HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Reclaiming male erotic desire: Psychology, theology and pastoral practice

Author:
Brian M. Ross[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Division of Medical Sciences, Northern Ontario School of Medicine University, Thunder Bay, Canada

Corresponding author:
Brian Ross,
bross@nosm.ca

Dates:
Received: 26 June 2025
Accepted: 16 Aug. 2025
Published: 17 Sept. 2025

How to cite this article:
Ross, B.M., 2025, 'Reclaiming male erotic desire: Psychology, theology and pastoral practice', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10890. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10890

Contemporary Western culture often leaves men confused or ashamed about their sexuality. The erosion of traditional male formation rites, combined with the rise of online subcultures such as the 'manosphere', has left many men adrift and vulnerable to nihilism or extremism. Within Christian contexts, male erotic desire is often framed primarily in terms of temptation and sin. This essay argues that such desire, when rightly ordered within a relational theological anthropology, is not an entitlement to be asserted, but a vocation to be lived: a sacred, formative call to self-giving love.

Contribution: Grounded in biblical texts, sacramental theology and contemporary psychology, particularly sociocultural learning theory and masculinity studies, the article develops this vocational framing through five movements: (1) surveying historical and theological perspectives on male erotic desire; (2) examining the cultural erosion of formative structures; (3) examining the therapeutic role of religious participation with regard to male desire; (4) assessing the potential of Christian participation to support redemptive integration as vocation, and (5) proposing pastoral practices, especially role modelling and communal rites of passage, while identifying safeguards against their distortion. The essay concludes with a call for Christian communities to reclaim their role in forming men who embody integrity, emotional depth and the capacity to flourish in committed relationships.

Keywords: male sexuality; male identity; mental health; spiritual formation; Christianity.

Introduction

This essay examines male sexuality within contemporary Christian contexts, with particular attention to its theological, pastoral and cultural dimensions. The term 'male erotic desire' refers specifically to male sexuality understood as relational, sacramental and morally formative. It will be used when referring to theological and pastoral matters while 'male sexuality' will be retained for broad sociocultural discussion. This essay will proceed in five parts. Firstly, a survey of historical and theological frameworks shaping Christian views of masculine erotic desire. Secondly, a consideration of the erosion of formative structures and the rise of digital subcultures that distort masculinity. Thirdly, it examines the therapeutic role of religious participation in integrating male desire. Fourthly, it explores theological resources for reframing male desire as vocation rather than entitlement. Finally, it proposes practical pastoral approaches, including role modelling and communal rites of passage, to support healthy Christian masculinity. Before narrowing the scope to masculinity, however, it is important to affirm the sacredness of femininity in Christian theology, recognising that women too bear the image of God in ways that are unique and complementary. Other religious traditions also offer valuable insights into healthy expressions of masculinity, from rites of passage in indigenous communities to disciplined compassion in Buddhist monastic practice. This essay focuses on Christianity while acknowledging these broader spiritual resources.

Male sexuality and contemporary cultural tension

There is a tendency to represent male sexuality in a polarised way within contemporary Western societies. On one hand, it is often portrayed as a problem to be solved, being associated with so-called toxic behaviours such as aggression, domination or coercion (Harrington 2021). On the other hand, masculinity is often belittled through comedic stereotypes, to the point of ridicule in popular media (Nathanson & Young 2001). This propensity to vilify or to mock leaves limited space for a constructive, integrated understanding of male erotic life. Indeed, at least in Western contexts, the Catholic confessional and Protestant purity culture tend to support rather than contradict the larger cultural paradigm, although they do so in different ways. Augustine's analysis of *libido dominandi* in the City of God (Augustine 1998b) critiqued how disordered desire

could devolve into domination and use, a suspicion that resonates with modern purity culture's framing of male sexuality as inherently dangerous and in need of constraint. Catholic sacramental theology, by contrast, affirms the redirection of desire towards communion and self-gift, especially in its theology of marriage (John Paul II 2006). Yet, in practice, the confessional system often reinforced guilt and repression more than integration, aligning with broader cultural tendencies to construe male desire as problematic. At the same time, in many countries, there has been increasing encouragement, socially, psychologically and even spiritually, for women to explore and affirm their erotic identities (Lorde 1984), although this shift has been uneven and remains contested in many cultures. Men, by contrast, are often confronted with cultural messages that emphasise limitation rather than cultivation, telling them what to repress rather than how to grow. Many therefore experience a disconnection between their internal sexual world and its acceptable public representation, which can lead to disordered expression, confusion or repression (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

These tensions reveal a deep pastoral and theological gap. If, as the apostle Paul writes, the body is 'a temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 6:19, Revised Standard Version), then male erotic desire cannot be ignored, pathologised or merely controlled, rather it must be theologically interpreted and spiritually formed. This essay presents a theological and pastoral reinterpretation of erotic desire as a sacred aspect of human experience. By reclaiming a Christian anthropology of desire that is both psychologically and spiritually informed, it aims to support both systematic and pastoral theology, and to make the case that male erotic desire is sacred and morally forming. Here, 'morally forming' means that desire can school the heart in patience and self-mastery, nurture tenderness and relational responsibility, and even mirror divine eros, so that longing itself becomes a teacher of character and communion. Such a vision stands in deliberate contrast to cultural framings that treat desire as either a threat to virtue or a trivial amusement. When properly incorporated into a Christian understanding of love, this kind of yearning can give rise to spiritual vigour, tenderness and connection.

Historical frameworks and the decline of initiatory masculine structures

Historically, male sexuality was rarely regarded with indifference. Across cultures, it was seen as both powerful and requiring disciplined socialisation, often through ritual. In pre-Christian societies, these energies were shaped through rites of passage, military codes and fertility ceremonies. Such practices initiated young men into adult communal life and often involved either an actual or symbolic separation from mother figures, followed by their return as adults entrusted with social, spiritual and generative responsibility (Campbell 1949).

The Christian tradition also recognised the potency of male sexual desire, although it frequently emphasised the need for spiritual discipline. The theology of the early Church Fathers, particularly Augustine, interpreted sexual desire through the lens of original sin. For Augustine, concupiscence (disordered desire) was the result of the Fall and a sign of humanity's wounded will (Augustine 1998a). Thus, sexuality was not inherently evil, but it required divine grace to be rightly ordered. Paul, similarly, urges the faithful to 'flee from fornication' (1 Cor 6:18, RSV) and allows marriage as a remedy against 'burning with passion' (1 Cor 7:9, RSV), reinforcing a framework of regulation rather than celebration. Medieval monasticism deepened this emphasis, elevating celibacy and bodily denial as expressions of holiness (LeClercq 1982). Even within marriage, sexuality was often seen as a concession to human weakness rather than a gift of embodied communion. This view has contributed to much of Christianity being ambivalent about male erotic desire, recognising its power, but often mistrusting its expression. As MacCulloch (2024) observes in his comprehensive history of sex and Christianity, this ambivalence towards embodied desire recurs across the centuries: Christian communities have honoured its generative potential while fearing its capacity for disorder.

Yet, Christian tradition has also affirmed desire, not as mere biological drive, but as a deep longing to be sanctified. For example, the Song of Songs, read both literally and allegorically, portrays erotic love in celebratory terms. Mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux saw in it a vision of the soul's desire for union with God (Bernard of Clairvaux 1981). Saints such as John of the Cross exemplify male devotion that did not deny longing but situated it within paths of sacrifice and contemplative intimacy (John of the Cross 2000). C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, describes four distinct kinds of love: *storge*, the natural affection of family bonds; *philia*, the friendship grounded in shared purpose; *eros*, the romantic longing for union with the beloved that transcends mere appetite; and *agape*, the love of self-giving charity (Lewis 2017). Christ reveals *eros* in his longing to dwell with humanity, and *agape* in his total self-giving on the cross. The Christian life therefore offered men not just rules to follow, but a spiritual journey to purify and deepen their sexual longing and direct it towards communion. Theological anthropology, particularly in Catholic and Orthodox traditions, affirms that the human person, body and soul, is created for communion, and male desire, rightly formed, thus participates in divinely inspired relationality (Catholic Church 1997).

However, modernity has eroded many of these pathways. Early modern Protestant traditions, such as Puritanism, disciplined sexuality within marriage, yet it also risked a rigid repression of eros, while Enlightenment voices like Rousseau began to romanticise desire as individual authenticity, a shift foundational to modern conceptions of the self (Joshanloo & Weijers 2024). The Enlightenment's emphasis on rationality often sidelined embodied experience, while the sexual revolution, although liberating in rejecting repressive Victorian norms and opening new spaces for women's autonomy, lacked a coherent telos: it knew what it was freeing sex from, but not

what sex was for (Perry 2022). As a result, cultural representations of masculinity now rest on shallow foundations. Disembodied technologies, shifting social norms and the collapse of communal rites have left men vulnerable to distorted expressions of erotic desire, often manifested as aggression or detachment (Kaufman 1987). Traditional rites of initiation, particularly those that framed desire as powerful, yet formative, have faded. In many Indigenous and pre-modern societies, the road to manhood was mapped out and guided by ritual, symbolism and intergenerational mentorship (Meade 1993). These processes taught not only strength, but also restraint, humility and purpose. Their loss has left young men without maps, mentors or sacred stories for navigating the complexities of their erotic and spiritual lives. Cut off from any formative structures that frame desire as good or meaningful, many men experience desire either as guilt-inducing or as something to control and assert. In the resulting vacuum, many turn to pornography, online communities, or exaggerated performative 'pick-up artist' roles in search of meaning. This essay argues that without robust theological frameworks to interpret desire as sacred and formational, men will remain adrift and estranged from a vision of themselves as created for communion. Instead, it is suggested that the Church must recover this vision, affirming that male desire, rightly formed, is not merely tolerable, but necessary for love, responsibility and spiritual vitality. Moreover, a model of sacred desire seeks not to revive patriarchal controls, but to integrate the best of feminist critiques: affirming that men's erotic lives must be reshaped away from dominance and towards mutuality, respect and communion. Sarah Coakley argues that desire becomes holy only when it is purified through kenotic humility, a corrective that safeguards men's eros from collapsing back into control (Coakley 2013).

Digital influencers and the substitution of traditional male guidance

In the absence of elders or formative theological frameworks, many young men seek guidance online. These digital spaces often lack spiritual depth and can distort male sexuality. Figures like Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson and Joe Rogan offer conflicting visions of masculinity, from disciplined self-improvement to aggressive dominance (French 2024; Ging 2019; McCann 2025). Although some such 'influencers' advocate responsibility and wellness, their influence is frequently embedded in reductive or regressive models. Tate, for instance, champions domination and sexual conquest, appealing especially to adolescent males disillusioned with a society they feel has devalued and rejected them (Ging 2019). Peterson offers a more complex message, integrating psychology, myth and biblical archetypes to promote order and meaning (Peterson 2018). Yet, his vision, while psychologically grounding, lacks a theology of the body or a spiritual understanding of desire as sacramental.

These personalities fill a void once held by intergenerational mentorship and religious rites. In general, the rise of social media male support systems has shifted from embodied communities to disembodied online platforms. YouTube, Reddit and other forums form the digital 'manosphere', where masculinity, health and identity are debated (Ribeiro et al. 2021). Some forums promote constructive dialogue, but many devolve into toxic cultures celebrating misogyny, aggression and despair. Incel communities, for instance, express longing for intimacy, but are often steeped in rage and entitlement (Ging 2019). These subcultures expose a deeper crisis, one in which erotic desire is detached from dignity, and loneliness festers into alienation or hate (Ging 2019). Indeed, a core problem in the manosphere is the absence of ritual, mentorship and theological vision. Without frameworks that affirm erotic desire as a sacred capacity, men either repress it in shame or distort it through violence. Instead, now is the time for renewed theological anthropology, one that views male sexuality as a gift to be disciplined, sanctified and directed towards love and communion. Reclaiming a vision of embodied grace and spiritual formation is not optional, is essential for healing both individuals and the wider culture. This is not to say that all online culture is destructive or toxic. Alongside these negative influences, the digital space has also enabled constructive engagement with male formation. Indeed, there are expansive opportunities for healthy formation and male integration. For example, the Order of Man (n.d.) is a secular online community built around a podcast, newsletters and courses encouraging self-mastery, leadership and familial responsibility. In addition, Wild at Heart (n.d.), rooted in John Eldredge's (2001) theology of adventurous masculinity, extends its reach through global online courses, video series and podcasts that help men recover their masculine identity and find spiritual freedom, while in the Catholic context, the Catholic Men's Fellowship (n.d.) mobilises parish-level chapters across California, offering fellowship groups, newsletters and conferences to foster spiritual growth and accountability among men. These digital and hybrid platforms, while not a substitute for embodied community, offer accessible entry points, connection and formation for men who may lack local male mentorship.

Therapeutic role of religious participation in male integration

Such cultural influences, digital or otherwise, have the potential to result in actual psychological benefit or harm. While physical illness often draws public attention, mental illness significantly impacts male wellbeing, with men more likely than women to die by suicide or from substance use (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2024; World Health Organization 2021). Suicide remains a leading cause of death in midlife males, while men also make up about 70% of substance-related fatalities (National Institute on Drug Abuse 2024). Furthermore, although men report lower rates of depression, they are less likely to seek help and often cope through aggression, substance use or emotional withdrawal (Rice, Fallon & Gross 2019). It is therefore of great interest that religious involvement has been linked to lower rates of depression, addiction and suicide (Chen et al. 2020), possibly

because of religious practice offering meaning, moral guidance and community (Zhang et al. 2019). An authentic, lived faith tends to foster greater life satisfaction and lead to stronger relationships, due in part to the structure, community and accountability that religious practice provides (Lim & Putnam 2010). It is important to note, however, that religion is not a universal remedy. Many men have found religious settings guilt-inducing or repressive, especially when traditions overemphasise obedience and purity over grace, embodiment and honest desire. This can be particularly harmful to marginalised identities, including gay men (Goodman 2024). Yet, when faith communities integrate psychological insight, embrace vulnerability and affirm the body's sacredness, they can become spaces of healing (Chen et al. 2020). Moreover, religion and spirituality can help order and guide male identity. For example, Heth (2017) found that men who internalise spiritual values often move beyond rigid masculine norms, embracing vulnerability and relational depth. Snodgrass (2017) similarly argues that pairing spiritual reflection with psychological counselling fosters more grounded, authentic male identities, while Gelfer (2007) suggests that spirituality offers a generative space to reimagine masculinity beyond dominance and stoicism, providing a counter-narrative to the supremacy and misogyny promoted by figures like Andrew Tate (French 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that faith communities can support male mental health by offering a theological vision of desire as sanctifiable, not merely as one to be restrained.

Faith communities thus hold the potential to complement mental health care when they embody empathy and relational theology (Captari et al. 2018). Within this broader narrative, this essay focuses on the role of Christianity in supporting male wellbeing in sexual relationships. Research shows that men who integrate their faith into daily life exhibit greater relational commitment and marital satisfaction, while having lower pornography use (Perry 2017). Moreover, among adolescent males, faith-based environments that emphasise integrity over fear have been associated with delayed sexual initiation, greater emotional regulation and healthier expectations of intimacy (Regnerus 2007). In parallel with such findings, movements such as Promise Keepers in the 1990s exemplified an attempt to renew Christian masculinity through spiritual accountability, emotional transparency and covenantal commitment (Bartkowski 2000). Although the movement has been criticised for reinforcing hierarchical gender norms, it also invited men into public vulnerability and encouraged frank conversations about sexuality. Indeed, religious settings that affirm male desire, rather than repress it, can foster integration and reverence. As the apostle Paul writes, each man should 'know how to control his own body in holiness and honor' (1 Th 4:4, RSV). This reframes desire as something to be dignified and directed towards communion. However, both secular liberalism and purity culture have tended, in different ways, to leave male sexuality without a coherent moral and relational framework, whether by reducing it to indulgence or by constraining it into silence. Although each contains elements that can be constructive, such as affirmations of sexual freedom or the pursuit of personal integrity, neither consistently provides a formative vision that integrates desire with moral and spiritual maturity. Christianity, at its best, can offer such a vision, redeeming male desire as an essential part of personhood.

Male desire and the potential for redemptive integration in Christianity

Biblical foundations

Religion has therefore the potential to provide a framework for the expression of healthy male erotic desire. Indeed, within many religious traditions, it has been seen as a powerful and ambivalent force that requires formation rather than being a problem to be solved. In the case of Christianity, male sexual longing is not incidental; it is foundational to the human story, both in its glory and in its distortion. The Book of Genesis describes the creation of woman in response to man's loneliness, and the subsequent poetic recognition of shared being, 'Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman"' (Gn 2:23, RSV). Here, desire emerges not merely as appetite, but as sacramental, as an embodied yearning for communion. In this sense, erotic desire in the sense of *eros* is a gift that reveals the relational nature of humanity made in the image of God.

The Fall, however, distorted this relationship in which desire became viewed with shame, concealment, and blame:

> Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. (Gn 3:7–8, RSV)

Theologically, then this signals not the elimination of desire, but its disorientation. Despite this, Scripture does not abandon erotic desire to suspicion. The Song of Songs later depicts male and female erotic longing in highly affirmative terms. While the text has often been interpreted allegorically (Origen 1988), its literal voice remains as a joyful, poetic affirmation of physical attraction and erotic love:

> You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you … You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride. You have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace. (Song 4:7, 9, RSV).

In a sacramental frame, such verses are not mere poetry, but rather divine permission to see erotic love as a participation in divine beauty and delight.

Despite these biblical accounts, Christian thought has long wrestled with how to understand erotic desire within a framework of holiness. Much of Christian teaching on male desire rests on a Pauline framework articulated in 1st Corinthians. Paul does not condemn erotic desire, but frames it as a force that needs to be within the sacred container of marriage. Yet this vision is not confined to marriage. Early monastic and mystical

traditions reveal how desire can be transfigured beyond sexual union. Augustine, for instance, spoke of sexual longing redirected into love of God and the good of others (Augustine 1998a, 1998b), while later mystics treated desire itself as a path towards divine communion. In both marital and celibate vocations, male sexuality is therefore sacred when directed towards love, service and participation in God's life. Yet this is not where Christian theology must stop; a sacramental vision should not merely restrain desire, but seek to redeem and elevate it as a mark of grace. This is a valuable conceptualisation as it resists both indulgence and denial. Yet too often, containment ends up being a terminal framework rather than a starting point. The result is a pastoral vacuum in which men are told what not to do, but not given any form of guidance about what they should, especially when marriage is delayed, disrupted or absent. Contemporary churches, especially in the evangelical and Catholic spheres, struggle to articulate a theology that embraces male sexual longing as part of God's good creation rather than a danger. What is needed is a vision in which male desire is reverenced as a spiritual energy, a flame not to be extinguished but guided, integrated and ultimately transfigured. For this, the Christian tradition offers profound resources.

The medieval mystics

The medieval mystics frequently drew on the language of human love and longing to articulate spiritual union. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in his sermons on the Song of Songs, describes the soul's yearning for God in sensuous terms:

> They are to seek the kiss of the mouth, an exceptional grace; participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the mutual knowledge and love of the Father and Son. (Bernard of Clairvaux 1981:42)

Such mystical theology reveals a deep truth: erotic imagery, far from being inappropriate in religious discourse, becomes the very means through which the soul reaches towards God. Similarly, St. John of the Cross, in the *Spiritual Canticle*, writes of the soul's passionate pursuit of the divine:

> The perfect union of love between itself and God being now affected, the soul longs to occupy itself with those things that belong to love. It is the soul which is now speaking, making three petitions to the Beloved. (John of the Cross 2000:141).

This is not metaphor for metaphor's sake, it is sacramental. Desire, here, becomes a visible sign of the invisible grace of divine communion.

This integration of erotic desire with spiritual life reaches a new depth in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* (John Paul II 2006), which teaches that desire is not merely a carnal urge to be repressed, but a profound expression of the human vocation to love. He writes:

> [*T*]hat man became the 'image and likeness' God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons, which man and woman form from the very beginning. The function of the image is that of mirroring the one who is the model, to reproduce its own prototype. Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. (John Paul II 2006:25)

In other words, erotic desire is not merely to be tolerated within the Christian worldview; it is essential to it, provided it is ordered towards self-gift, dignity and communion. This vision speaks with urgency to the crises of eros in our time: pornography that promises intimacy, but delivers only fantasy, and incel alienation that hungers for love yet collapses into resentment. Both are erotic desire in solitude, cut off from relationship, and thus a distortion of the divine image. What is lost in both cases is sacred embodiment, understood as the body's sacramental vocation: not merely biological matter or a vehicle of pleasure, but the visible expression of divine image and communion. In this vision, the body mediates presence, offers self-gift and grounds desire in intimate joining. Against this brokenness, John Paul II recalls men to the truth that desire only finds fulfilment in the gift of self. In this sacramental vision, desire is healed and reoriented, not towards possession or consumption, but towards vocation and embodied love.

Taken together, these theological resources offer an alternative to both secular indulgence and religious repression. They form the basis for a sacramental anthropology of male erotic desire, one in which the body becomes a site of grace, a path to communion and longing for participation in the divine. Yet this language is rarely extended to men outside the cloister. Indeed, messages around purity and restraint are often framed in negative or prohibitive terms, contributing to confusion and shame. What is needed is a theology that names desire, blesses it and directs it, not as indulgence but as vocation. The Church must recover its capacity to speak this truth, not only to condemn distortion, but to illuminate the holy potential of longing. This is not licence, but liturgy: masculine erotic desire as a devotion that leads to marital fidelity, to solitude and prayer, to fasting or service and to a life rhythmically shaped by the grace of desire formed in love. In such a life, every aspect of embodiment, be that touch, arousal or sacrifice, becomes not merely permissible, but sacred. Central to this framework is the conviction that male desire, when rightly ordered, is not an entitlement to be asserted but a vocation to be lived. This shift reframes desire as a call to self-giving love, moral formation, and relational communion, grounding it in biblical witness (e.g. Gn 2; Song 4) and in a theological tradition that directs desire towards dignified self-gift and communion.

Pastoral implication: Sexuality as vocation

To recap, male desire can be either life-giving or destructive depending on how it is guided and directed. The Christian church has long recognised this tension. Whether with early catechesis or monastic life, sexual desire was never viewed as passive, but as something to be recognised, formed and sanctified. Churches today must develop and embrace robust pastoral resources for helping men hold this tension, not through rejection, but by guiding it towards personal and communal flourishing. It should be emphasised that seeing male desire as sacred in no way excuses abusive or

exploitative behaviour; on the contrary, it demands from men accountability, self-control and respect for themselves and others. This vision is well-articulated in Ephesians:

> Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (Eph 5:25–28, RSV)

This passage articulates a Christian model of masculinity, one in which sexual activity is not hidden or rejected, but reoriented by sacrificial love. In other words, a Christian male eros is shaped by conscience, and instead of treating it as a problem to be controlled, it encourages moral and spiritual formation, where sexuality becomes a source of virtue and communion.

But how to accomplish this? Psychology gives us some of the answers, particularly that role models are critical in demonstrating the lived reality of integrated masculinity. Sociological and developmental research confirms that values and identity are often shaped more effectively through relational modelling than through instruction alone. For young men especially, the presence of approachable older men exhibiting attributes such as emotional intelligence, moral courage and marital fidelity can be powerfully formative (Erikson 1968). This is to be expected, given the wealth of psychological research on what can be broadly described as sociocultural learning. For example, social learning theory has shown that children and adolescents learn how to behave primarily through observing adults in social contexts (Bandura 1986). In addition, having a regularly accessible positive male role model is linked to stronger moral development, reduced engagement in high-risk behaviours and better emotional regulation among boys (Lamb 2010). However, such healthy development is often blocked by male socialisation that discourages boys from displaying vulnerability and emotional honesty, even when they long for such (Levant 1998). This underscores the need for spiritually and emotionally mature male mentors who are both available and trusted, and who do not merely talk about virtue but embody it. Pastoral care of young men must therefore identify and promote real-life examples who demonstrate the virtues of strength and compassion, self-mastery and humility, and Christ-inspired *eros* and *agape*. Such role models need not be limited in scope with some examples being:

- a father who cares attentively for his children
- a recovering addict who has transformed his illness into service and spiritual awakening
- the minister who speaks frankly about his own sexuality
- the older man whose erotic life has deepened into wisdom.

Faith communities can therefore play a vital role in identifying, supporting and promoting such role models. That is, liturgical life and mentoring programmes can function as sites of formation where young men are invited to discover their capacity for love, service and fidelity. This requires a shift from prohibitive models of purity towards affirmative frameworks of purpose and belonging.

In addition to role models, Christian communities should seek to create ritual structures that mark the transitions in men's lives: puberty, fatherhood, commitment to fidelity and marriage, retirement, recovery from addiction or abuse and so on. Church and society alike require men whose lives demonstrate that desire and holiness are not opposites but can instead coexist. While not replacements for sacramental rites, these practices can acknowledge and guide the spiritual and emotional dimensions of masculinity, in addition to encouraging a sense of Christian vocation. Such rituals, however, do function sacramentally in the broad sense: they make visible the inner process of spiritual transformation, enacting God's grace through rites of passage and recognition by the man's faith community. Indeed, when made visible outside of the church hall, their presence also contributes to a broader cultural reappraisal of what masculinity is, not as inherently toxic, but as capable of reflecting the *Imago Dei* when rightly formed.

At the same time, it is important to note that role modelling and rites of passage can go wrong. Poor models can valorise domination or emotional suppression, and poorly designed rites can become exclusionary or even abusive. To guard against distortion, models and mentors must be accountable to the Church community, transparent about their own struggles, and their actions measured by the fruits of the Spirit rather than by status or dominance. Rites of passage should be communal, affirming and rooted in service, avoiding secrecy, humiliation or the glorification of aggression. That is, the effortful inclusion of safeguards is essential and includes clear theological grounding, pastoral oversight, trauma-informed facilitation, and community accountability that centres dignity, consent and service.

Although my experience of church life has not included such male-focussed spiritual and relational integration, contemporary ministries do offer compelling glimpses. For example, Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle's work with former gang members through Homeboy Industries models a masculine spirituality rooted in vulnerability, kinship and service (Boyle 2010). Similarly, Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr's Men's Rites of Passage offer a non-sacramental, Christian-inspired place where men confront pain, grieve losses and recognise their own sexual energy, and in doing so develop a spiritual identity grounded in love and responsibility (Rohr 2005). Such practices illustrate what it means for Christian communities to re-sacralise masculinity, not through domination or suppression, but through ritual, accountability and communion.

Conclusion: Reclaiming sacred masculinity in practice and culture

Contemporary views of male sexuality often oscillate between stigmatisation and ridicule, producing anger, confusion and withdrawal. This has left many men without a credible and

effective way to integrate their erotic, emotional and spiritual lives. Historical, theological, psychological and sociological perspectives indicate the urgent need to reclaim sacred frameworks that consecrate male sexuality. Such frameworks reject the view of male desire as an inherently dangerous force to be feared, an entitlement to be gratified or an impulse to be restrained. Instead, it can be a vocation to be shaped towards love, service and communion as a morally formative, relational and spiritually potent dimension of male personhood. This vocational framing offers a radical pastoral alternative grounded in the Gospel's call to wholeness, in which sexuality becomes part of one's sacred mission in life.

The present moment constitutes both crisis and possibility. The erosion of traditional male rites of passage, the proliferation of hypermasculinity online and the absence of affirming religious narratives have left many men psychologically harmed and relationally isolated. Yet these wounds can become openings for reimagining masculinity in ways that honour the body, cultivate emotional maturity and frame sexual desire as something to be stewarded for the good of others. A credible and effective renewal must be both biblically rooted and psychologically informed. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians: 'Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love' (1 Cor 16:13–14, RSV), provides a spiritual blueprint: vigilance, conviction, courage, strength and love. This stands in contrast to both passive cultural detachment and destructive dominance. When understood as vocation, male sexuality becomes a source of purpose, communion and moral growth. Christianity offers rich symbolic and doctrinal resources to describe this vision, along with a praxis of formation, discipleship and pastoral care to sustain it. Achieving such a renewal will require collaboration among theologians, psychologists, pastors, parents, spiritual mentors and ordinary men committed to reviving sacred masculinity.

Reclaiming male erotic desire as vocation is not only a spiritual imperative, but also an act of cultural and communal healing. Women, children and communities flourish when men are at peace with their bodies, clear in their roles and grounded in their sacred calling. To restore this vision is to resist both the cynicism that mocks male desire and the fear that seeks to suppress it. A culture that honours male eros as a gift, one that is offered, formed and received in love, can become a culture that teaches men to love with strength, serve with joy and stand with integrity. Such men do not merely avoid harm; they generate life. They become fathers in the fullest sense, whether to children, communities or causes, leaving behind them a legacy not of conquest, but of communion.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

B.M.R. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Augustine, 1998a, *Confessions*, transl. H. Chadwick, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Augustine, 1998b, *The city of God against the Pagans*, transl. R.W. Dyson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bandura, A., 1986, *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Bartkowski, J.P., 2000, 'Breaking walls, raising fences: Masculinity, intimacy, and accountability among the Promise Keepers', *Sociology of Religion* 61(1), 33–53. https://doi.org/10.2307/3712089

Bernard of Clairvaux, 1981, *On the Song of Songs* I, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI.

Boyle, G., 2010, *Tattoos on the heart: The power of boundless compassion*, Free Press, New York, NY.

Campbell, J., 1949, *The hero with a thousand faces*, Pantheon Books, New York, NY.

Captari, L.E., Hook, J.N., Hoyt, W., Davis, D.E., McElroy-Heltzel, S.E. & Worthington, Jr, E.L., 2018, '"Integrating clients" religion and spirituality within psychotherapy: A comprehensive meta-analysis', *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 74(11), 1938–1951. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.22681

Catholic Church, 1997, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edn., para. 2332–2336, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City.

Catholic Men's Fellowship, n.d., *Bringing men closer to Christ*, viewed 15 August 2025, from https://www.catholicmen.org/.

Chen, Y., Koh, H.K., Kawachi, I., Botticelli, M. & VanderWeele, T.J., 2020, 'Religious service attendance and deaths related to drugs, alcohol, and suicide among U.S. health care professionals', *JAMA Psychiatry* 77(7), 737–744. https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0175

Coakley, S., 2013, *God, sexuality, and the self: An essay 'On the Trinity'*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Connell, R.W. & Messerschmidt, J.W., 2005, 'Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept', *Gender & Society* 19(6), 829–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639

Eldredge, J., 2001, *Wild at heart: Discovering the secret of a man's soul*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN.

Erikson, E.H., 1968, *Identity: Youth and crisis*, W.W. Norton, New York, NY.

French, D., 2024, 'The atmosphere of the "manosphere" is toxic', *The New York Times*, 18 January, p. A18.

Gelfer, J., 2007, 'Spirituality and masculinity: New directions in research', *Journal of Men, Masculinities and Spirituality* 1(1), 1–15.

Ging, D., 2019, 'Alphas, betas, and incels: Theorizing the masculinities of the manosphere', *Men and Masculinities* 22(4), 638–657.https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17706401

Goodman, M.A., 2024, 'Associations between religion and suicidality for LGBTQ individuals: A systematic review', *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 46(2), 157–179. https://doi.org/10.1177/00846724241235181

Harrington, C., 2021, 'What is "toxic masculinity" and why does it matter?', *Men and Masculinities* 24(2), 345–352. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X20943254

Heth, J., 2017, 'Spirituality and masculinity: Discovering if faith influences the social construction of masculinity', Doctoral dissertation, Indiana State University.

John of the Cross, 2000, *A spiritual canticle of the soul and the bridegroom Christ*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI.

John Paul II, 2006, *Man and woman he created them: A theology of the body*, Pauline Books and Media, Boston, MA.

Joshanloo, M. & Weijers, D., 2024, 'Ideal personhood through the ages: Tracing the genealogy of the modern concepts of well-being', *Frontiers in Psychology* 15, 1494506. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1494506

Kaufman, M., 1987, 'The construction of masculinity and the triad of men's violence', in M. Kaufman (ed.), *Beyond patriarchy: Essays by men on pleasure, power, and change*, pp. 1–29, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Lamb, M.E., 2010, *The role of the father in child development*, 5th edn., Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.

LeClercq, J., 1982, *The love of learning and the desire for God: A study of monastic culture*, transl. C. Misrahi, Fordham University Press, New York, NY.

Levant, R.F., 1998, *Desperately seeking language: Understanding, assessing, and treating normative male alexithymia*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, New York, NY.

Lewis, C.S., 2017, *The four loves*, Harper Collins, New York, NY.

Lim, C. & Putnam, R.D., 2010, 'Religion, social networks, and life satisfaction', *American Sociological Review* 75(6), 914–933. https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122410386686

Lorde, A., 1984, 'Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power', in *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*, pp. 53–59, Crossing Press, Berkeley, CA.

McCann, D., 2025, 'Charlie Kirk, Joe Rogan, and Gen Zers for Trump', *Quadrant* 69(1/2), 22–25.

MacCulloch, D., 2024, *Lower than the Angels: A history of sex and Christianity*, Random House, London, UK.

Meade, M., 1993, *Men and the water of life: Initiation and the tempering of men*, Harper San Francisco, San Francisco, CA.

Nathanson, P. & Young, K.K., 2001, *Spreading misandry: The teaching of contempt for men in popular culture*, McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, Montreal.

National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2024, *Overdose death rates*, viewed 23 June 2025, from https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates.

Origen, 1988, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and homilies*, transl. R.P. Lawson, Paulist Press, New York, NY.

Perry, S.L., 2017, 'Pornography use and the conjugal bond: Evidence from the American national survey of marital strength', *Sociological Forum* 32(2), 348–367.

Perry, L., 2022, *The case against the sexual revolution*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Peterson, J.B., 2018, *12 rules for life: An antidote to chaos*, Random House Canada, Toronto.

Regnerus, M., 2007, *Forbidden fruit: Sex and religion in the lives of American teenagers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Ribeiro, M.H., Blackburn, J., Bradlyn, B., De Cristofaro, E., Stringhini, G., Long, S. et al., 2021, 'The evolution of the manosphere across the web', in *Proceedings of the Fifteenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, pp. 196–207, AAAI Press, Palo Alto.

Rice, S.M., Fallon, B.J. & Gross, J.J., 2019, 'Men and depression: Clinical and research perspectives', *Australian Psychologist* 54(2), 83–89.

Rohr, R., 2005, *From wild man to wise man: Reflections on male spirituality*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, OH.

Snodgrass, J., 2017, 'Religion, spirituality, and masculinity: New insights for counselors', Doctoral dissertation, University of Central Florida, Orlando.

Wild at Heart, n.d., *Wild at Heart: The series*, viewed 15 August 2025, from https://wildatheart.org/.

World Health Organization, 2021, *Suicide worldwide in 2019: Global health estimates*, World Health Organization, Geneva.

Zhang, H., Hook, J.N., Farrell, J.E., Mosher, D.K., Captari, L.E., Coomes, S.P. et al., 2019, 'Exploring social belonging and meaning in religious groups', *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 47(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/0091647118806345