

WHAT IS CHASTITY?

“Chastity is freedom from possessiveness in every sphere of one's life. Only when love is chaste, is it truly love” (1 Cor 13:13) This is very illuminating. We are generally brought up to think of chastity as “Thou shalt not”, i.e. a negative thing, and that it only applies to specific sexual behavior. How much wider and deeper is this theological concept? Indeed, it reminds us that the primary sin is “possessiveness”: “I want to keep for myself” my intact ego, my material possessions, my relationships, my private life, and so on. But true love is freedom, release from all kind of deadly “ownership” - and it applies to married love and to friendship, sexual purity, as to everything else. Being all too human a lot of the time, we struggle with this detachment from possessiveness. Even using the word “detachment” makes it sound negative. We are powerfully attached to a person or a thing, yet have to learn to see this attachment in the light of our greater “attachment” - to Christ. It is only attachment to Christ that will put all our other attachments in the right perspective and thus enable us to celebrate them with chaste love (2 Cor 6:10).

When we think of chastity, we think of something in terms of mortification, putting something to death or cutting something off. Such a counterintuitive injunction. Chastity is not just submitting to it, resigning yourself to it but loving it, embracing this virtue. It is not simply a matter of deprivation or denying yourself something but more like embracing something that will help you arrive to where you want to go, somewhere that corresponds with your deep desire, your deep longing. Chastity must become incarnate, must become fully what we are as a person. The pedagogical aspect of chastity from all church life, biblical schools, and seminaries, has been associated with just a simple spiritual discipline, with not doing something, not activating something. We need to learn how to respond to everything with gratitude, instead of responding with the desire to grasp, to possess, and to own (Rom 12:13).

Through Scripture, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we need to educate and purify our gaze, to repair the fracture between our heart and our eyes. We need to integrate the heart (the way of feeling) with the eyes (the way of seeing) – the perspective. This stage implies a long and slow process of spiritual growing and maturing. For Christian life, this integrity is crucial, this goal of becoming whole (this theme recurs a lot in Psalms) is very important. What needs to happen in our experience is called “transformation in grace” (Matt 6:22-23).

The common enemy here is not lust, nor is it evil desire (those are surface level temptations). The real common enemy is the “Temptation to Despair” (Rom 7: 24). Having the straightforwardness, the honesty, the humility, and the integrity of recognizing the problem, recognizing what is going on in our minds, in our hearts, confessing before God (sometimes even in the presence of a spiritual father), and not only asking for forgiveness, but understanding and making sense of what truly is the meaning of this. Finally, letting go of the illusion of things that I believe that I am entitled to in order to satisfy my desires. In Christ, all our desires are met and fulfilled (Psalm 87:7). In this spiritual laboratory, going through this big tension, God is teaching us to become detached from things, and even more, He is teaching us how to get rid of the illusion that the things, pleasures, and desires of this world can satisfy us (Matt 6:21).

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