

The Abundant Fruitfulness of Chastity *(Recommended to run as a two-part series)*

At the center of Catholic Faith is the God who reveals himself as love. Love, then, is the central, defining reality that shapes and orders the life of the Catholic. The virtue of love, expressed in the sexual sphere, is called chastity. Often, the virtue of chastity is defined by the things it prohibits. And certainly, the virtue of chastity necessitates rejecting some behaviors and resisting certain disordered impulses to which the human heart is prone. However, there is also a profoundly *positive* value of chastity that we must recover both in our understanding of this virtue and also in the way we talk about it.

Chastity is love. There are two major principles that define chastity: First, chastity is reverence and respect for the dignity of the human person as *willed for his own sake*. It is the capacity to see the other person as possessing an infinite dignity and a corresponding awareness that the human person can never be used as a means to an end. The second principle of chastity is a reverence and respect for the meaning of the human body and sexuality. Chastity understands that sexuality and, in particular, the unique and complementary distinction between male and female, is a sign of the human person's call to give himself or herself away in love. Therefore, the whole person, body and soul, can only ever be a subject of reverent love and can never be used as an object for sexual gratification. When chastity is present in the heart, it enables us to "see" the person in this way and to relate to the person in accord with this "seeing". The fruit of this is an abundance of peace, both in one's heart and also in one's relationships.

Because the command of Christ is that we love one another, there is no person who is exempt from the call to chastity. While chastity takes a different form depending on one's state of life, all people - married, single, and celibate - are called to live this virtue.

For the married couple, chastity takes the form of a deep reverence and respect for the dignity of the person who is one's spouse. This is expressed in the spouses' attentiveness to the motives driving their sexual intimacy, engaging in sexual love when it is the expression of a desire to give oneself to the other and refraining from sexual intimacy when it is driven by a desire to acquire pleasure at the expense of the other. The chaste marriage not only avoids infidelity *outside* of marriage, but also cultivates fidelity *in* marriage. This means fidelity to the whole person of the spouse, avoiding such violations of spousal communion such as the use of contraception, pornography and the like.

For the celibate person, chastity is not simply a decision to refrain from marriage, and therefore, from sexual intercourse. Chastity for the celibate person is a deliberate decision to surrender the full meaning of one's body and sexuality to God, who, in response, renders the celibate person spiritually fruitful. The celibate man or woman who is truly chaste experiences himself or herself as a spouse – totally and completely given to Christ in love - and, as a result, also a mother or father in the spiritual order. Chastity in the celibate person bestows upon the heart the ability to live in the world as *totally given to others*, with hearts widened through the right-ordering of passions and the desire to receive the sons and daughters of God as their own sons and daughters. The truly chaste person who has chosen the life of celibacy experiences the tremendous fruitfulness of allowing authentic love to govern and shape their lives in this way.

For the single person, too, chastity is a rich gift. It affords the single person a deep peace because it enables the single person to live in relationships with others that are full of respect and reverence. The chaste single person also enjoys freedom from the anxiety and turmoil that

accompanies sexual promiscuity. Chastity gives the single person an understanding of the meaning of his or her own body and sexuality and enables him or her to choose daily to order his or her own desires and passions to the things of God who, in turn, opens up new avenues of fulfillment for the single person. This brings a peace and joy to the life of the single person, whether waiting for marriage or a vocation to celibacy, whether single through divorce or widowhood, or whether having chosen a single life to devote oneself to God.

Like all of the virtues, living the virtue of chastity is not easy. Yet, no matter what our state of life, Christ's command of love makes chastity not optional, but essential to each of our lives. It is the Church's great desire that men and women in all situations of life experience the abundant fruitfulness of a chaste heart and life. Now more than ever, it is necessary for the Church to accompany men and women and help them respond to Christ's call to chaste love. Many apostolates are emerging that are doing just this. There are the numerous Theology of the Body-based apostolates that help us understand the dignity of the person and the true meaning of the body and sexuality. For youth and young adults, there is the Love and Fidelity Network, The Culture Project, Chastity Project, and the Anscombe Society, to name a few. There is also the beautiful Courage Apostolate, which helps men and women who experience same-sex attraction to live a chaste life.

No matter what our particular struggle with chastity, all of us are called by Christ to live it. Thankfully, the virtue of chastity, while certainly requiring our cooperation and real exertion of will, is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit, a gift that is ours for the asking. Through a life of prayer and the sacraments and through the support of the community of Christ's disciples, may chastity become for each of us a life-giving path to peace, a journey towards deeper personal healing and a conduit for the healing of wounded or broken relationships.

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