

Chastity

What is chastity? Chastity is a virtue, a willed and ongoing pattern of morally good behavior. It is a sub-virtue of the cardinal virtue temperance, which, as we demonstrated in chapter 1, is the virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasure and provides balance in the use of created goods. When temperance is exercised with respect to human sexuality, we are speaking about chastity.

But what does chastity mean in practice? Most people would probably say, "Being pure," or "No sex before marriage," or "Not having sex, period!" Although there is a measure of truth in each of these answers, they are inadequate. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, chastity is "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being."² What does this mean? Chastity is not a denial of one's sexuality or of one's sexual feelings, but the virtue by which sexuality becomes personal and interpersonal—becomes truly and fully human. Stated differently, chastity is the virtue by which our sexuality becomes integrated into the whole person, body and soul, and this integration disposes us to value and respect the dignity of both ourselves and others. Chastity thus leads to a more fully human sexuality, one that is lived as a gift to oneself and others. Pope Benedict XVI underscored this teaching when he stated that sexuality can only attain its full human stature when it is lived as an expression of our intimately united body and soul.³

Because of our fallen human nature, however, the integrity of the gift of sexuality is never assured. According to Scripture, the first man and woman chose to act in a way that was at odds with—that sinned against—the truth of who they were: creatures who share in God's creative activity through, among other things, the ability to procreate. With this choice they began a history of sexuality all too often marked by impersonalism, selfishness, and a lack of integration; in other words, by lust. Pope Benedict XVI captured well the dynamic of lust in his encyclical *God Is Love: Eros*, reduced to pure "sex," has become a commodity. This is hardly man's great "yes" to the body. On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will. Nor does he see it as an arena for the exercise of his freedom, but as a mere object that he attempts, as he pleases, to make both enjoyable and harmless. We are actually dealing with the debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere.⁴ The "matter" of human sexuality, as the pope says, is not simply biological. Rather, this "matter" is the reality of the human person, the unity of the body and soul in relationship with God, self, and others. To maintain otherwise by excessively spiritualizing the body—as some Christians have done—would be to void the body of its moral meaning. Similarly, viewing the body as simply a physical object—as society tends to do—reduces the person to the level of a beast. The body is as integral to our human nature as our capacity to reason. To regard the body as a commodity or as a meaningless physical structure would be to act not only against the body itself, but also against reason's apprehension of the body's special character and the integral place it occupies in human nature.⁵

Pope John Paul II asserted that the essence of chastity "consists in quickness to affirm the value of the person in every situation, and in raising to the personal level all reactions to the value of 'body and sex.'"⁶ That is, chastity leads us to treat others as persons deserving of dignity and respect, not as objects to be exploited for our sexual gratification. Thus, chastity does not simply mean "don't have sex." It means recognizing what sexuality is for and conforming our actions to it. That is why those who take a vow of celibacy, including the Catholic clergy and those who have professed vows to a religious order, do not engage in sexual relations. That is also why those who are not married should not engage



in sexual relations: they have not made a life-long commitment to the other person. For married people chastity means remaining faithful to one's spouse. Married people are capacitated—and expected—to engage in sexual relations both to express their committed love and to create children. Within marriage, however, sexuality is exclusive in that the spouses are to experience it only with each other. It is only through this faithfulness and exclusivity that human sexuality becomes the gift that it was meant to be by God's design. When we willingly and consistently act in accord with this understanding of sexuality, we develop the virtue of chastity.⁷

Endnotes

2. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2337.
3. Pope Benedict XVI, *God Is Love (Deus caritas est)* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), no. 5.
4. Benedict XVI, *God Is Love*, 5.
5. Cf. Benedict Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Washington, DC: The Pope John Center, 1985; repr. 1995), 370; cf. also Benedict M. Guevin, OSB, "Aquinas' use of Ulpian and the Question of Physicalism Reexamined," *The Thomist* 63, no. 4 (1999): 613–28.
6. Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), 171.
7. It is important to point out that developing the virtue of chastity is a life-long process. The *Catechism* states that self-mastery in the area of sexuality is "long and exacting work," and, in fact, one never fully acquires the virtue of chastity in one's lifetime. It is a process of growth that requires "renewed effort at all stages of life," and the effort is often marked by imperfection and sin. CCC, nos. 2242–43.

Excerpted from *Catholic Ethics in Today's World*, Revised Edition, by Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin, OSB (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011). Copyright © 2008, 2011 by Jozef D. Zalot and Benedict Guevin. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.

