Wedding* documents the essence of a loving relationship where each individual knows the other and accepts him or her fully.