



Catholic Teachings on Sex

By Daryl Glick

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INTRODUCTION

St. Augustine prayed, "Grant me chastity, Lord, but not yet" (Confessions, VIII, 7). His was a classic case of someone wanting to have his cake and eat it too. For saints and sinners, and everyone in between, purity is a sensitive subject, and one which occasions struggle and trials and sometimes more than a little doubt and worry.

Today it's not uncommon to find Catholics who seem to accept everything the Church teaches except when it comes to sexual morality. Here they prefer to simply "follow their own conscience" (a lax conscience, perhaps?). Yet these teachings are a basic part of Catholic doctrine, and haven't changed over the past 2,000 years. Picking and choosing is risky business. The Church, we must remember, teaches not her own doctrine, but that of her Founder, who said, "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).

The virtue of purity is often misunderstood and even maligned these days. Some call it a "Victorian prejudice," puritanical, or repressive. But are we really happier than before we were "liberated"? Sexual permissiveness has had some ugly offspring: casual acceptance of pre-marital sex, a sharp rise in divorce and abortions, teenage promiscuity, and the blatant appeal to sexual appetites in television, movies, and advertising. Maybe it's time to take a closer look at the Church's teachings on purity.

TIME FOR A CLOSER LOOK

The commandments of God can seem hard at times, particularly the sixth and ninth commandments which deal with sexual morality. But we have to admit in our heart that we're not happy when we know we've offended God. We may be left with a disgust for our weakness.... Maybe we aren't "OK" after all. Well, for many that disgust has been a beginning.

Christ never promised that the Christian life would be easy, and purity undoubtedly involves self-denial. He did promise joy, but he also demanded sacrifice. The goal of our existence is eternal life, and not "having a good time" on this Earth.

"Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Purity is necessary for a close relationship and friendship with God. It leads us to him. It is not the first or most important of the virtues. There are worse sins than those of lust. But without chastity there can be no charity; and charity is the first of the virtues, the perfection of virtue.

Those who give up the fight to acquire chastity become blind and spiritually crippled, because "the sensual man cannot perceive the things that are of the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2:14).

Let's be clear from the start. We are not talking here about an antiseptic or puritanical disgust for things carnal. Nor are we talking about coldness, shyness, or naiveté. We are talking about a virtue of those who know there is more to life than flesh, "a virtue of those who know what their souls are worth" (St. Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 131).

God's commands are for our own good. He gives us the moral law. He reveals it through Scripture and passes it on through tradition preserved by the Church. He also inscribes it in the hearts of all men and women (the natural law). The purpose of this law is to make our way to him easier although we don't always see it that way.

In an interview, Pope John Paul II spoke of man's need to impose demands on himself:



In this domain, the only demands made by the Church are those bound up with true, that is, responsible, conjugal love. She demands what the dignity of the person and the basic social order requires. I do not deny that there are demands. But that is the essential point, that man fulfills himself only to the extent that he knows how to impose demands on himself. In the opposite case, "he goes away sad," as the Gospel says. Permissiveness does not make men happy. The consumer society does not make men happy. It never has. (Be Not Afraid, Frossard, p. 111)

Jesus summed up all the divine commandments in our duty to love: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Mt 22:35-40).

The commandments are not a list of taboos designed to make life difficult for us. They are the way, the path, leading to love; therefore we have to live them with love.

When God forbids something, whether it be killing, lying, stealing, fornication, lustful looks, or anything else, it is not just because these things are evil in themselves, but because they corrupt us. They degrade our hearts, weaken our character and make us less able to love. They lower us to the level of beasts and make us unfit for his friendship. Why then are these things so appealing at times? It is because of original sin, and the effects of our personal sins. Our sensuality is not fully under control. We are divided within.

As a result, virtue, any virtue, must be won through effort, vigilance, and hard work—and the grace of God. We have to fight with ourselves to be good; we have to frequently check and redirect ourselves if we are to please the good God. Undoubtedly, the standards for a Christian are high: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification.... Let everyone learn to make use of his body in holiness and honor, not yielding to the promptings of passion, as the heathen do who do not know God" (1 Thess 4:3-5).

God only wants what is best for us, like a loving Father; He alone knows what is truly best for us. The sixth and ninth commandments are formulated negatively in that they forbid something; but they can only be fully understood within the context of the love of God and God's plan for our

happiness in this life and the next. The aim of these prohibitions is positive: an invitation to be worthy sons and daughters of God—to achieve mature and unselfish love.

Where there is love for God, the commandments are not difficult. He himself has told us: "My yoke is easy and my burden light" (Mt 11:30), and St. John comments: "This is what loving God means— keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not difficult" (1 Jn 5:3). Like all men and women, we are confronted with temptations against the virtue of holy purity. Sometimes those temptations are strong, or frequent, and sometimes we succumb. But, as the experience of many testifies, once we discover the friendship of Christ most of the problems associated with living purity recede into the background. A solid prayer life and some practices of self-denial make all the difference in the struggle to overcome temptation.

GO AGAINST THE TIDE

We may need to be convinced again—even in the face of the skepticism of modern society—that it is possible to live a refined purity in this day and age. We need to see that without it we will never have peace of soul nor intimacy with God. Chastity is not a virtue peculiar to people who are sheltered, naive, unattractive, or in some way abnormal. Nor is it important only for children. Purity is essential for the Christian life, a virtue for strong men and women who are mature in every sense of the word. It requires strength: the strength of self-control, and the courage to clash and to part company, if need be, with the pagan mentality of many of our peers.

St. Josemaria spoke of how "Christ loved the beautiful virtue of holy purity, a virtue that helps us to be stronger, to be firmer, to be more fruitful, better able to work for God, and more capable of undertaking great things!" (Friends of God, no. 176). Holy purity is possible, liberating, joyful, and well worth the effort:

We all know from experience that we can be chaste, living vigilantly, frequenting the sacraments and stamping out the first sparks of passion before the fire gets started. And it is precisely among the chaste where the most clean-cut men from every point of view are found. And among the impure abound the timid, the selfish, the hypocritical, and the cruel—all characters of little manliness. (The Way, no. 124)

To live a pure life the first step is to want to. We have to be absolutely determined to do everything in our power to avoid impurity and the occasions of sin, and to employ the remedy of the sacrament of Reconciliation when we fail. But it is not only a question here of having good will, nor is it primarily a matter of knowing what to avoid: what not to do, what not to think, what not to desire. It is especially important to have a wholesome attitude toward the beautiful reality of marital love, to know that sex has something of the sacred about it, to understand the place of marital love in God's plan, and to see that it is vital to protect it.

A GOD-GIVEN POWER

First, sex is about babies. As one author puts it:

Sex is about breeding and babies. It can be a great deal more than that as we all know, but it cannot be made less than that without becoming an unreal thing, a fantasy-construct.... It could be argued that modern technological man is exceptionally prone to fantasy, immune to fact. He lives among substitutes and images, he deals in abstractions and superficial relationships, his imagination is continually assaulted by the mass media, and in a thousand small ways he is constantly being encouraged to look upon sex as a dream-thing." (Christopher Derrick, *Honest Love and Human Life*, p. 89)

To live a pure life involves a number of practical duties based on the love of God and on the fact that our human nature is as it is, with a body and a soul, and with a marvelous power of generation. Sex is not a plaything; it is very serious business—so serious that God has surrounded it with a "Great Sacrament" and protected it within the confines of a devoted, lifelong, self-giving love between husband and wife.

When adolescents first begin to feel the stirrings of this power, they must be taught clearly that they are custodians of a beautiful gift from God. They are experiencing a power entrusted by the Creator to his children to generate new life, in partnership with Him.

Purity then is seen as reverence for something sacred. It is a sensitivity to the value of that special love which lasts a lifetime. Because marriage demands hard things in the long and tedious bearing and training of children, God has rewarded it; that reward is mutual attraction, passion, and delightful love. Sin against this power is terrible because it betrays God's trust and imperils their future marriage and family. It steals the rewards of love without accepting the responsibilities for which those rewards were given.

Let young people ponder the wondrous reality that they are potential fathers or mothers, that they are carriers of future life. With this wholesome attitude toward sex, they will appreciate the heroism of Christian purity which prepares them to exercise this partnership with God in true and lasting love. They can respect their own bodies, and those of each other. And they can realize that this is the way it was meant to be—love which is the real thing, not trivialized intimacies which are dispensed as the reward for a pleasant evening. They will get used to saying "No!" They won't be taken in by the phony propaganda for impurity: "The boys (girls) expect it" ... "It's not wrong if we really care for each other". . . "It's not healthy to be repressed" ... "He will think I don't care for him" ... "She'll think there's something wrong with me," etc.

On the contrary, a worthwhile girlfriend or boyfriend realizes that it takes a person of character to master these inclinations, that modesty and decency are not prudery but are the intelligent way to safeguard something sacred and prepare for a solemn responsibility. But be forewarned: you may be in a minority if you stick to high standards. You'll be a better person for it, you'll save yourself a lot of anxiety, and you will be admired for it in the long run; but in the meantime don't be surprised if you encounter ridicule.

But, some might object, doesn't it frustrate human love to restrain sexual desire? What about a couple who truly love each other and cannot marry yet? Isn't it inhuman to ask them to deny the chemistry of their bodies? The modern mind confuses passion with love. Passions can be good or bad. Sexual desire in its proper place—serving love and new life—is good and willed by God.

Passions, if not controlled, are mortal enemies of love. As Ronald Knox has pointed out:

Love is essentially the effort to sacrifice yourself, to immolate yourself, to another person. And passion is essentially the effort to sacrifice, to immolate, another person to yourself.... The man who...sees in modesty something which must be overcome, that he may score a personal triumph...that man is guilty of passion; he is an egoist from first to last.... So much difference, you see, a whole world of difference, between the two experiences...either of which is described, in common parlance, as "falling in love". (In *Soft Garments*, p. 197)

Because of our fallen nature, it takes real virtue and a great deal of effort to control our passions. As many married couples can testify, a bit of delicate mutual restraint can greatly improve the quality of their relationship. For the unmarried it is quite a different story. They must live complete restraint; for conjugal love outside of marriage is essentially dishonest, no matter how "sincere." Only the self surrender which is lifelong and open to procreation is completely honest.

Courtships and marriages flourish where there is reverence and respect for each other (body and soul), where the mystery of sex is protected by modesty, where fidelity is beyond doubt. This requires restraint of their passions. As many marriage counselors will tell you, impurity before often brings infidelity afterwards.

Of course, training in purity is not only necessary for the young. We all need to be chaste if we are to avoid becoming slaves of selfish urges that go against God's plan for the proper use of our bodies. It offends God to seek sexual pleasure inordinately or out of context at any age. To quote St. Josemaría again:

People who only seek their own satisfaction endanger their eternal salvation and cannot avoid being unhappy even in this life. Only if a person forgets himself and gives himself to God and to others, in marriage as well as in any other aspect of life, can he be happy on this Earth. . . . Chastity therefore is a necessary virtue for every Christian in whatever state or situation. Chastity is as much a virtue for the married as for the unmarried. Human love—pure, sincere, joy-ful—cannot subsist in marriage without the virtue of chastity, which leads a couple to respect the mystery of sex and ordain it to procreation and to mutual self-surrender. . . . What Our Lord expects from them is that they should respect each other and that they should be loyal to each other; that they should act with refinement, naturalness, and modesty. I also must tell them that the dignity of their conjugal relations is a result of the love that is expressed in them. And there will be love if those relations are open to fruitfulness, to bringing children into the world. To stop up the sources of life is a crime against the gifts that God has granted to mankind. (Christ Is Passing By, nos. 24, 25)

This is a vision of Christian marriage which our society desperately needs to recover. Conjugal love must be generous, self-sacrificing, and God-centered if it is to be authentic. It must be delicately chaste, reverent, and open to new life if it is to be respectful and truly joyful, as it is meant to be.

Parents: Beware of a double standard! How can you expect your children to avoid sin if you don't? How can you honestly expect them to be self-restrained, idealistic, and pure if you are not willing to be so yourselves? Example is the best teacher here. While they desperately need sound moral instruction, even more than instruction they need models. If they do not see that you are disgusted by pornography and everything that degrades sex, how can you expect them to respond to your words? As one author put it, "Let us be sincere. The most convincing (and at times the only effective) argument that parents can and should give their children, when telling them they cannot see a particular film or read a particular book, is that they themselves are not going to allow themselves to see or read it either." (Cormac Burke, *Parents, Children, and the Rules of Life*, booklet no. 100, p. 27)

If they see you live a refined modesty and affection with each other, they will have a fine idea of marriage. Our Catholic faith teaches us wonderful truths about the holiness and generosity of marriage, which your children may have never heard of, and which we easily lose sight of in this hedonistic age.

THE OBLIGATION TO TEACH

Parents, you have many things to teach. You have a grave responsibility. It seems that many Catholics, who are otherwise intelligent and well-informed, are very hazy about specific points of sexual morality both in and out of marriage. Is there a conspiracy of silence? Have priests and parents and educators abdicated their responsibility, preferring not to fish in troubled waters? Parents, in personal matters you are the primary educators. Some parents are afraid to speak to their children, for fear of exposing too much of their marital intimacy to the curiosity of the kids! They find it too embarrassing. Do you prefer that your children satisfy their legitimate curiosity on the street, from clandestine readings or hush-hush conversations? And can you then be surprised if your children pick up perverted ideas about the sacred reality of sex? Left with only these kinds of outlets for their curiosity, children learn the "facts of life" without any reference to the moral, emotional, and religious aspects which are necessary at this stage of a child's development.

This teaching should be done in a natural and friendly way. St. Josemaría advises:

The task of forming young people's standards in the matter of purity is a particular responsibility of parents. It should be parents who teach their children gradually about the origins of life, in accordance with their mentality and capacity to understand, gently anticipating their natural curiosity. I consider this very important. There is no reason why children should associate sex with something sinful or find out about something that is in itself noble and holy in a vulgar conversation with a friend. This can also be an important step in strengthening the friendship between parents and children, preventing a separation in the early moments of their moral life. (Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá, no. 100)

Fr. Jesus Urteaga, in his book *God and Children*, pleads with parents:

Don't be afraid to speak to them! If they do not ask where babies come from, then go ahead and tell them unasked. Tell them where babies come from, and I promise you it will give them a great love for their mother, a great respect for womanhood, and a holy pride in themselves. There is no need to wait until they are 14 to tell them the father's function, and they will then begin to appreciate, naturally and supernaturally, the spark of creative power that God has given to man. The young girl should know the cause of menstruation and its relation to the sacred duty of motherhood. She should know--because you should explain it to her--that her early maturity accounts for the attraction she feels for boys who are older than she is. The young boy should be told the cause of those involuntary emissions which he will have at night and how that function, which must be used exclusively within marriage, plays its part in bringing new lives into the world.... You will have to warn them against masturbation; if you neglect to do this, I wouldn't like to be in your shoes. (God and Children, p. 167)

You have to tell them the "facts of life," yes; but at the same time and more importantly you have to educate them in purity. You must also teach the moral principles. Fr. Urteaga has some harsh words for those who fail in their duty here:

It is a monstrosity to be careless in giving your children a correct knowledge of God's works.... If you leave these questions to their own judgment their sexual life will careen along ways of blind sensuality, and they will approach marriage covered with filthy selfishness inside and out.... And they will lose all respect for you. (Ibid, p. 169)

Fr. Burke sums up the matter this way:

It is essential to begin this work of sex education in good time, without losing sight of two fundamental guidelines: (a) the idea of reverence has to be gotten across when dealing with this topic; (b) the idea of reverence has to be gotten across before the topic becomes a matter of temptation. Later on may be too late. (Booklet no. 100, p. 18)

It is a sound principle of Christian sex education to speak more about purity than impurity, and to avoid going into too much detail lest we produce the opposite effect from the one intended. Yet it is necessary to spend some

time on specifics to have the necessary background information to form a correct conscience in this area.

CHASTITY REGULATES

The power to transmit life is situated in certain organs which are called genital because they are the means for exercising the power to generate. Both in man and woman these organs have internal parts which are enclosed and protected by the body, and external parts which make the conjugal act possible. Because these organs have to fulfill specific biological functions, they undergo certain modifications whose purpose is to enable them to fulfill their function—the creation of new life.

When we walk, speak, write, or work, we feel what we are doing; we are conscious of it even if there is no particularly intense bodily sensation accompanying the experience. The movements undergone by the genital organs, on the other hand, are felt in a special way and are to some extent automatic. They are felt as a specific and intense sensation—they give a type of bodily pleasure which is called sexual or venereal. This pleasant sensation accompanies changes of the genital organs which enable them to perform the marriage act. The changes in question are of two kinds: those which prepare for the conjugal act and make it possible (excitation or arousal), and those others which follow and complete the first type.

The first kind can be brought about voluntarily or involuntarily; but once the biological mechanism controlling them is set in motion, unless it is halted in time, it leads automatically to the second kind. Therefore, these will merit the same moral judgment as the first. If they are brought about within marriage and without placing obstacles in the way of procreation, the whole activity will be virtuous, good, and noble. It will be chaste and form part of conjugal love. If the changes are provoked outside of marriage in any direct and completely voluntary way, a mortal sin will be committed; for we are making use of the generative power, totally or partially, in a way contrary to nature and to God's will, for He gave us these organs specifically for the purpose of engendering children. Outside marriage, then, a sensitive conscience strives to avoid anything that causes arousal: thoughts, readings, things seen or heard, images, kissing, touching, memories, and so on.

We must not forget that these motions of our body are governed by various nervous mechanisms which sometimes function voluntarily and at other times involuntarily. Maybe a comparison may be useful here to clarify the point.

Let us imagine that these bodily phenomena are like water overflowing from a container: before it overflows, it must first be full. Well, in our comparison the container has three pipes feeding water into it. The first pipe is our thoughts, what we read, what we see and hear, etc.; everything that passes through our brain pours water into the container through the first pipe. These thoughts may or may not be voluntary. If we let our thoughts run wild and entertain impure thoughts instead of rejecting them, this is like opening the tap on that pipe and letting the water into the container. If there is an overflow, it will be our own fault because we did not control what we could have controlled.

The second pipe has no tap, and so the water may reach the container without our consent; that is, we may not be directly responsible or have any blame in this case, for organic stimuli are independent of our will. Such stimuli can happen during the day or night. We are not to blame for the overflowing because we have not accepted or consented to what we feel.

The third pipe, like the first, has a tap which is our will, because in this case the things that fill the container are directly voluntary: touches, kissing, and other actions outside marriage which are performed for the purpose of sexual stimulation. These constitute an offense to God and are contrary to chastity.

We understand that not all thoughts on matters relating to sex are impure. Otherwise Christian sex education would be impossible! Furthermore, impure thoughts may go no further than being mere temptations, which can actually help the soul in its spiritual progress if we resist them with humility and faith. Only impure desires to which we consent are sinful—gravely sinful if we consent fully—for to desire evil is a sin. However, the problem is to know whether in fact we have consented, or whether the thought or desire was just something that flashed through our minds without real consent on our part. The difference usually depends on how we react.

Here it may be useful to recall what we have said about the bodily sensations related to the generative power, because when dealing with desires and thoughts these sensations can act as alarm signals. Often we are not conscious of the fact that our imagination has taken a wrong turn until we actually notice some bodily effect. What we have to do then is to react, correct ourselves, and turn with the faith of a child to God our Lord and to his most pure Mother. But temptations as such shouldn't upset us, if we haven't invited them and if we try to dismiss them. Then there's no need to worry. Only if there is consent is there moral fault. "Whatever happens, there is no need to worry as long as you don't consent. For only the will can open the door of the heart and let that corruption in" (The Way, no. 140).

Sometimes actions which are quite innocent may cause sexual stimulation. This can happen in connection with personal hygiene, medical examinations, athletics, etc. When these sensations are neither willed nor aroused directly, there is no need to lose peace of mind. We should just try to minimize the cause, and minimize the reactions as much as possible.

SKATING ON THE EDGE

All this is not to say that there is no danger as long as there are no bodily repercussions. It is quite possible for some things not yet to be an offense against the sixth or ninth commandments and nevertheless to be dangerous or even wrong because of what they may lead to. For instance, daydreaming fantasies entertained in reading love stories or watching soap operas, unhealthy curiosity in looking through magazines or books, immodest glances, an excessive show of affection, intemperance in food or drink, spending time in the company of certain people, etc. These may be occasions of sin for those individuals who know from past experience that they will result in temptations against purity---and yet are not avoided. In such cases, we have to be fully honest with ourselves and admit complicity, since we are partly responsible for bringing on the trouble. We should learn from experience what the danger zones are for us personally. Without getting scrupulous, we may need greater sensitivity here.

This brings up the subject of "brinkmanship" with temptation. Purity, like all virtues, should be practiced cheerfully, generously, and decisively. If it is seen only negatively, a person—sometimes quite consciously, at other times less so—may look for satisfactions to make up for what he begrudgingly has to do without. This compensation may take the form of a veiled search for affection, immodesty with himself or others, indelicacies in the question of personal hygiene, off-color conversations and jokes, etc. He may think that even if his hunger cannot be completely satisfied, at least he must be allowed a little nibble from time to time provided that there is no serious sin. But this approach is a mistake, because such compensations are just like nibbles: they don't satisfy his hunger, but only increase it. Instead of calming sensuality they aggravate it. This mistaken search for relief then only brings greater unrest and greater temptations down the line.

Let's not be so foolish as to test ourselves, thinking that we can handle the temptation. God is forgiving, but he does expect us to learn from our mistakes and to make the effort to avoid occasions of sin. Otherwise we are not doing our part. We need a healthy distrust of our weakness. "Don't be such a coward as to be 'brave.' Flee!" (The Way, no. 132)

THE MORAL STANDARD

Lust is theologically defined as a morally disordered search for sexual pleasure. The sixth commandment forbids under pain of mortal sin anything that involves seeking sexual pleasure directly through carnal acts, whether complete or incomplete, interior or exterior. There are some acts, of course, which are always contrary to the sixth commandment, whatever the state or situation of the person involved: fornication, that is, the complete sexual act outside marriage; and masturbation or self-abuse, which consists of procuring arousal and the consequent pleasure proper to the sexual act without carnal intercourse. In short, any action performed outside marriage, alone or with others, whose purpose is something proper to the transmission of life, is gravely sinful. Perhaps we should say an additional word about masturbation. Some have alleged that in adolescents there is often incomplete advertence, so it is better not to tell them it is a mortal sin and cause undue anxiety. Morally, this is a very dangerous opinion. Even though advertence may be incomplete in some cases, yet adolescents should be made aware that the action is sinful. Such correction is important because a habit of this sort is easily formed and a tremendous effort may be required to break it.

Sacred Scripture depicts in no uncertain terms the gravity of sins of the flesh:

When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency, and sexual irresponsibility.... I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave in this way will not inherit the kingdom of God (Eph 5:3-7).

Let there not even be mention among you of fornication or impurity in any of its forms, or promiscuity.... For you can be quite certain that nobody who actually indulges in fornication or impurity or promiscuity—which is worshipping a false god—can inherit anything of the Kingdom of God. Do not let anyone deceive you with empty arguments: it is for this loose living that God's anger comes down on

those who rebel against him. Make sure that you are not included with them (1 Cor 6:13-15, 19-20).

We seldom find in Scripture so many warnings as those given us on the matter of purity. What St. Paul is making clear is that impurity in its various forms is a sin, and a grave sin when there is full knowledge and consent, in spite of the fact that these sins are not usually sins of malice but of weakness. Thus it is a mistake to think that simply because we did not want to offend God the sins of lust are not serious, just as it would be mistaken to assume that acts against chastity are not wrong provided they do no harm to anyone except the parties themselves. When someone offends God by knowingly disobeying his law, even though no other person may be harmed, he is still doing wrong, namely committing sin.

The true test of morality is objective—does the act violate God's law or not? (Not do I "feel" that this is wrong.) And if we don't know the answer, it is wrong to act until we find out. If our conscience is the least bit uneasy, we must not act until we find out what the teaching of the Church is on the matter—and we can't plead ignorance if we didn't take the trouble to find out. Granted, it is useful to look back after we have sinned to consider our motives. One's intentions will increase or decrease guilt (for example: "I didn't mean any harm to anybody" ... "I didn't think about it much, I just felt like doing it, and so I did" ... "I didn't know it was a mortal sin." But the first measure of morality is the objective nature of an act itself, not the subjective intentions of the doer. It's important to be clear about this, to avoid the temptation of excusing any action as long as we mean well.

As the Sacred Congregation for the Faith put it "In this regard the Council [Vatican II] declared that the moral goodness of the acts proper to conjugal life... does not depend solely on sincere intentions or on an evaluation of motives. It must be determined by objective standards.... The use of the sexual function has its true meaning and moral rectitude only in true marriage" (Declaration on Sexual Ethics, no.5).

There has been plenty of criticism of the mentality that looks upon everything to do with sex as sinful, dangerous, and an enemy of the soul; and unfortunately this outlook still exists among some people. Either extreme is wrong. While we should avoid complete aversion to sexuality as something

evil, we must also realize that a religious respect for everything concerned with transmitting life is essential for a truly Christian life.

In particular it must be remembered that marriage itself is a vocation to holiness, and that couples cannot simply give free reign to their passions. Overindulgence in sexual matters, or a sexual life that goes against the divine will, is one of the greatest impediments to facing God and understanding supernatural truth.

Purity is possible

Some have always objected to the possibility of living a pure life. Revelation and Church doctrine, however, teach that it is both possible and necessary. Now if the fact that God requires us to practice chastity—abstinence from any sexual act contrary to the obligations of our state—does not convince us, we have only to look at the testimony of the millions of souls who have lived a life of complete chastity ever since Our Lord came on Earth to realize it is quite possible. If some still find this unconvincing let us examine the question more closely.

The first point to make is that the sexual instinct in man is not like that of animals. It is not an absolute need which must be followed automatically; instead he has a free will that allows him to control his appetites. Only a very small part of the sexual tendency is automatic in man; by far the greater part is voluntary or at least stimulated by the person himself. Images, memories, and entertainments become temptations or impel him to exercise his sexuality because he accepts and admits their influence. When these same things are looked at from some other point of view, they normally cease to have any influence on sexual conduct. And so it is important to look at everything with pure eyes, not letting the mind give an impure twist to things. This is especially important today when we are subjected to a constant bombardment of sexual stimulation in our surroundings.

THE GENUINE ARTICLE

Those who try to deny the possibility of celibacy, and consequently of chastity outside of marriage, sometimes claim that unless we have conjugal love we are susceptible to neuroses, inner conflicts, or emotional dryness. On the contrary, the selfish, predatory, unloving exercise of sexuality does not in the least help to remedy these dangers. Instead it makes them worse.

Frustrated emotions may in some cases lead to psychological complications. But here we are not dealing with Christian chastity, embraced positively, but with a caricature of chastity, the result of fear, selfishness, or perhaps pride—anything but the love of God, the soul of true chastity.

If love is not the basis and motive of our chastity, difficulties may indeed arise; but as Our Lord pointed out: "By their fruits you shall know them." If the fruit of chastity is love, cheerfulness, happiness of soul, a feeling of completeness, and a genuine desire to serve, then we can be sure it's genuine. On the other hand, if its fruits are feelings of frustration, envy, sadness, or loneliness, if it leads us to seek secret compensations, then it is not genuine chastity. True chastity is not something sad; it is a positive affirmation, a gift of oneself to God.

THE MEANS TO CONQUER

Since love of God is vital to living holy purity, anything that helps us to have a solid spiritual life will also help us to practice this virtue. Quoting from St. Josemaría:

Let us now take a look at the means we Christians have in the struggle to guard chastity. We must try to do whatever is necessary to assure good formation, distinguishing clearly between a delicate conscience, which is a true grace of God, and a scrupulous conscience, which is something altogether different. Take very special care of chastity and also of those other virtues which always accompany it: decency and modesty. They are the safeguards of chastity. Don't take lightly those norms which are so effective in keeping us worthy in God's sight: the guarding of the senses and heart: courage (the courage to be a "coward") to flee from occasions of sin; frequenting the sacraments, especially the sacrament of Penance; complete sincerity in personal spiritual direction; sorrow, contrition, and reparation after falls. All this should be anointed with a tender devotion to Our Lady so that she may obtain for us from God the gift of a holy and pure life. (Friends of God, no. 185)

To live chastity, the most important thing is to want to---and to want it with the mature resolve to take the necessary steps, with the humility to accept our failures, and to get up again. Obviously one of the most important questions is how we pray and with what fervor we receive the sacraments.

A Confession made just to get by, bordering on insincerity, telling as little as we can get away with in the vaguest possible terms, hoping just to set our minds at rest without seeming to be too bad, is a sign that we are not really sincere. While we may not be committing outright sacrilege, there is no deep conversion here. No true prodigal-son mentality, no repentant return to our Father's house (cf. Lk 15:11ff).

In regard to prayer, we should not confine ourselves to asking Our Lord for things, but when we do ask for something we should be sincere and determined— and persevere in our petition. In other words, our prayer is a way to attain purity because it is a means to know and love God better and to have a deep friendship with him, and because "holy purity is given by God when it is asked for with humility" (The Way, no. 118). Our progress in this virtue is directly related to how, and how much, we ask for it.

Mortification or self-denial is another indispensable means to keep concupiscence at bay and to control ourselves. To safeguard chastity we must delicately guard our imagination and our sight, for this is essential to guarding our heart. Most temptations to sensuality come to us through sight. "One must not look at that which one cannot desire," St. Gregory warns us. Otherwise we do not really want to be chaste. True we cannot avoid seeing certain things, but we don't have to look at them! If a hungry man is served an appetizing dish but does not want to eat it, then he simply must turn his attention away from it or even leave the table. If he goes on looking at the food while trying to think of good reasons for not touching it, his effort will probably be in vain: sooner or later he will eat it. The battle to be pure should be waged "far from the main wall of your spiritual fortress, so that the enemy is met and fought in your small mortifications, your customary prayer, your methodical work, your plan of life: and with difficulty will he come close to the easily scaled battlements of your castle" (The Way, no. 307).

One subtle occasion to avoid is idleness. A good motto is: a busy mind in an energetic body. Let young people have many wholesome occupations and outlets to keep them busy. This is an elementary rule of prudence. We have to develop our willpower by learning to say no to ourselves where we tend to be soft and lazy.

An athlete exercises and trains his muscles so as to be in shape for running. In a similar fashion we have to train our will—exercising the “muscles” of the will by means of little efforts and sacrifices—so as to be in shape for life... . The practical side of moral formation is simply aimed at making each one master of his own life. This is what the moral struggle is all about: being in charge—or not—of our lives. It is only by victories—despite some defeats—that one becomes master. And being master means that, with the help of God's grace, a person can take his life where he wants; and not be left drifting under the control of a

thousand things—environment, fashions, friends, passions, laziness.
(Fr. Cormac Burke, Booklet No. 100, p. 20)

If we add to the means already mentioned an attempt to get out of ourselves and take a Christian interest in the needs of those around us, and if we use whatever reasonable human remedies are necessary, then these words will be fulfilled: "You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it" (1 Cor 10:13).

Let us bring many people back to the Christian way of life, boldly announcing that we have found a better and happier way to live, and that they should not worry that it is difficult. While we are weak and may fall at times, the important thing is to stay in the fight. God constantly takes our hand and so does Mary, the Mother of Fair Love.

In the words of St. Josemaría: "We must tell everyone that it is a wonderful thing to be a Christian, because a believer's soul is God's temple, where the Blessed Trinity dwells. We must also tell them that if you want to attain Christian perfection, you must put up a bold fight in the struggle of the interior life, because the Kingdom of God is to be taken by force" (St. Josemaría, February 2nd, 1945).



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