

The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality

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Questions for Chapter 7

Christ, Father of the World to Come: Virginity and Continence

Symbolism of Premarital Chastity

1. How did prescriptions of the Law regarding sexual behavior change from Old Testament times to New Testament times? How has a higher degree of virtue been made possible?

Much of what the Law prescribed or forbade, since restricted by time, place, and culture, has not been taken over, at least literally, by the Church. But far from being abrogated as mere culturally conditioned and obsolete regulations, as some mistakenly hold today, those commands of the Law have been reasserted through the symbolic and, therefore, universal language of the New Testament in a purer and, from a merely natural viewpoint, much stricter form—just recall the Lord's words, "Everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Yet even this degree of virtue has been made possible for our weakness by the grace of Jesus' love. All the requirements of Christian morality arise from, and are dependent on, the symbolism we have been considering. All, consequently, flow immediately and directly from what God has revealed about the nature of His love.

2. Describe the symbolic meaning of premarital continence, both male and female.

For the female, the maidenhead is an enclosure, a bodily sealing off of a virgin. Symbolically, the world has always seen it as a sign of her reservation of herself, of her being sealed off against indiscriminate love in order, ultimately, to be the sacred receptacle, the vessel within which God will bring about the mystery of a new life through the action of her husband.

3. What is the link between rites of passage from many cultures and Christian chastity?

By establishing control over that which is, so to speak, the pre-eminent element of opposition in the sub-rational world to the action of reason, a man shows symbolically that he is capable and competent to subject the world to the good of his family-to-be, that he can provide for them by his labor in the world and can protect them from the forces of nature and from enemies. The symbolic meaning of man's virginity, then is a dominion over the subhuman world for the good of his prospective family that images God's dominion over the entire universe for the good of His family, the whole people of God.

Further, a man's mastery of his sexual desires symbolizes a man's freedom to procreate or not, as his truest love may move him. This freedom is a basic aspect of the freedom he needs if he is to discern whether God is calling him. A man's virginity is a likeness in his very flesh to God, whose power to create, naturally or supernaturally, is infinitely free.

4. What is the reason for the seeming dislocation between the maturation of the sexual powers and the development of the necessary intellectual and emotional maturity necessary to enter marriage?

A young person has to learn complete continence and to gain mastery of his sexual drives and desires before he is ready to give himself totally in marriage. Sexual intercourse is a symbol of loving self-gift of one spouse to the other. But a person who does not already possess himself, cannot give himself. If a husband is not capable of perfect self-control, he is incapable of giving

himself perfectly to his wife. So, also, a wife must be mistress of her emotions and feelings if she is to yield herself in true freedom as a gift to her husband.

Virginity and Fruitfulness

5. What is another aspect of premarital chastity in males that is recognized in practically all cultures?
The point of interest is these various rituals or rites of passage is closely tied to the boy's ability to bear pain and to endure hardship in the context of hunting, fighting, and other modes of male activity. All these rites seem to indicate that there is a need, deeply rooted in the human psyche, that this instinct which makes a man physically capable of procreation be somehow tied in with pain or suffering, with contest, and with victory, whether over other men in battle, or over animals killed in defense or hunted down for food.
6. What does the author say is the Christian "rite of passage" for both male and female?
The achievement of chastity is the rite of passage for the Christian. It is itself the symbol of both the suffering and the contest—the effort to control one's sexual drives is painful and difficult; chastity alone proves that a boy has become a man; that a girl has become a woman. Each person must be subjected to the inner conflict: to the deep, obscure, but powerful emotions of the girl; to the very obvious physical passion of the boy. Only by chastity can they give proof of themselves as men and women who are adults, who have matured enough to accept full responsibility for their sexual powers, not treating them as means for amusement or experimentation.
7. What is the universally recognized meaning of female virginity—even by pagans?
A woman's virginity has been universally recognized as relating her to the divine. AS far back as records of religion go, we find that some women were consecrated as virgins in order to carryout religious functions, to be servants of the gos, or even to act as priestesses.
8. In Christianity, what is the meaning of consecrated female virginity?
Through the whole course of Christian history, women have chosen to consecrate their virginity to Christ. They seek, as virgins sealed to all power but His Holy Spirit and as images of His bride, the Church, to give Him in her name that exclusive love that is symbolized by marriage.
9. What is the meaning of consecrated male virginity?
A man's perpetual virginity consecrated to God is not one of union so much as of oneness, of likeness, of identification, especially in action. Adam's naming of all the animals symbolizes man's power over creation—an obvious explanation of the phrase that man was made in the image and likeness of God. That is, a man shares in God's rule over the world. By his virginal dominion over his own sexual appetites, then, he gains a further way to image God, symbolically, with respect to His governance of the material world. It is a man's task to subdue the world not only for the good of his family, but ultimately, to make it subserve the glory of God by grace. A man labors that the whole temporal order be formed into an instrument for God's service and praise, he must, then, refuse to be enslaved to it as he finds it in his own flesh.
10. Explain what the author means by the "power of the consecrated virgin to be a parent" as exemplified by Mary and St. Joseph.
St. Joseph, a husband given wholly to his wife in love, remained always a virgin. Without procreation, he nonetheless took the place of human father to our Lord, and was more perfectly

father to Him than any of us will ever be to our children according to the flesh. For Mary, perfect virgin and perfect mother, she shows even more fully all aspects of the symbolism of virginity summed up entirely in one person. As a virgin, she was enclosed, reserved for God alone, having within her no rival love. Because of this, God chose her and came to her to work within her directly the same mystery of creation that He works indirectly in other women. Thus, the virgin is one reserved for God alone, to whom He then comes in order, through the virgin, to give Himself to others.

11. Explain “virginity and fruitfulness” as the basis for Religious life within the Church, and also as something that is meant to be true of all who are celibate.

Vowed religious, and all those who are celibate, are to be fathers and mothers of great numbers of people, not just of one family begotten of their own flesh. Parents of all those whom Christ leads towards holiness through them, they find abundant fulfillment even in this life. Their joy is to nurture the divine life of those entrusted to them and to govern and discipline them for their more abundant growth. The fullness of virginity requires the fruitfulness of a spiritual parenthood that has graver obligations than natural parents have.

Eunuchs for the Kingdom

12. Christ uses the phrase “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven”. Explain.

In using this phrase, Christ is calling those who can receive it, to lives of perfect celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. The symbol Christ invokes for this state of perpetual virginity is the eunuch—a man who has been castrated and who thus has no capacity for sexual intercourse. The meaning would seem to be that virginity and celibacy are always relative goods. They are undertaken only for the sake of something else; they are not complete in themselves. They always represent a true deprivation of some present good for the sake of something which is still to come.

13. What does St. Thomas Aquinas say about the need for virginity if man had not fallen?

St Thomas Aquinas speaks of virginity as something that would have had but trivial place in the Garden of Eden had Adam and Eve not fallen into sin. If man had not sinned, there would be no need of special preparation for marriage. Man would have had the necessary control without effort. There would have been no need for waiting, for this expectation and readying oneself for something still to come—whether union with another human being in marriage or with our Lord in heaven, outside this world and its conditions altogether, which is the hope of consecrated celibates and virgins, those who have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of God.

14. What are those who are unwillingly celibate being invited to do?

A validly married Catholic whose spouse has gone off with another, a man of strongly homosexual orientation, a woman of deep maternal affection whom no one chooses to marry, and many another unwilling celibate are all invited by Christ to accept this “castration” for His sake and for a fulfillment beyond this world. His language shows that He knows the pain of what He is proposing to them; His grace will grant them success if they seek it from Him.

Further Reflections

15. What are the two aspects of virginity or chaste celibacy described by the author?

On the one hand, it is a preparation and a readying of oneself for sharing in God’s creative activity, whether by the generating and raising of children or by making the world a suitable place for the human family or by bringing to the Church those meant to be her spiritual children and

helping them grow in Christ. On the other hand, it is not merely a waiting and a longing but a deprivation and a suffering albeit for the sake of a greater good to come. But in both aspects, its ultimate meaning is perfect love, a consecration of oneself to Christ loved above all else, a love centered on the Lord Himself directly and without intermediary as well as through all those He loves.

16. How are these same two aspects visible even in natural human love?

If a man has fallen deeply in love with a woman, but he must wait for years because he is off to the wars, or because she has not returned his affection, or if a woman does the same for a man she loves, they share in these same two aspects of waiting and longing, in the deprivation and a suffering for the sake of a greater good to come.

17. Explain the statement, "There is no harm in perfect love" as it relates to virginity or chaste celibacy either as a preparation for marriage or as a chosen state of life.

Since virginity has meaning only as a preparation for love, there is no question of harm coming from its existence, whether it be directed toward the perfect love of husband or wife in marriage or toward the perfect love of God which consecrated virgins seek throughout their entire existence here on earth.

18. An unhealthy "chastity" may result for those who refuse or are unable to live at ease and in peace with the sexual body that God has given them. Explain.

Psychological harm does come as the natural result of frustrated stimulation to people whose "chastity" is mere refraining from sexual intercourse without being grounded in charity. Refraining from physical action, they give free rein to their thoughts and desires. Interiorly at least, they are not pure or chaste. Harm can also come to those who fear sex, who see sin in every stirring of desire or passion, who do not learn as adolescents to distinguish between arousal or orgasm that is freely chosen and that which comes unbidden and unwilled. As a result, they refuse or are unable to live at ease and in peace with the sexual body God has given them.