

FROM THE GENERAL CURIA

Meditation Moment: The Vow of Chastity

“Oh, Gentlemen, let us ask God unceasingly for this virtue of purity. If we possess it, we shall draw down on ourselves many others, but if we do not possess it we are lost, the Mission is lost.”

St. Vincent de Paul

When speaking about the vow of chastity in his conferences, Saint Vincent seemed to prefer the term “purity.” Distilled in the quotation of Saint Vincent above is the heart of his teaching on the topic. The saint refers to purity as a virtue so basic and important that if attained, by God’s grace, it will bring other virtues to us as well.

Thomas Aquinas wrote that to love is “to will the good of the other.” To make this choice requires us to deny ourselves. This choice is at the heart of a chaste relationship. There is no room for the ego. When we habitually make that choice “to will the good of the other,” we learn to love after the manner that Jesus taught. However, the moment that the other becomes a potential means for our own gratification, corruption enters the equation.

Jesus taught his disciples to choose the lowest place. This is not an easy choice in a “me first” world. But when the choice becomes habitual, the virtue grows within us almost without notice, but certainly by God’s grace. The choice becomes part of the fabric of one’s life. Eventually, to choose otherwise becomes an alien and unacceptable option.

This is the kind of choosing that St. Vincent saw as necessary for his confreres and for their mission. If his followers were to grow in this virtue of purity, they must learn to make the choice to live a chaste life in their relationships by practice and repetition. At its heart, it is the choice to love. Our Constitutions frame the vow of chastity in the context of a committed prayer life (both personal and communal), an engaged apostolate and local community, and the willingness to grow in self-discipline and integrity:

“Intimate union with Christ, true fraternal communion, zeal in the apostolate, and asceticism supported by the experience of the Church will enable our chastity to grow strong. Through a continual and mature response to the Lord’s call, it is a living source of spiritual fecundity in the world, and contributes greatly to the attainment of human maturity” (*Constitutions*, # 30).

Many might define chastity for a vowed celibate simply as sexual abstinence. However, this definition both fails to capture the virtue Saint Vincent recommends, or the love as Saint Thomas defines. Our relationships cease to be chaste the moment the other becomes an object and means for our ends. It is perhaps more obvious that seeing the other as a potential means of our sexual gratification violates chastity. However, so does seeing the other as a potential means to achieving position or power. How easy it is to befriend the wealthy when there is the possibility of enjoying the goods of this world through them. How easy also to stand near powerful people that we might be seen as powerful ourselves.

Shortly after my arrival as pastor at Our Lady of the Mountains, I undertook the task of creating more office space for the pastoral staff. One of the first orders of business was to make sure each of the offices had a clear window in the door. This ensured that while conversations within would be private, they would also be visible to others from the hallway.

The installation of the glass in office doors was one of many changes made in the wake of the scandals resulting from clergy misconduct in the United States. In fact, nearly every place that a priest might meet privately saw some redesign, including many confessionals. These changes stirred the memory of an old Vincentian admonition that, when a confrere meets with a woman, the door should always remain open. For a time, many viewed this admonition as old-fashioned or outdated. However, recent clergy scandals help us to see the wisdom behind this precaution.

The purpose of these simple practices in themselves will not necessarily deter misconduct or promote chaste living. Rather, they help to defend us as ministers from potential false accusation. Moreover, they are a not-so-subtle reminder that others can see our actions as ministers. For the sake of the mission, our relationships with others need to be pure and transparent in the eyes of others as they are to eyes of our Savior.

Transparency is also key value in financial administration. The business practice of having our financial accounting and records audited by an accredited company serves the same function as the clear glass in the door to pastoral offices. An audit serves to call those responsible to good financial practice and reassures others that the figures on the page and those who prepared them are reliable. In a similar way, transparency in our relationships provides similar assurances.

The transparency of our relationships is basic in the practice of this virtue of purity. One attains the virtue of purity, like any virtue, only by the intentional choosing a particular behavior until it becomes so habitual that it is ingrained in our very being. The glass in the door,

in itself, does not ensure us of attaining the virtue; it is only a helpful reminder of the choices we make regarding relationships.

By way of example, Pope Francis made several memorable choices after his election. He chose to take the bus back to the Casa Santa Marta rather than the papal limousine. He chose to live in a simple two-room apartment rather than in the papal palazzo. Some might see this as a calculated choice for the sake of public opinion. However, those who knew Jorge Bergoglio also knew just how consistent this choice was with the many choices he had made during his life prior to his election. For him it was the natural choice.

One could see this pattern of choosing clearly when John Paul II named Bergoglio a Cardinal. He came to Rome alone, received the red hat without fanfare, an entourage or celebration, but almost in a penitential manner. Even his red robes were hand-me-downs from his predecessor. Thus choosing to take the bus required no deliberation. The choice was natural to him. He had made it habitual. In a similar way, our habitual choice should be transparency in relationships so as not to arouse suspicion in others and remain above reproach.

If the practice of being transparent in our relationships makes one's life visible to others, then the practice of mortification puts boundaries upon the senses. Both of these practices help one to achieve virtue in our practice of chastity. Mortification was one of the virtues that Saint Vincent hoped would be present in the congregations he founded. He said that, "*Mortification of the appetite is the A, B, C of spiritual life. Whoever cannot control himself in this, will hardly be able to conquer temptations more difficult to subdue.*" This disciplining of our choices regarding chastity will necessarily begin with our eyes.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori wrote, "*The devil first tempts us to look, then to desire, and afterwards to consent.*" In this age of the internet, pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry. Today one can access pornographic images by a simple click on an electronic device. Countless people have become addicted to these materials. Most confessors know the damage this has caused to the relationships of those ensnared in this way. Therefore, the first sense one needs to discipline is sight. What we choose to gaze upon must assist us to attain the virtue of purity. This is the age-old practice which spiritual writers once called modesty or "custody of the eyes."

Therefore, let us put the vow of chastity in practice in such a fashion that the virtue of purity to which Saint Vincent exhorts us grows within us. May our love for the other may be without the blemish of self-interest. By loving the other in this virtuous manner, with God's Grace, other virtues will certainly follow as St. Vincent indicated. Most importantly, the work of our mission of evangelization will more effective.