

THE VOW OF CHASTITY

We don't see it as often anymore, but I remember a number of older movies in which circumstances threw together a man and a nun in some important task. The two would grow fond of each other as they labored to accomplish some good purpose. The "would-be" romance became the subplot, but in the old days the Vow of Chastity held firm. The story would make it clear that the nun was already married to Christ and could not make room in her life for a mortal man or the vows of earthly marriage.

Then the movie *Gandhi* came along, and it got a lot of us reading (or rereading) about this unusual man. We had to stumble over or blink past the fact that Gandhi made a conscious decision to become celibate. His wife demurely commented that for a while he did not always manage to keep his vow, but after a time he did. Typical and consistent with Hindu and Buddhist teaching, at some point the soul moves on beyond the stage of householder and community service and, upon entering the quest for spiritual enlightenment, puts family affairs and sensual desires aside, like some old worn-out shoe.

It troubled some that a man of Gandhi's stature should have followed such a tradition. Clearly it was not a matter of morality; the affection and sexual relationship at stake were strictly with his own wife. Why was this to be abandoned? Why was this in the way of his spiritual progress?

It may seem strange to mention the movie *Rocky* in the same vein, but in preparing for the great fight, Rocky did become a "monk" and did take a Vow of Chastity. His trainer insisted that if he did not stay away from his girl, it would weaken his legs. Myself, I never noticed that and I don't believe it. But nobody laughed at this concept in the movie. The symbolism was clear: If you expect to have a chance in the ring – that is, on the Day of Judgment – you have to keep yourself pure.

The word "chastity" does not appear in the Bible. The word "chaste" is used three times (Titus 2:5; I Peter 3:2; II Corinthians 11:2) and Revelation 14:4 uses the word "virgin."

We are taking a brief tour this Lent of some of the great vows of the spiritual life – the vows that seem even to cross all lines of race,

creed, culture, and religion. Among those vows, this is the one I really did not want to talk about. The problem is, this is not just one of the big vows; that would still leave some choice. This is one of the *big three*: poverty, chastity, and obedience. There is no escaping them. Wherever we turn, whatever the language, these three are at the core of the disciplines. Being fool enough to bring up the subject in the first place, it did not seem fair to duck one of the central three.

It puts us in a unique situation. I am standing up here not really wanting to talk about chastity, and you are sitting there even less eager to hear about it. Yet both of us know it has and does play a huge part in our religious tradition. Attitudes and morals and guilts and even faith are tremendously affected by the way the church has thought and acted in regard to chastity. In our time, the whole category is so confused – so twisted with resentments and conflicting opinions and definitions – that it is no wonder we don't want to speak or hear about it.

On the other hand, it is also a category so obviously important for our forebears – and we know for us as well – that somehow it is not enough to just claim alienation from our traditions and let it go at that. In some manner for thousands of years, the Vow of Chastity has been crucial to those most interested in spiritual life and progress. It cannot be just a simple mistake or misunderstanding. And please don't hate me if I fail to clear it all up in twenty minutes (fifteen now).

It seems clear to me that Paul was not eager to write this seventh chapter of First Corinthians either. He is tentative in some other places, but nowhere does he qualify himself and leave more invitation for further discussion than in this passage. He goes out of his way several times to make sure we know that he is not sure he has it all figured out right. Paul's honest caution doesn't do any good, sometimes. After all, what does *he* know? "It's Scripture! It's inspired by God and cannot have any errors in it. It's in the Book!" Yet this time, *the Book itself* makes it very clear that the Book also contains sincere, humble, uncertain, searching human opinion. Right or wrong (which we will not know for sure until the next realm), that sincere and humble human opinion, especially from one who loved God as much as Paul did, is mighty precious stuff.

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Paul's approach hangs on two things:

1.) Time is short – the world will not last much longer. There is not really time for marriage. There will not be time for kids to grow up. The world as we know it is about to end. There are an awful lot of people who don't know about the Kingdom coming, and they need to know and will rejoice to hear it. Why not put all time and energy into spreading the news? We can get back to family things in the new era, in the next age.

2.) Marriage and children are very distracting. They take up all kinds of time and energy, and they cause worry about what will happen to the family. So marriage cuts down obedience. People tend to compromise more and tend to hesitate to risk their necks or dare martyrdom if the wife and kids will go hungry and unprotected.

These are Paul's concerns. It is from this kind of thinking that the Vow of Chastity evolved and eventually turned into a Vow of Celibacy. Hence the Christian Faith *is* stuck with a tradition that claims (or at least part of it claims) that celibacy is a higher state than marriage, that sex must therefore be tainted (if not worse), and that those most truly devoted to God will not engage in sexual relationships period. Chastity comes to be defined as "abstention from sexual relations." (*Dictionary of Christian Lore*, page 66.)

Even by the time the later books of the New Testament were written (thirty to forty years after Paul's comments), the direction is obvious. The Book of Revelation is clearly stating the view that men who have had *no* sex with women are a higher order than those who have, and a higher level of spiritual life is intended and implied. From this conviction there finally arose monastic and priestly orders and convents, and the majority of the best of the church's leaders (both men and women) have been celibate ever since.

I have a lot of opinions on this subject, but what is more important is: What do *you* think? Is there some residue of doubt or conviction deep within you that believes it would please God more if you were celibate? I know we all blame our spouses at times for getting in the way of our spiritual progress, but is it the "making love" that does it (or undoes it)?

In some manner we all have some form of the Vow of Chastity. We do decide under what circumstances we will or will not make love.

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Without exception, that “vow” is shaped by our belief in God, what God is like, and what God wants from us – and the values that come from those beliefs. I presume that very few of you accept celibacy as a higher state of spiritual development. But a few of you are toying with the possibility and wondering. (Please don’t ask me how I know this.) If we consider it to be an aberration, does it not still leave us a little curious that the lists of spiritual giants who were celibate or who eventually chose this path are so long?

Well, many old morals seem to be defunct in our day. And old standards and even the principles and perspectives on which they rested appear to us to be wrong. But that does not cancel the category. We each still shape and try to live by our own Vows of Chastity, whatever we mean by that. So what is “chastity”?

Milton writes:

’Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
She that has that is clad in complete steel

No, it is not from *Paradise Lost*; it is from *Comus* (lines 420-21). But Milton continues:

So dear to Heaven is saintly chastity
That, when a soul is found sincerely so,
A thousand liveried angels lackey her,
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt

(*Comus*, lines 453-56.)

Byron writes: “Be warm, but pure; be amorous, but be chaste” (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, line 306.)

Such sentiments seem to us, if we can recognize or remember them at all, to have come from a far-off, romantic age – an age that existed more in imagination than in reality, even in its own heyday.

From the dictionary: “Chaste: not guilty of unlawful sexual intercourse – virtuous.” That sounds reasonable. Some religious folk may carry it to the extreme of celibacy, but in common language – keeping within the intentional and honorable bonds of marriage. But wait a minute! The chasm between “two consenting adults” and “until death do us part” is enormous! What is chastity? The incredible St. Augustine prayed, “Give me chastity and continency, only not yet.”

(*Confessions*, Book VIII.) I always loved that man. By the way, I know lots of people who are not guilty of unlawful sexual intercourse, and it has nothing to do with virtue. When St. Augustine finally turned from his rakish life, it seemed not to be a matter of virtue either. Rather, he encountered the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and his old life seemed quite dull and dumb and uninteresting in comparison, so he put it aside and went after the New Way.

What I am trying to get to, if I can ever stop interrupting myself, is that our concept has undergone interesting changes. *Hagnos*, the Greek word used for chaste, means “clean,” as an animal is clean if it is fit for sacrifice or for human consumption. *Hagnos* means clean, innocent, modest, perfect, pure. That has applications to sexuality, but the concept itself is far larger. One suspects that sexual relations were tacked on as one illustration or application of a much older and larger concept and then eventually took it over entirely.

We still find traces of the ancient meaning. The Latin root of chaste means purity (*castus* = pure). Chaste is still defined as “pure in character or conduct, simple (simplicity – as in not having a lot of unnecessary trash hanging on).” Are you starting to hear familiar old themes of great consequence? From out of the mist of the past come the three forms we don’t even associate anymore: chaste, chasten, chastise – to discipline, temper, correct, refine, purify. To be chaste is to have gone through the smelting process – to have gone through the purification. Do you remember? “*John answered them all, saying ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” (Luke 3:16) Burn away the dross, prune off the dead weight, be free and alive and dedicated. “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*” (Matthew 5:8) “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” (Sören Kierkegaard) It is the function of Hell and the purpose of the Holy Spirit – both symbolized by fire – to refine, to purify, to get rid of the trash that holds us down (and sometimes under), and to free us for LIFE with God.

Baptism, conversion, new birth, transformation – chastity is the virtue that comes from it; it is the vow that goes with it. Somewhere, somehow we slowly allowed it be reduced down to some schmucky little insinuation that sex is wrong or dirty; that women make men’s legs weak; that marriage is not as high a spiritual way or path as celibacy. God must have liked sex; it sure is prominent in creation. And I believe that Christian marriage, when it is taken as a spiritual trek, is as high a spiritual pilgrimage as is known on earth.

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Before time runs out today (or you do), I want to suggest that the Vow of Chastity was originally a vow to stay true to Christ: true to the calling, the purpose, the vision of conversion. Paul's concern about getting married is that married people have divided loyalties. He may have been wrong about the solution, but his point is still well taken: the Kingdom of Christ requires undivided loyalty and attention.

Any time we form strong attachments to anything or anyone, there is the danger of conflict with our primary allegiance to Christ. The result is often cut-down willingness or desire or availability for serving God. That is the age-old arena of personal faith, and it is the battleground of every authentic spiritual path the world has ever known.

How do the sheep get lost? They nibble themselves lost. A little juicy morsel over here, another over there, and before you know it we are miles away from where we belong and what we intended.

The Vow of Chastity is a vow to stay true to the calling, to keep pure our intention and our direction – to follow the Christ without excuse or equivocation. Yes, we all have Vows of Chastity in some form. And this is a good week, midway through Lent, to take them out and check them over. The vow will have something to do with sexual behavior; we are, after all, sexual creatures. But that is only one small section of the Vow of Chastity. How do *you* go about staying true to Jesus Christ?