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Very Human, Very Divine (XIII): With Our Whole Heart

The virtue of chastity strengthens our ability to perceive and enjoy what truly fills the human heart; it allows us to discover God in everything.

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- Pdf: Very Human, Very Divine (XIII): With Our Whole Heart

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (*Mt* 5:8). Seeing God:

with no filters, no haste, no limits… Who could dream of achieving this by their own strength? Contemplating at its source the beauty, goodness and greatness that we are constantly seeking everywhere. Contemplating, which doesn't mean observing from the outside, but from within, knowing we are immersed in all that immensity of light, in the "Love that satisfies without quenching" our deepest desires.[1] The deep yearnings that find only a very partial response in this world – although so often creatures can seem to have all the beauty, goodness and grandeur we can imagine.

Of course, when speaking about purity of heart, our Lord is not referring only to chastity. If there were a very chaste person who was also unjust, insincere, disloyal, lazy or selfish, we wouldn't say that that person's heart is clean. When King

David begs, *O God, create in me a clean heart* (*Ps* 51:12), he is asking for a heart that harmoniously unites all the virtues; a heart that beats in harmony with what is truly of value, that is capable of risking one's life for something greater than oneself, that doesn't let itself be dominated by ephemeral and superficial things. As we grow in the various virtues, our sight — our desires, interests, aspirations— becomes ever clearer and we learn to perceive the true value of things. We learn to see truly, to contemplate, to enjoy.

Perplexities

God has created us for this contemplation, which unites all the aspirations in our heart. He wants to give us this grace. But it is a grace we need to fight to obtain. We need to conquer our heart so that it becomes capable of receiving this gift, because we run the risk of leaving it

unopened, forgotten in a corner. As Saint Josemaría said, chastity “is a battle, but not a renunciation. We respond with a joyful affirmation, and give ourselves to God freely and cheerfully. Your conduct should not be limited to simply evading falls and occasions of sin. In no way should you let it come down to a cold and calculating negation. Are you really convinced that chastity is a virtue and that, as such, it ought to grow and be perfected?”[2] Chastity is a joyful affirmation, and can always grow. These two statements may seem familiar to us, but how they are connected is often not well understood, and could even cause some perplexity.

That chastity is a joyful affirmation contrasts with the view of someone who puts excessive emphasis on the “no’s”: on not doing, not thinking, not looking or desiring. In contrast, chastity is a "yes" to love, because it

is love that makes chastity necessary and gives it meaning. Naturally, we need to say “no” to certain acts and attitudes that are contrary to it and that every sensible person realizes are actually denials of love. For married love is always total, exclusive and definitive. But despite requiring some “no’s,” chastity is an eminently positive virtue.

Let us imagine a person with a good knowledge of the faith and Christian life, who is sincerely determined to put their faith into practice; a person who has perhaps even transmitted this positive vision of holy purity to others, because they understand and share the reasons for it. But it could happen that their practical experience of this virtue doesn’t accord with the idea of chastity as something positive and that can always grow. First of all, because they don’t see the need to struggle in purity constantly; other concerns are

usually in the foreground and relegate chastity to fourth or fifth place in their struggle. As a result, chastity can often seem to be neither an affirmation nor a denial. And secondly, because when at times they need to fight more intensely to live it, chastity can seem to be a negation, and not an affirmation.

Added to this is another source of perplexity: since it is a virtue, chastity is called to "grow and be perfected."[3] Again, this good Christian could think: I usually manage to avoid acts, thoughts, looks that are contrary to chastity. Isn't that what it's all about? Can't I say I possess this virtue? What else should I do? In what sense should chastity grow and be perfected in me?

At the origin of these perplexities is the idea, quite widespread but very reductive, that virtue is above all the strength of will that enables us to

respect moral norms, even when they oppose our inclinations. If this view were correct, virtue would consist in the ability to ignore our feelings, to systematically oppose what we feel whenever respect for these norms requires it. Naturally, there is an element of truth here, because the formation of virtue often requires that we act against our feelings and inclinations. However, it is very important not to forget that this is not the goal; it is just a step that, if not followed by others, will only form the ability to repress one's feelings, to say "no." Those who think of the virtues in this way, although they might say that chastity is a joyful affirmation, in reality have not adequately understood this, since they fail to see what it means in practice.

Well-integrated

Virtue, more than the capacity to oppose an inclination, is the formation of the inclination itself. Virtue consists precisely in enjoying, in delighting in the good, because an affective connaturality has grown in us, a “complicity with the good.” It is precisely in this sense that we call temperance the order in the natural tendency to pleasure. If pleasure were bad, ordering it would mean canceling it. But pleasure is good, and our nature tends towards it. But its being good in principle does not mean that it is good in all cases. The object of a tendency may not be good for the person in a particular case. That is why we need to put order in our inclination to pleasure. If we succeed, we will have turned it into one of our best allies to do good; if not, it will be a great enemy that can destroy us. Just as water, which quenches our thirst, hydrates our body and makes plants grow, can

also become a tsunami, a destructive flood that is out of control.

What does ordering this tendency involve? Certainly not in making the attraction of pleasure disappear, which furthermore is impossible. Nor in ignoring it, or in living as if it didn't exist; nor even in repressing it. Ordering the tendency to pleasure means integrating it into the true good of the human person[4]: giving unity to our desires, so that they are progressively in accord with our human nature and reinforce it. An impure heart is a fragmented heart, with no clear aim; a pure heart, in contrast, is a unified heart, with a clear direction in life.

How can this be brought about? Human tendencies are ways of perceiving the good: each of them presents what satisfies it as suitable for us. We say that we have a tendency to pleasure because when

faced with something that can produce it, we experience attraction: the object presents itself to our eyes as suited to our needs. However, what is good for the tendency may not be good for the person. A cake may appeal to me because it would be pleasant to eat, but it may not be good my health (for example, because I'm diabetic), my fitness (I'm trying to lose weight), or my relationship with others (it belongs to someone else). Each tendency has its own point of view; it values reality from its own perspective and cannot do so from another. Reason is the only faculty that can adopt all points of view and integrate them,[5] identifying the good of the person and not just the good of a specific tendency or a particular aspect of life. Reason listens to what each tendency has to say, evaluates all these voices, and judges whether an action is truly good for the person.

Reason is not cold and dispassionate. It is influenced by our emotions, by our tendencies and passions. If one tendency speaks much louder than the others, it can confuse our reason. Hence the importance that our tendencies be well-formed (well-tempered). Thus, instead of an obstacle, they will be a support for the judgments made by our reason. Of course, this integration through the use of our reason requires that the meaning of the tendency be understood and respected, and that this respect imbues and guides our emotions and desires. Gluttony, for example, reveals that the meaning of our need to eat has not been understood – at least not in a practical way, in a way that influences our behavior. That is to say, the way in which the pleasure of eating contributes to the integral good of the person has not yet been thoroughly assimilated. Something

similar can be said of chastity, and of any other virtue.

An inner world

Let us listen to Saint Josemaría's advice in one of the briefest points in *The Way* : "Why do you look around if you carry 'your world' within you?"[6] It's true: if we carry a world within us – a world made up of great goods, both divine and human – any look, action or thought against chastity may have a certain attraction for us, but it will be much easier to fight against it, because it will be perceived as a threat to the harmony of our inner world itself.

We could even say that chastity refers to sexuality only secondarily. Mainly it has to do with the opening of our inner world – of our heart – to great endeavors, with the ability to perceive, aspire to and enjoy what is capable of filling the human heart. Hence, as Saint Josemaría also said:

“I have never liked talking about impurity. I would rather consider the rich rewards that temperance brings … living this way, with a spirit of sacrifice, means freeing oneself from many kinds of slavery and savouring instead, in the depths of one's heart, the fullness of God's love. We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes.”[7]

Those who are chaste are able to appreciate and enjoy everything that is beautiful, noble and genuinely amusing. Their look is not possessive, but grateful. They “let the other be” and don’t allow their relationship with each person to be tarnished and become “depersonalized.” In contrast, those who aren’t chaste look in an unclean way; it is a look that isn’t capable of welcoming others, but only of demanding benefits. In reality, they are unable to

appreciate the little joys in life and in personal relationships, and to simply enjoy spending time with others. Small joys that others appreciate seem insipid to them and lacking in meaning. They need a strong emotional reaction in order to experience something as positive and pleasant.

Thus we can understand why those who experience the virtue of chastity as a joyful affirmation don't usually require an extraordinary effort of will to restrain disordered sexual impulses; their inner world, made up of worthwhile interests and genuine relationships, strongly contrasts with any wayward impulses and rejects them. And as a result, they feel deeply free, because they do what they truly want to do and like. In contrast, those who are lustful, who lack sexual restraint, or even those who are "merely continent," if they manage to achieve control of their

appetites by a stern effort, would feel repressed – as though something were missing in their life.

For Saint Thomas Aquinas, the lustful, the incontinent, the continent and the chaste are four different realities.[8] The chaste person possesses the virtue, while the lustful person has the opposing vice. The incontinent person, while not having firmly established the vice, does not live uprightly. And the continent person, as the term implies, possesses self-restraint. They don't sin against chastity, but neither do they possess the virtue. In the face of temptation, they limit themselves to repressing the impulse, without actually enjoying the good.[9] This is the case, for example, of those who don't want to look at something unchaste, but who would be happy if it were impossible to avoid doing so. They simply sidestep obstacles that they would prefer not to have to

sidestep; and in doing so they fail to form their interior attitude and direct it to the true good of the human person. This situation can be a step forward for someone who comes from farther away. But that person still has a long way to go to form the virtue of chastity. Whoever does not decisively move away from the borderline of what is sinful, even if they manage not to sin, will never go beyond merely being continent. They won't truly enjoy the virtue of chastity and will fail to see it as a joyful affirmation.

They will see God in everything

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (*Mt* 5:8). Perhaps Jesus isn't saying here that those whose heart is impure won't be allowed to see God, but rather that they won't be able to see where the pure in heart will perceive an indescribable beauty, filled with a multitude of

shades and colors, satisfying all the aspirations of the human heart. This is in fact what happens even in this world. The virtuous are able to find God in every person and situation in daily life, while those who are not virtuous fail to sense his presence or find it uncomfortable and unpleasant, as restricting their freedom.

Virtue thus understood, as the creation of a beautiful inner world, of an affective connaturality that enables us to enjoy doing what is good, is a response to the perplexities mentioned above. Indeed, if the effort to form the virtue of holy purity is not aimed simply at fighting against disordered acts, but also and above all at building up an interior world filled with supernatural and human riches, it is easy to understand that this virtue grows and is formed not only when a temptation has to be overcome, but

also when our attention is directed to what is valuable and beautiful in the world, even if in itself it has nothing to do with sexuality. Chastity is not only a virtue for when we have to struggle. It is not only meant for temptations, but also for guiding our "attention," what our heart attends to. And thus we can understand why this inner refinement, this openness to what is truly great, has no limits and can always grow.

A multitude of means

How can we form this rich inner world? Of course, we need to avoid whatever could disturb it, ensuring that our sight and imagination are not dispersed or clouded, restraining our curiosity, and also avoiding idleness, that passive attitude of someone who gives up dominion of their decisions to whatever happens around them. Drifting aimlessly, letting oneself be led by the

prevailing wind, is an easy way to lose one's way and end up in a place where we would have preferred not to go.

It is also important to grow in fortitude, because otherwise it is very difficult to stay on course amid the onslaught of the wind and waves. Small acts of self-denial in our work, in our relationships with others, in our likes and tastes strengthens our heart. And we also need sincerity: having the simplicity to talk about what is going on inside us is a very effective way to "oxygenate" our heart and prevent it from becoming intoxicated with affections that only constrict it.

Also very important are other means that direct the heart's attention towards what is supernaturally and humanly valuable: Eucharistic devotion, love for the Mother of God, prayer and a personal relationship

with our Lord. Friendships and all noble human relationships are also very helpful here. While isolating oneself or closing in on oneself is an easy source of infection, sincere self-giving to others keeps our heart in good health.

In addition, it is very helpful to develop worthwhile cultural interests, especially good literature, good films, music, etc., which strengthen our aesthetic sensitivity and sense of beauty. Those who only enjoy superficial “high-intensity” movies or videos or books, who grow accustomed to living only on “banal” emotions, will need a great effort to control themselves when their emotions enter the sexual realm. And even if they manage to do so they will experience it, at best, as repression, as a denial. It is much more pleasant and effective to create a clean, bright, rich and positive interior atmosphere. Our heart has

not been made for less. We have been created to enjoy God's beauty already in this life, and for all eternity.

[1] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 208.

[2] *Friends of God*, no. 182.

[3] *Ibid*.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2337: "Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman."

[5] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 17, a. 1, ad 2.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 184.

[7] *Friends of God*, no. 84.

[8] Cf. *Summa Theologica*, II-II, qq. 151-156.

[9] In II-II q. 155, Saint Thomas distinguishes what he calls "continence" from the virtue of temperance. Temperance belongs to the person whose appetites are positively ruled by reason, whereas continence is the stern control of appetites that resist the rule of reason.

Julio Diéguez

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