

Topic 32: The Sixth Commandment

Sexuality reaches the deepest core of the human person. True education in chastity is not satisfied with simply informing about the biological aspects, but helps people to reflect on the personal and moral values that come into play in our affective relationships with others. Sins against the sixth commandment are often a substitute for the lack of true love for which the heart yearns.

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God's call to mankind to "increase and multiply" should always be read from the perspective of creation "in the image and likeness" of the Trinity (cf. Gen 1). This means that human generation, within the broader context of sexuality, is not something "simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such" (*Catechism*, 2361). Hence human sexuality is essentially different from animal sexuality.

"God is love" (1 Jn 4:8), and his love is fruitful. He willed that the human creature should share in this fruitfulness, associating the generation of each new person with a specific act of love between a man and a woman.^[1] Thus "sex is not a shameful reality; it is a divine gift, ordained to life, to love, to

fruitfulness.”^[2] Since the human being is an individual composed of body and soul, the generative act of love requires the participation of all the dimensions of the person: the body, the affections, the spirit.^[3]

Original sin broke man’s harmony with himself and with others. This fracture has had a particular impact on human sexuality. On the one hand, by obscuring in the intellect the inseparable link between the affective and generative dimensions of the conjugal union; on the other hand, by making it difficult for the will to exercise dominion over the affective and bodily dynamisms of sexuality. This has led to the obscuring of the noble anthropological meaning of sexuality and its moral value.

In the present context it is important to distinguish legitimate reflection on gender from the “gender ideology”

that Pope Francis condemns. The former attempts to overcome unjust social differences between men and women through a critical reading of an overly “naturalistic” vision of sexual identity that reduces the whole sexual dimension of the person to biological factors. It also advocates overcoming unjust discrimination based on sexual orientation. Gender ideology, in contrast, promotes a vision of the human person and his or her sexuality that is incompatible with Christian revelation. It not only distinguishes, but radically separates biological sex from gender, seeing the latter as a social and cultural construct.^[4]

Human sexuality in its present condition, redeemed by Christ but still on the way to our definitive homeland in heaven, requires an effort to embrace it in a mature way, which entails renunciation and

purification. This in no way implies its rejection, or a negative view of this gift that men and women have received from God. Rather it implies the need to “heal it so that it may attain its true greatness.”^[5] In this effort, the virtue of chastity plays a fundamental role.

The vocation to chastity

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of a “vocation to chastity” because this virtue is a condition and essential part of our vocation to love – the gift of self to which God calls every man and woman. Chastity makes it possible to love in and through our bodies.^[6] In a certain way, it could be said that chastity is the virtue that enables a human person to live well, with benevolence and interior peace in relation to other men and women and to oneself, because human sexuality influences all our capacities from the

most physical and material to the most spiritual, giving a masculine or feminine tint to all our faculties.

Thus the virtue of chastity is not simply a remedy against the disorder sin gives rise to in human sexuality, but a joyful affirmation, since it enables us to love God and, through Him, other men and women, with our whole heart, our whole soul, our whole mind and our whole strength (cf. Mk 12:30).^[7]

“The virtue of chastity comes under the cardinal virtue of temperance” (*Catechism*, 2341) and “means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (*Catechism*, 2337).

When speaking about chastity, especially with young people, it is important to stress the capacity to love that this virtue imparts to

sexuality and procreation. Otherwise, chastity could come to be seen as a negative virtue, since a good part of the struggle to live chastity involves the struggle to control one's passions, which at times can be directed towards a particular good that cannot be rationally ordered to the good of the person as a whole.^[8]

In our present state, we cannot live in accord with the natural moral law, and hence be chaste, without the help of grace. This does not imply the impossibility of acquiring the human virtue that brings a certain control over one's passions, but rather that the wound caused by sin is so deep that only divine help can bring about a perfect reintegration of the human person.^[9]

Educating for chastity

“Charity is the form of all the virtues. Under its influence, chastity appears as a school of the gift of the person. Self-mastery is ordered to the gift of self” (*Catechism*, 2346).

Educating for chastity is much more than what some reductively call “sex education,” usually limited to giving information on the physiological aspects of human reproduction and methods of contraception. A true education in chastity involves much more than the biological aspects. It needs to provide help in reflecting on the personal and moral values involved in our affective relationships with others, and in particular, in the unique relationship that unites husband and wife. Moreover, it needs to foster high ideals of love for God and other men and women, through virtues such as generosity, self-giving, the modesty

that protects intimacy, etc. – virtues that help a person to overcome selfishness and the temptation to become self-centered. Indeed, “our sentimental dimension is a call to love that is manifested in fidelity, in welcoming, and in mercy.”^[10]

In this endeavour, parents have a great responsibility, since they are the first and principal teachers in instilling the virtue of chastity in their children. In many cases, they must work actively, together with other families, to ensure that the sexual and affective education given in educational centres is in keeping with an adequate anthropology, which is capable of overcoming the widespread trivialisation of sexuality.

In the struggle to live this virtue, the following are important means: prayer: asking God for the virtue of holy purity;^[11] frequenting the

sacraments; having a balanced lifestyle in which the different dimensions (work, rest, relationships) are lived in harmony; thinking of others; devotion to Mary Most Holy, *Mater pulchrae dilectionis, Mother of Fairest Love*. In addition, the following are also very helpful: moderation in eating and drinking; care for details of decency and modesty in dress, etc.; avoiding readings, images and videos that may foreseeably have inappropriate content; having the help of spiritual direction.

Chastity is an eminently personal virtue. At the same time, it “implies a cultural effort” (*Catechism*, 2344), since there is “an interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society.”^[12] Respect for the rights of the person requires respect for chastity; in particular, the right “to receive information and an education that

respect the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life.” (*Catechism*, 2344). The family faces many challenges today, and it is important to reflect carefully on them in order to be able to offer solutions that will help individuals and society as a whole.^[13]

The specific manifestations of this virtue will differ depending on one’s vocation. “Married people are called to live conjugal chastity; others practice chastity in continence” (*Catechism*, 2349).

Chastity in marriage

Sexual union “is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman” (*Catechism*, 2360): that is to say, “it is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death.”^[14]

The grandeur of the act whereby man and woman cooperate freely with God's creative action requires certain strict moral conditions because of the capacity to engender a new human life. This is why one should never voluntarily separate the unitive and procreative dimensions of this act, as happens with contraception.^[15] Chaste couples will find the most adequate moments to live this bodily union so that in each act it always reflects the gift of self it signifies.^[16]

Unlike the procreative dimension, which can be realized in a truly human way only through the conjugal act, the unitive and affective dimension proper to this act can and should be manifested in many other ways. Hence, if for reasons of health or other reasons, the spouses cannot carry out the conjugal union, or if they decide that it is preferable to abstain temporarily (or permanently

in particularly serious situations) from the conjugal act, they can and should continue making this gift of self a reality, which fosters the growth of a truly personal love, of which the union of bodies is a sign.^[17]

Chastity in celibacy

The Son of God in coming into this world chose for Himself a life of celibacy, and in his preaching He offered various indications which, while helping us to discover the beauty of marriage, also help us not to lose sight of its provisional, and therefore relative, character: *For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven* (Mt 22:30).

God calls the majority of people to find holiness in marriage, but He wants to choose some to live their vocation to love in a special way, in apostolic celibacy.^[18] Living the

Christian vocation in apostolic celibacy requires continence. Excluding the use of one's reproductive capacity in no way entails excluding love or affection. On the contrary, freely giving to God the possibility of a married life enables one to love and to give oneself to many other men and women, helping them in turn to find God, which is the reason for their celibacy.^[19] This way of life must always be viewed and lived as a gift.

There are different charismatic ways of living celibacy as a call. Some receive this vocation in the priesthood or in religious life; many others receive it in the midst of the world without a particular consecration, but with the clear awareness of being instruments of God's love to go into the whole world and preach the Gospel.

Sins against chastity

Sins against the sixth commandment are often a substitute that tries to replace the lack of true love for which the heart yearns.^[20] Opposed to chastity is lust, which is a “disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes” (*Catechism* 2351).

Since sexuality is a central dimension in human life, sins against chastity are always grave in their matter when venereal pleasure, which is proper to the sexual act, is directly sought. They may be minor, however, when such pleasure is not directly sought, or when full or perfect consent is lacking.

The vice of lust has many serious consequences: blindness of the mind,

by which our final end and true good are obscured; weakening of the will; attachment to earthly goods and forgetting the eternal ones; and finally it can even lead to hatred for God, who is seen by the lustful person as the greatest obstacle to the satisfaction of one's sensuality.

Among the sins against chastity, adultery holds first place. It involves marital infidelity. “When two partners, of whom at least one is married to another party, have sexual relations – even transient ones – they commit adultery” (*Catechism* 2380).^[21] “You shall not commit adultery,’ despite its negative form, directs us to our original call, that is, to the full and faithful spousal love which Christ revealed and gave to us” (cf. Rom 12:1).^[22]

Masturbation is the “the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in

order to derive sexual pleasure. ‘Both the Magisterium of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.’” (*Catechism*, 2352). By its very nature, masturbation contradicts the Christian sense of sexuality being at the service of love. As a solitary and selfish exercise of sexuality, deprived of the truth of love, it leaves a person unsatisfied and leads to emptiness and disgust.

“Fornication is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children” (*Catechism*, 2353). Both free unions or cohabitation without the intention of

marriage and premarital relations offend to varying degrees against the dignity of human sexuality and marriage. “They are contrary to the moral law. The sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion” (*Catechism*, 2390). Those who are engaged are called to live a special chastity.^[23]

“Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered,” as the Tradition of the Church has always declared.^[24] This clear moral evaluation of actions should not in the least prejudge persons with homosexual tendencies,^[25] since their origin is not voluntary and their condition is not infrequently a difficult test.^[26] They too “are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship,

by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection” (*Catechism*, 2359). The apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitiae* stresses: “In discussing the dignity and mission of the family, the Synod Fathers observed that, ‘as for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.’”^[27] —

Also opposed to chastity are conversations, looks, manifestations of affection for another person, including one’s fiancé, that involve a lustful desire or are a near occasion of sin which is sought or not rejected.

Pornography (displaying the human body as a mere object of

concupiscence) and *prostitution* (making one's own body an object for financial gain and for carnal pleasure) are grave faults of sexual disorder which, besides offending the dignity of any person involved, are a true social scourge (cf. *Catechism*, 2355). Unfortunately, the consumption of pornography is widespread in our world, greatly facilitated by the internet. What may begin as a certain curiosity, especially in young people, not infrequently becomes a habit that greatly hinders a person's ability to love "with all one's heart." leading one along paths that encourage the easy satisfaction of bodily pleasures and, ultimately, selfishness. In some cases it can lead to a true addiction to pornography, which often requires appropriate psychological help to overcome. In any case, it is an important problem for the spiritual life, because lust dulls the heart and hinders a serene prayer life, as well

as the joy needed for effective apostolic work. It is therefore important to know how to seek help in spiritual direction that will open up high ideals to which it is worthwhile dedicating one's life.

God is Love. He created us out of love and to love. To love also with our body. This must always be the starting point when dealing with sexuality in the context of Christian anthropology. At the same time we need to realize that, after original sin, the proper use of this faculty has been weakened. This is why the help of grace and the cultivation of the virtue of chastity is so necessary in order to be able to truly love "with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk 12:30).

Basic Bibliography

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2331-2400.

Saint Josemaría, Homily "For they shall see God" in *Friends of God*, 175-189; "Marriage: a Christian Vocation" in *Christ is Passing By*, 22-30.

^[1] "Each of the two sexes is, with equal dignity, though in different ways, an image of the power and tenderness of God. The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the generosity and fruitfulness of the Creator: 'A man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh' (Gen 2:24). From this union proceed all human

generations (cf. Gen 4:1-2,25-26; 5:1)" (*Catechism*, 2335).

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, 24.

^[3] "Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness" (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 5).

^[4] Cf. Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 19 March 2016, 56. On this topic, see the document from the Congregation for Catholic Education: "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education" (2019).

^[5] "True, eros tends to rise 'in ecstasy' towards the Divine, to lead us

beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 5).

^[6] “*God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion*” (Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, 11).

^[7] “*Chastity is the joyous affirmation of someone who knows how to live self-giving, free from any form of self-centred slavery*” (Pontifical Council for the Family, *Human Sexuality: Truth and Meaning*, 8 December 1995, 17). “*Purity is a consequence of the love that prompts us to commit to Christ our soul and*

body, our faculties and senses. It is not something negative; it is a joyful affirmation” (Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, 5).

^[8] *“Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy (cf. Sir 1:22). ‘Man’s dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint. Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions, he presses forward to his goal by freely choosing what is good and, by his diligence and skill, effectively secures for himself the means suited to this end’ (Gaudium et Spes, 17)” (Catechism, 2339).*

^[9] ”Chastity is a moral virtue. It is also a gift from God, a grace, a fruit of spiritual effort (cf. Gal 5:22). The Holy Spirit enables one whom the water of Baptism has regenerated to imitate the purity of Christ (cf. 1 Jn 3:3)” (*Catechism*, 2345).

^[10] Pope Francis, General Audience, 31 October 2018.

^[11] ”God gives holy purity when it is asked for with humility” (Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 118).

^[12] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 25.

^[13] Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, ch. 2 (The Reality and Challenges of Families).

^[14] Saint John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 11.

^[15] Artificial fertilisation also entails a rupture between these dimensions

proper to human sexuality, as the Instruction *Donum vitae* (1987) clearly teaches.

^[16] As the *Catechism* teaches, the pleasure derived from conjugal union is something good and willed by God (cf. *Catechism*, 2362).

^[17] Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, ch. 4 (*Love in Marriage*).

^[18] Although holiness is measured by love for God and not by one's state of life (celibate or married), the Church teaches that celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven is a superior gift to marriage (cf. Council of Trent: DZ 1810; 1 Cor 7:38).

^[19] When speaking of priestly celibacy (but his remarks can be applied to all celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven), Benedict XVI said that it cannot be understood in merely functional terms, for in reality it “represents a special

configuration to *the way of life* of Christ himself" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, 24).

^[20] Pope Francis, General Audience, 24 October 2018.

^[21] Christ even condemns the desire for adultery (cf. Mt 5:27-28). In the New Testament, adultery is absolutely forbidden (cf. Mt 5:32; 19:6; Mk 10:11; 1 Cor 6:9-10). The *Catechism*, when speaking of offences against marriage, also lists divorce, polygamy and contraception.

^[22] Pope Francis, General Audience, 31 October 2018.

^[23] "Those who are engaged to marry are called to live chastity in continence. They should see in this time of testing a discovery of mutual respect, an apprenticeship in fidelity, and the hope of receiving one another from God. They should

reserve for marriage the expressions of affection that belong to married love. They will help each other grow in chastity" (*Catechism*, 2350).

[²⁴] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Human Person*, 8. "They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a true affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved" (*Catechism*, 2357).

[²⁵] Homosexuality refers to the condition of men and women who feel an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction to persons of the same sex. The possible situations that can arise are very different, and therefore great prudence is needed when dealing with these cases.

[²⁶] "The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This

inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition" (*Catechism* 2358).

^[27] Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 251.

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