

Chastity and Modesty

Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. ~ 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

WE LIVE

in a culture that is saturated by sexuality. It is inescapable: sexually-explicit advertising, movies, television, music, clothing, and educational materials, even for the very young. Not only are we assaulted with sexually-charged images and thoughts, but our

ways of deciding moral right and wrong are now conditioned by “values” such as “if it feels right, do it,” “no one can legislate what goes on between two consenting adults,” “you need to overcome your inhibitions,” and the like. Virtues such as chastity, modesty, fidelity, self-control, and self-mastery are scorned and ridiculed, as are the people who practice them. We are surrounded by “those who call evil good and good evil” (Is 5:20).

Adolescents make their way through a minefield of cultural messages suggesting that they initiate sexual activity as soon as possible and seek out as many sexual partners as possible. Men are taught that women “want it” just as much as men do, and so it is perfectly all right to engage in promiscuity and predatory sex. Women are taught that they should desire multiple sexual partners and that there is “something wrong” with their yearning for steadfast love. Everyone is told that sex is “natural” and that self-gratification and even self-pleasuring is to be commended and encouraged.



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Has the overthrow of sexual morality made us happier? There is a tremendous amount of evidence that it has created a human landscape of misery, betrayal, bitterness, anger, and blighted expectations. Spouses can no longer count on each other “for better or for worse” if their approach to marriage is “if it doesn’t

work out, I’ll get a divorce.” Children can no longer expect to be raised in a home with two parents, and considerable effort has been made by shapers of our culture to make it seem as though a single-parent household is “just as good,” as though all forms of family life are equally beneficial. Children are supposedly able to “adjust” to the destruction of their expectations of a happy home and childhood, because their parents are elsewhere seeking a “soul mate.”

The promiscuity that is so praised as “healthy” has led to rates of sexually-transmitted diseases never before seen in human societies. Many women who had hoped to bear children discover that they have been sterilized by disease; both men and women discover that they have incurable infections; and all too many discover that they will die prematurely. The “sexual revolution” has led to a culture that promotes “safe sex” but curls its lip at sexual abstinence. Abortion

is not only sanctioned but even encouraged as a “lifestyle choice.”

Is this how things are supposed to be? Is

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this the way God intended us to live? Or is the “freedom” we think we have just another “big lie” from Satan, “a murderer from the beginning [who] has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44)?

We are engaged in a constant battle with evil, a battle that began in the Garden of Eden when our first parents succumbed to the seductions of Satan (see Gn 3:1-6). Original sin has left us with a darkened intellect, a weakened will, and disordered desires (see handouts on Original Sin and Temptation). Yet God has not forsaken us. Within our hearts he has placed the natural law and a hunger for him. He has revealed his law to us, and came himself to redeem and sanctify us. He has given us the sacraments as our channels of grace, his very life to strengthen us in our battle against our own wayward nature. And he has given us the Church to not only dispense the sacraments but also to teach us the “*paths of righteousness*” (Ps 23:3), to help us on “*the way [that] is hard, that leads to life*” (Mt 7:14), and to lead us to the narrow gate of Heaven (see Mt 7:14). The virtues of chastity and modesty are protective walls to guard us against our own fallen nature.

Chastity

The virtue of chastity is an expression of the virtue of temperance, the virtue that reins in our passions and appetites. Yet chastity is not a negative, bloodless virtue that seeks to drain joy from our lives. God’s gift of sexuality is one of our greatest treasures. Mastering and controlling it is as much a challenge, an adventure, and a reward as mastering a wild horse so as to ride like the wind in complete union of human and animal.

In this respect, then, chastity is “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner

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unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (CCC 2337). We subdue the war within our nature and strive to attain the original unity that characterized Adam and Eve’s life before their terrible sin.

We instinctively understand that the reproductive activity of animals is utterly different from our own. Animal sexuality is in nearly all cases entirely unconscious, and even “higher animals” in almost all cases seem to place no value on sexual expression other than reproduction. This is not so for humans, for the expression of our sexuality involves other *persons*, not merely other members of the same species. Every human being is a “someone,” not a “something.”

A person who engages in sexual relations for his or her own selfish pleasure is thus treating another as a “thing” to be used, an instrument with no claim to respect for his or her inherent human dignity. Chastity teaches us how to hold all of our *self* in the palm of our hands, ready to give as a gift to our beloved — expecting nothing less than the same in return. The love that we offer is the gift of ourselves for the other’s good, rather than seeking our own gratification. The expression of our sexuality is truly human, therefore, only “when it is integrated into the

relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman” (CCC 2337).

Chastity is attained by seeking to master our disordered desires that seem to so insistently seek even fleeting pleasure. Self-mastery, like any other virtue, is attained through effort on a daily basis throughout a lifetime. Childhood and adolescence are periods of especially intense efforts at self-mastery, since habits of virtue are not yet fully established and, during adolescence, the temptations of an awakening sexual maturity are exceptionally strong. Especially valuable ways to achieve self-mastery include a knowledge of one’s self, the practice of self-de-



A patron of youth and of the Gospel call to joyful chastity in the modern world: Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, by Lisa E. Brown

nial (in areas that do not include only sexual self-denial), avoidance of all kinds of sin, development of other virtues as well as chastity, and a commitment to prayer. We must always recognize our helplessness to “go it alone”; God’s grace is essential to achieve self-mastery. There will always be setbacks, and we will find self-mastery more difficult at some times than others. Yet the effort to develop chastity especially strengthens us in the practice of virtue, and it is self-mastery that makes it possible for us to give of ourselves in holy charity.

We should not mistake the self-mastery of chastity as “following a bunch of rules” that will prevent us from “having fun.” To work to master one’s disordered self is “a training in human freedom” (CCC 2339). If we are not free to choose the good, we are truly acting only from “animal instinct.” It cannot be said too strongly that we will either govern our passions, and achieve happiness, or be governed by them, and be miserable. Sex without real love is a fleeting thing, and the enticements of false sexual “freedom” are an enslavement to the blind impulses of pleasure-seeking that destroys our human dignity and *never offers joy*. God created us for happiness and joy, not gratification however momentarily pleasurable it might be, and our happiness and joy comes only from fulfilling the deepest yearning of our hearts.

Chastity as It is Lived Out in Each Life

Every person is called to chastity, but the way the virtue is exercised differs according to our state in life. Those who are unmarried, including those who have taken vows consecrating their lives to God (priests and members of religious orders) and those who are no longer married, must entirely refrain from sexual expression. This has not been an easy achievement in any age, but the culture in which we live today makes living a chaste life an exercise of he-



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for unbridled sex, they are seeing marriage as a license for self-gratification. Does this mean that married couples cannot enjoy sex? No. In fact, a husband and wife who give themselves completely to each other in every aspect of their lives, including the expression of their love in sexual union, find that they experience gratitude to their Creator for this most wonderful gift, and great joy and pleasure in the gift. Marriage is the closest any human relationship comes to imaging the love of God for his people, of Jesus the Bridegroom and his Bride, the Church (see Eph 5:31-32). It is for this reason that complete, lifelong fidelity is an essential element of marriage.

The use of contraception in marriage, because it violates the complete gift of self, is immensely destructive of the human dignity of the partners. When married love precludes an openness to new life, when it refuses the procreative element of the sexual act, it degenerates to sex for pleasure alone, and too often leads to self-seeking sexual gratification by one or both partners, one using the other or both using each other. The use of contraception, therefore, is

roic virtue.

For those intending marriage, chastity is an expression of honor toward the one, perhaps not even yet known, who will be a lifelong partner. Even when engaged, the couple must not engage in sexual expression or actions. The period leading up to marriage is, instead, a time of “discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God” (CCC 2350). Reserving the expression of sexuality until marriage allows the engaged couple to determine whether their desire to share their lives is founded on sexual attraction alone or on a genuine love of each other that can be the foundation of a lifetime of self-giving.

Marital sex, too, is chaste. Marriage is hardly the time when self-mastery can be forgotten. If the marital partners see marriage as a time

inherently threatening to the marriage itself and is gravely sinful (see handout on Marriage, Sexuality, and Contraception).

Especially in our culture, the chaste person becomes “a witness to his neighbor of God’s fidelity and loving kindness” (CCC 2346). Chastity protects and enhances friendship, so that our relationships with each other can be more than merely physical; they can be a genuine spiritual communion. Our Lord told us: “I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15), for whom he laid down his own life (see Jn 15:13). Communion with God is friendship with our Creator such as Moses experienced: “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11). Chastity is thus “a promise of immortality” (CCC 2347).

Finally, we must pursue chastity not only as a personal but also as a civic virtue. Chastity by its nature respects the dignity and rights of the person, including the “moral and spiritual dimensions of human life” (CCC 2344). For this reason, parents have a right and a duty to protect their children from sex-education programs that promote values contrary to Christian morality or provide information that they do not wish their children to have. Parents have a grave obligation to ensure that their children are not exposed to sexually-explicit entertainment. And all of us have an obligation to avoid anything that degrades the human dignity of anyone, and to inform the purveyors of sexually-oriented entertainment or advertising of our intentions to seek out, instead, al-

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ternatives that show respect for persons and eternal moral truths. Chastity for ourselves and for our children must be actively pursued.

Modesty

Just as chastity is viewed in our culture as “unnatural” or “repressed,” modesty has been completely devalued. In its place we have been told, “if you’ve got it, flaunt it” and to “get used to it.” The impulse to modesty is treated as an indication of immaturity or psychological imbalance, while the “healthy” person supposedly experiences no shame in sexual display.

Yet the universal impulse to modesty exists; it is God’s gift to us to shelter and nurture chastity. Modesty is an emphatic form of both self-respect and respect for the dignity of others, for it protects and veils the part of our personhood that should be revealed only to those with whom one is most intimate. Therefore modesty is more than a physical covering of the body; it is, as well, an attitude of reserve and respect that enhances the personhood of everyone by protecting “the mystery of persons and their love” (CCC 2522) in the very core of their being. Modesty is, therefore, not defined by what one bares or what one covers up, but of how this occurs in the context of each individual culture. Modesty begins in the heart and mind and influences choices of apparel and behavior. The modest person does not seek to display his or her “wares,” but seeks instead

not to draw attention. The modest person reserves himself



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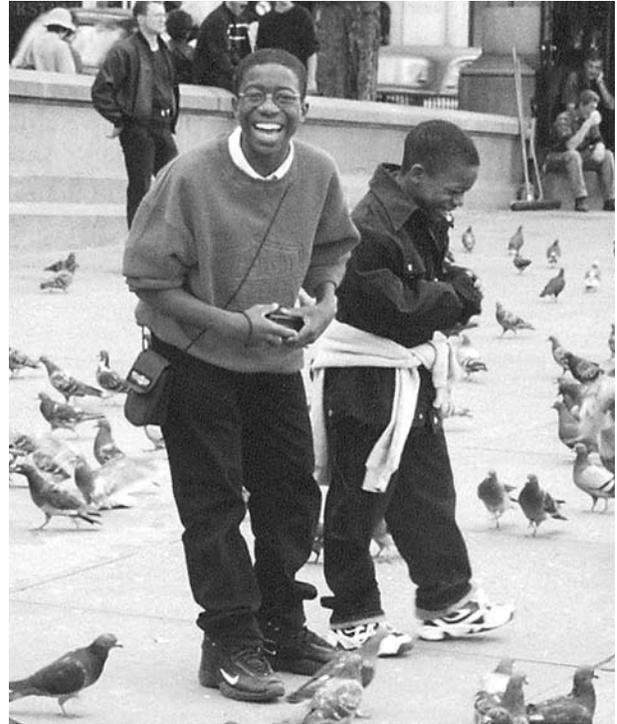
or herself as a gift for the *one* other to whom, eventually, the entire gift of self in marriage will be made (including, when the vocation is to the priesthood or religious life, a gift of a chaste self entirely to the service of God).

Modesty governs not only what a person shields from view but also what another seeks to see, and in that sense modesty is both withholding display and avoiding intrusiveness. Modest apparel and behavior reduce sexual temptation and the inappropriate arousal of sexual desire in others; it is the first line of defense against unwanted sexual advances. Our disordered desires and our weakened wills need the protection from heightened arousal that modesty provides.

There are passages in St. Paul's letters that, to the first-time reader, seem to be examples of male repressiveness of women (see, for example, 1 Tm 2:9). The First Letter of Peter expresses what appears to be the same sentiment (see 1 Pt 3:1-6). And yet these apostles expressed great wisdom. In the pagan society that they were evangelizing, the Christian witness of modesty had great power. Not only was a display of wealth unseemly, but it also conflicted with striving for the true adornments of the Christian: "*good deeds*" (1 Tm 2:10), "*reverent and chaste behavior*" (1 Pt 3:2), "*the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit*" (1 Pt 3:4), so "*that the word of God may not be discredited*" (Ti 2:5). St. Peter and St. Paul's admonishments were particularly directed at women because the culture seeks especially to destroy their natural modesty; women far more often than men are the objects of lust. For this reason, "[t]eaching modesty to children and adolescents means awakening in them respect for the human person" (CCC 2524).

As has been remarked by many people, the loss of modesty in our culture has actually degraded sexual attractiveness. Because of its shielding of mystery, modesty heightens attractiveness, and even between husband and wife, a "*modest wife adds charm to charm*" (Sir 26:15). The cultivation of modesty is the cultivation of an opportunity for greater, not less, enjoyment of God's great gift of sex within the rightful boundaries of marriage.

The modest person who encourages others to be modest is building up a society in which the dignity of everyone is respected. An attitude of modesty is also an attitude that resists "the allurements of fashion and the pressures of prevailing ideologies" (CCC



2523). St. Paul teaches us: "*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*" (Rom 12:2). Chastity and modesty, therefore, lead to purity of heart.

Jesus gives us this wonderful assurance: "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Mt 5:8). Those who are pure of heart "have attuned their intellects and wills to the demands of God's holiness, chiefly in three areas: charity¹; chastity or sexual rectitude²; love of truth and orthodoxy of faith"³ (CCC 2518). Chastity enhances charity by teaching us to love "with upright and undivided heart" (CCC 2520). We strive ever to discipline our passions and our thoughts, our feelings and our imaginations — all of which might cause us to turn away from holiness. We view our own body, and the bodies of others, not as objects of pleasure but, instead, as temples of the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 6:19). We seek to love God with "*a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith*" (1 Tm 1:5). Jesus is our model of purity, and "*every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure*" (1 Jn 3:3), so that we may be " *betrothed ... to Christ to [be presented] as a pure bride to her one husband*" (2 Cor 11:2) by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

(CCC 1632, 2337-2350, 2362, 2365, 2518-2526)

¹ Cf. 1 Tm 4:3-9; 2 Timothy 2:22

² Cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:7; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 4:19

³ Cf. Titus 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:3-4; 2 Timothy 2:23-36