

# Chastity

## *A word that needs hearing*

I suppose the first thing to do is to define the term: chaste, from the Latin *castus*, meaning *pure, honest, innocent, clean, holy*. As a technical term, *chastity* does not mean or even imply virginity, or celibacy, although both of these things can be an exercise of chastity for an individual person. Married people are all engaged in a vigorous exercise of chastity, upon which their continued married life constantly depends.

I'd like to think about chastity in the married context, so that we can make friends with it and admire the beauty of it. It is a virtue which draws power from the wedding promises, which we ought to listen to. Brides and Bridegrooms say:

*I call upon these persons here present to witness that I do take thee to be my lawful wedded wife/husband: to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse: for richer, for poorer: in sickness, and in health to love and to cherish, till death do us part.*

What makes the windows rattle in this promise is the way it excludes *the quality of the experience* from any future influence. If it's good, I love and cherish you until death. If it's bad, I love and cherish you until death. If it's rich, if it's poor, until death. If we're well, if we're ill, loving and cherishing. You might think that it was the hope of good times that keeps the show on the road. In fact, it quite importantly is not. If there's an impulse to be generous in a marriage that is deliriously happy, there is if anything an even greater need and more powerful impetus in a marriage that reveals needs, problems, challenges. Chastity is the quality that is selfless *exactly then*, when the relationship demands love that seems shorn of any payoff. The wedding-promise specifically provides for this moment.

This promise is the greatest one human being can make to another. If it is chaste, it will survive anything from outside itself; love, after all, is another name for God; and God is eternal. God is invulnerable by evil; love too has the power to defeat all evil. But huge promises can be assailed by corruption from within. We call the ability to sustain promises *fidelity*. It doesn't sound as exciting as love: but fidelity is still grounded in the experience of love, because real love calls for an *indefectible* response, a response that will never be withdrawn. "Love" that doesn't develop into fidelity isn't love at all. Fidelity isn't dependent on any of the accompanying effects of love, such as joy, consolation, passion; these can become precisely *payoffs*: you can get selfish about them, and this is dangerous, because they can come and go. Fidelity is an essential component of real love. The wedding-promise expresses it; those who make the wedding-promise may or may not understand it, or they may mistake a complex of powerful, basically selfish emotions for the real thing. But in the end, what preserves the reality of love from its enemies *within the lover* is the virtue of chastity.

### **What's a virtue?**

"Virtues" are moral and spiritual powers of the human personality, which enable us to do good easily and freely. Like physical powers, they are honed and grow stronger by exercise, and they atrophy and weaken by unuse. Chastity has a poor name, perhaps because it has been seen in such negative terms by people who have forgotten its beauty and force. But its absence brings the greatest suffering to vast

numbers of people, when they endure the infidelity of others, or the effects of their own infidelity. At this point we can widen the scope of our thinking.

Everyone, without exception, is called by God to be chaste. Infraction or neglect of chastity is infidelity, a failure to love. It *always* takes effect; it doesn't matter how private, or how insignificant, we may consider our infidelities to be, they still take effect in us, and, through us, in the world where others live. We are talking about the inner life, whose experience and activity we think of as secret. In fact, it's there that our outer life – words, deeds, and omissions – is prepared and designed: limited and deformed, or exalted and ennobled. What goes on outwardly goes on inwardly first. What goes on inwardly *matters more*. The most impressively-governed code of external behaviour is only a kind of deception, if the heart isn't engaged in it.

As in all the virtues, our model of chastity is Jesus. His mode of chastity was not married, but single; because of his devotion to the Father, he can also be truly called *celibate*; he had to have taken a specific decision not to marry, in a society where marriage was the norm. (He was quite original in this: there was then no cultural background that valued celibacy, no rank in society typified by it. Monasticism lay far in the future: Jewish Rabbis and priests, even prophets, were always married.) Chastity enabled Jesus to treat others with justice, and to relate to them with complete generosity, as a celibate man. His perfect control left him able to relate with humour and sympathy to women: both in an atmosphere of intimacy, like the home of Martha and Mary, and also in situations where confrontation might have been expected, like the scene where he meets a Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well. One of the most telling stories is that of a woman who was a public sinner, who appears at a Pharisee's banquet, weeping over Jesus' feet, which she dries with her let-down hair, and breaking open a jar of perfume; Jesus has the insight, patience, and dignity to read her heart, to defend her from expulsion or abuse, and to speak directly to her particular need ("Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you; go in peace.") There is no trace in him of embarrassment, or squeamishness, or lack of command in a difficult circumstance. He is all she could have asked him to be, and that is an example of chaste love.

The element of *purity* is one we could think of. You can get this wrong, too. As an enthusiastic cook, I know that if you want to whip up eggwhites, you have to use a very clean bowl, and ensure that not the slightest trace of egg-yolk gets in; if it does, the whites won't rise; and if you start to whip them in this melancholy state, there is no saving the situation. You have to throw them away, break more eggs, and start again. Cooks learn this bit of perfectionism, or lose their meringues.

I think that, in the case of love, there is a principle of redemption that does not work like that. Love isn't only for perfect people. Again and again we may offend the person we are trying to love. The remedy for this situation is *to love more*. Love is the totalising principle of human life. In itself it costs the gift of everything. But in its working, it *slowly* makes a human person *one*, it *gradually* bestows integrity. Unchastity is an attempt to get away with half-giving, or even with total selfishness; and this is disintegratory. We all do it. It's immensely damaging to the tenderest ground in our nature. But love itself - in the guise of forgiveness, which is fidelity under fire – can itself save the situation. In this way something evil can be turned to good, redeemed, in exact conformity with the law of the Cross. Jesus appears to die on the Cross because of fear, misunderstanding, hatred, Godlessness. All of these things he absorbs, giving back nothing but forgiveness. In this way the Cross itself turns round from being a perfect expression of condemnation, to being a perfect act of love. That is exactly what happens when offences between lovers are absorbed, forgiven, turned to love. This self-redeeming element is not, of course, always

allowed to work. Married people can collaborate to exclude it, and agree to condemn each other by deserting their ministry. Thus what was a love-story turns to a tragedy. And what then do we say about the wedding promise? It shows itself to have been vitiated, mingled inexorably with selfishness, in fact, unchaste.

### **Being What We Are**

So what about chastity for us who are not married? Chastity for unmarried people, in the Church's view, means being what you are – unmarried. Because I believe in the Sacraments, I think that this should be fairly easy to understand. In fact, the moment when those promises are solemnly exchanged, in the public arena as defined by the Church, *has* to have the significance we give it, of bringing into being the partnership of the whole of life that makes a marriage. It is carefully expressed in the words and content of the liturgy, and once the responses have been given, the bond is created *till death us do part*. Now, of course, during a long and complicated engagement, the relationship will reach a point where the couple will be quite sure that they want to go on to make those promises to each other, and where they may come to think that they are *already* married, that the liturgy is merely the signing of pieces of paper, and all the other dismissive things that people say about marriage. Even quite moral and quite keen Catholics will believe this, and will begin to live as married people before their weddings. What suffers here? Why does the Church demur at this response?

The value of the public promises is paramount. It's diminished if the marriage they express is held to be quite independent of them. The respect which *getting married* in public expresses is respect towards other people, respect towards the Church, and respect towards God. Those meanings reflect back into the relationship, teaching the couple that their relationship is not a lonely little boat for two, but a deepening of many other bonds with the community, and the forging of a covenant with God the Creator. *Being what you are* in marriage means entering into this world of meaning, giving hospitality to all these relationships, seeing how the working of love in a marriage changes the world around it. Marriage deserves, and needs, the grace of God and the wisdom and support of the community. If these things are excluded or refused, the relationship will not achieve its full sacramental stature. Those who live together before marriage may be imagining that these things are simply decorative inessentials, that what matters is their own view of their relationship (always assuming that they have one view. I suspect that one form of unchastity is the presence of two different views within the one relationship. Sooner or later these diverse ideas tear apart). I could confidently say, from my experience as a priest, that marriage is more than people understand when they marry. Respecting the awesome promises that bring a marriage into being means respecting that distance between what we think we are entering, and what we are actually entering. Getting married is getting into God.

Far from these considerations are those relationships where sex is reduced to a recreational factor between friends. I get surer all the time that getting used to an experience of sex that is uncommitted devalues disastrously the coinage of love. When several such relationships have folded and been thrown away, and the relationship appears which is to be the real one, there's nothing left for the poor old body to do, to carry the immense significance of the total gift of life. The message for the body is a grim one. Questions arise: what makes this person different from the ones that preceded? What are the prospects for fidelity later on, where impermanence and inconstancy have made their grooves in the personality? We can't teach our minds, hearts, even bodies that sex is trivial, without undermining our power to love: there's only one heart here, only one life. If it has been recklessly

chucked about and dishonoured on Tuesday, there is no way it is going to be open to its great vocation to love on Wednesday.

By contrast, the time of courtship and engagement can be seen for what it is: a most delicate and gracious time of life, the time for a kind of training for what is to come. If during this time a couple suffers huge frustration, it indicates the presence of things like greed, selfishness, impatience, and the incapacity for self-control, respect, understanding. These things may well be shared experiences; but that doesn't give them any greater value as springs of love. They aren't. They are in fact the enemies of love in the sense I've been describing it. The world is full of debris from shonky "marriages" that tried to build on such things. To believe you can use them to build a human house is terrible nonsense. Unworthy materials can only make an unworthy, dangerous home. We must regain the discrimination that knows how to choose what is best, and reject what falls short. This is what the beautiful and life-giving virtue of chastity is about.