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The Excellence of Chastity and Its Importance for NFP

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This paper deals with the excellence of self-possession or chastity, of the freedom and strength it brings to life, and of the importance of teaching chastity when we teach natural family planning.

On the one hand, as Pope John Paul II points out, it is unrealistic in the world today to present the Church's splendid teachings on chaste self-possession if we do not also teach NFP. On the other hand, it is useless to teach NFP if it is only a technique we are teaching. We teach NFP to set people free; to give them a better human life; to enable them to experience the excellence of handling important things like sex with intelligent love.

First of all, we shall deal with the necessity and the realism of teaching chastity while we teach NFP. Then we shall focus on the easier point: why it is unrealistic to teach chastity, if we do not also teach NFP.

We live in a world in which there is much sex education, but little education in chastity. We live in a world in which there are no longer many truly Catholic homes — homes in which all the persons who are formative influences on a young child are people sharing a Catholic and humane view of life. In almost every home the most eloquent teacher is the TV set. And it tends to educate not in the freedom of self-possession, but in hedonism; in the view that *the* great good is pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, and that people *are* dominated by their inner needs to have intense pleasure, rather than by intelligent desires to have what is truly good.

When I study the tools of religious education in our day, I am always surprised anew at how unrealistic the treatments of sexuality and of chaste love are in our education. All the strong, liberating, humane factors of our tradition seem to be missing. I have asked people all over this country and in many others, in lectures on related subjects, when they last heard a good sermon defending the Church's position on any area touching sexuality. The answer has usually been never — or practically never. I spoke to the priests in a large city deanery recently and the bishop and priests present

agreed that they do not talk about those subjects any more, though they agreed that they should.

Nonetheless, many people are educating our young people in sexual ethics. Television is; movies are; popular music is; peer pressure is; fashion makers are. Beautiful people in the mass media are frequently seen portraying or defending attitudes and acts that Christian faith counts as lustful, as destructive of human happiness, as undermining goods all people need and want. But at the very time when it is most important to proclaim the Gospel teaching on sexuality, the good news it proclaims about how men and women are to find self-possession and really excellent lives, our teaching has become weaker than ever. Parents, teachers, pastors, bishops — even those who firmly believe Catholic teaching and really want their young people to taste the goodness and liberating power of chaste self-possession (which has nothing to do with not enjoying sex, but with enjoying it wisely and rightly) — everywhere seem to have run into a strange failure to teach the only vision of sexuality that has really worked, and made human life happy.

A very recent Gallup poll release, for example, shows that only 33% of adult American Catholics think that fornication is immoral. In 1969, 72% of adult American Catholics acknowledged it was wrong. We are doing far worse than the Protestants are: 46% of them acknowledge that fornication is wrong. Few parents want their children to buy this idea, but they are, because no one is giving young people intelligent reasons to think otherwise. If they read more comprehensive statistics, such as those recently published by the Princeton Religious Research Center, they would see (in the midst of many sad statistics) one forceful counterstatistic. Teens think divorce is terrible. Overwhelmingly they think that divorce is much too easy to get in this country; and overwhelmingly they think that most people who get divorced have not tried hard enough to save marriages. They taste sharply the pain of divorce, in their own families or those of close friends, and they are angry about it. But they seem to think that people can be very casual about sex through teen years, through college, and later; and that when they get married they can suddenly become mature, self-possessed, ruled by intelligent love rather than by pleasure.

To live among young people and talk to them is to see how much pain all the current ignorance of the excellence of self-possession (or chaste love) brings. A young man in our parish recently told an assistant priest in the parish about how strange the Seventh Day Adventists are: the young Adventist girl he was dating told him they don't believe in sex before marriage at all!

Catholic sexual ethics is not a tribal code, a set of rules that we insist upon because we always had these rules, and, whether times change or not, we are going to tell people to follow our rules. The teachings of the Church about sex are part of the good news of the Gospel; they are guides to living in ways that work, in a world in which Murphy's law (if something can go

wrong, it will) seems to apply to the sexual lives of people as well as anywhere else. With some friends of mine I have just written a book on sexual ethics, and in researching and working on it, I became more convinced than ever that if we want to have compassion in people today, we must teach them to handle sex intelligently. We must not let the hope of immediate gratification lead us to conduct that we really know is foolish or we will hurt ourselves and others deeply.

Faith teaches, intelligently, that sex is not something trivial. A fellow may take a girl to dinner, and to the movies, just for fun; and play is a great good in life. But when he takes her to bed, too (without being committed to her with the kind of love spouses should have) he is doing something different. Movies and peculiar pleasures of eating out were made to delight us, but sex was made for that and something much more. It was made to lead to the fulfillment of people; it was made to serve elemental, basic needs of the human spirit. Sex was made for the unitive good: to bind together, in a world so shattered and full of loneliness, two people in a union that lasts a lifetime. And when people handle sex casually, they lose the hope of, and often the power of, anything like the ability to give themselves permanently and deeply to another. And they become the kind of people who go through the agony that movies like *Kramer vs. Kramer* showed us. Sex was made for the great good of having children; to see our love for a person more precious than all the world to us become divine in its power, and bring into being a magical new person: a child who is oneself and one's loved one in a single person — a person infinitely precious, and in need of the kind of sensitive, lasting love that a wise use of sex makes possible if that child is to grow into what every parent wants its child to be.

When St. Thomas began his tract on chastity in the *Summa Theologiae*, he wrote: "The more important anything is, the more important it is that the order of intelligence be guarded in using it." That is one part of what chastity is: intelligence in using sex, using it in ways that make it fulfill the hopes it was made to fill to keep it from bringing the terrible wounds it brings, when it is badly used. How often we see young people, driven to become sexually active, because "everyone is", and finding that, when intimacies never planned to last break up, they hurt badly. Walter Lippman once surveyed the fruits of the sexual revolution of his time and he found it did not bring joy and liberty of spirit; it brought the wastelands of the spirit.

Even the most corrupt pagan societies have known that sex is not something trivial — that it ought to be used to guard enduring love and new life, and the elemental goods of reality. Some time ago the TV series *I Claudius* portrayed the agony of thoughtful people of decadent Rome. They knew they would live chastely if they had any sense or any hope of a world that did not sear with pain, but they did not have the power to do it. The good news of the Gospel was not that it taught very good ways to live, but that it promised the power to live that way. And Catholic faith still does

that, when it is intelligently taught.

Moral education is basically education in virtue, and to learn virtue is to acquire freedom and intelligence and joy in living. It is to cease having one's life controlled despotically by a helpless need to give in when great pleasure calls, even if one knows that it would be stupid to seek this pleasure now. Many people see this on the most basic levels, and need to see how thoroughly true it is. Many a spouse, many a young lover, has been untrue to one truly loved because the loved one was not present, and passion and opportunity drove them. The person who is not chaste has not the power to do the good he or she wishes; instead the unchaste do the evil they hate — something alien to what is deepest in them is driving them madly. They know that doing this unfaithful and unchaste act may destroy what they most love. They have reason to hate doing such a thing. And they do it.

Many people think it is pointless to teach chastity today. People are too pressured by the erotic tone of our age. Youngsters will masturbate; teenagers will fornicate; married people will commit adultery and contracept. The compassionate thing to do (even theologians hostile to received Catholic teaching say this) is accept people for what they are, and give up the unreasonable, difficult demands of standard Catholic teaching. Kindness means not demanding too much of people; good sense means not holding up impossible ideals.

The Gospels portray Christ as a very different kind of moral teacher. He was certainly kind, and forgiving. When He found a sinner, it was not the past He worried about; no one was more prone to forgive. But for the future He was bracingly severe: sin no more! Not only that, but His reverence for the human person made Him give moral teachings more excellent and demanding than anyone ever heard before. He would tell the people: "You have heard it said . . ." and then repeat the stern precepts of the Old Law. He would add: "but I say to you . . ." — then He would say something much tougher, or at least, much more excellent. "You have heard it said: don't commit adultery. I say . . . one who looks with lust upon a woman has already committed adultery in his heart." When they asked Him: "May a man divorce his wife for any reason?" the apostles expected a moderate answer: "Not *any* reason; only for very good reasons." But He said: "There is to be no divorce at all." The apostles were astonished: Good grief — if that were so, no one would get married at all. They felt what He said was impossible and the Lord conceded that it looked impossible. But He suggested also, as the teenagers in today's polls do, that life with divorce is even more unbearable.

Christ had the audacity to add, after giving a series of moral demands so excellent and so difficult that they were breath-taking: "Come to Me all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest My yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

St. Thomas Aquinas asks: "Is the new law of Christ more difficult, or is it easier than the old law?" And his answer is an interesting one. Clearly, he

notes, the law of Christ demands more excellent things. But really it is easier as Christ said it was. For one thing, Christ taught the right way to live, and when one is living rightly, it feels good; it tastes good. Some things are only difficult in their acquisition, not in their exercise and this is true of virtue, and in a special way, of chastity. Before one has learned to play the piano, it is very difficult to do so. When one has learned, it is sweet and easy and wonderful. Before one learns to live chastely, self-possession seems too hard to endure. It is just like one who overeats and does not exercise enough. To that person, a disciplined life appears too bitter. But when one has tried it for a while, one finds, "This is good! Why did I ever let myself live so madly?" Of self-possession in chastity this is even more true. The chaste person finds life easier than the unchaste person. One who has acquired chastity rejoices in the goods that sex was meant to serve. The chaste married person has far more joy in sexual intercourse than the unchaste person has. His or her acts of love mean immensely more to him and to the loved one. They are not acts one is driven to by uncontrollable desires for pleasure for oneself, but by shared love of really great goods that add many kinds of pleasure to the sensible pleasures of sex. The chaste person does not secretly want to enjoy orgies or wallow in the basically cruel fantasies of pornography. Anyone who thinks a chaste person must struggle with great pain to abstain from entering an adult book store has to be of limited vision. The chaste person enjoys living in self-possession as the just person enjoys justice, and the brave person gladly does hard things when love requires them.

But it may seem too hard to acquire virtue. There is a small point there and that is the reason John Paul II is always telling us that we must teach children and others virtue gradually. We must teach chastity from the time people are very young. We must help them taste the joys of the small triumphs of self-possession; we must help them feel the goodness of the things that sex is meant to serve. Even the acquisition of chastity can become easy. Quoting Augustine, Thomas Aquinas notes: "The New Law is not rules, but the grace of the Holy Spirit and for those motivated to love the Lord, that can make things that would otherwise be difficult become most sweet and easy. One never finds a lustful person who is deeply happy; one never finds a self-possessed person who is not also rich in freedom and peace."

Teaching chastity works. Like every worthwhile thing. Like learning to play the violin, or learning to care about justice, it may take time to acquire a virtue. But this age is not a uniquely difficult one for acquiring chastity. When the Gospel was first preached it was brought to a pagan world far more corrupt than even ours is. Corinth was a port city notable for its base morals: the phrase "a Corinthian girl" meant a prostitute. In that city and in those times St. Paul spoke the most sublime messages of chaste love and even of virginity for Christ, and the community of faith found that what He taught was right, and livable; and that life was barely human unless one possessed oneself in freedom as the Gospel required. But many things are

required to teach chaste love effectively — things that are possible, however. The one who teaches must be chaste, and have experienced the goodness and freedom of intelligent and upright love. (That is one reason why parents who practice contraception have so little success in teaching their children not to fornicate; if they abuse sex in one way, if they put convenience or pleasure ahead of following the intelligent guidelines of Catholic faith, their children will not be persuaded to do otherwise.) Moreover, we must build community to create an atmosphere favoring chastity. We cannot speak of the great goodness of self-possession in corners, while the mass media are trumpeting the ultimately heart-breaking pleasures of lust with effective rhetoric. We must have courage to speak plainly and wisely, to speak beautifully the truth that does not disappoint. I do not speak here of the solid reasons, rooted in the Gospel, in the profound needs of the human person, in the requirements for a happy life, that justify the teachings of faith on matters that chastity touches. I presume you know these ethical considerations well. But if you don't I recommend the book referred to above.

The Church's great interest in promoting NFP today lies in her love of freedom, self-possession, chastity, and the far greater virtues that these make possible. If NFP were only a better technique for controlling the size of families, it would not be of such profound concern to the Church.

It is hard to exaggerate the harms that lust has done to the faithful in an age when false prophets are eloquent, and those who love the Gospel are too timid to teach in the face of opposition to the demanding but good news of Gospel morality. To say that masturbation and fornication and adultery and contraception are sins is not to say that they put spots on one's soul, or that they break the rules of our ancestors. It is to say that they bruise human persons and corrupt human society and we know that is true.

It is distressing to many good people to see how few there are who wish to learn NFP. Many of the educated guesses I have heard suggest that no more than 5% of Catholics entering marriage practice NFP. The great majority have recourse to contraception or to sterilization, to forms of family planning that require no self-possession and give no freedom or dignity. This decision does great harm to the faith of people for the Church has always taught that such acts are gravely sinful, that they separate one from the love of Christ, just as they alienate one from the great human goods that sexuality was meant to serve. But our failure to teach chastity to people from the time they are young makes rejection of NFP almost inevitable. Those who have been fornicating for many years before coming to marriage, and who have regularly used contraceptives to avoid having children, are not likely to take seriously a suggestion that they go from technology to self-possession to regulate birth. While the way of NFP is more human, and has many psychological, personal, and even medical advantages, those who have not learned temperance are no more likely to act on that abstract knowledge than the person intemperate in the use of

drink, drugs, or food is likely to be moved by abstract information. We must as a community of faith teach heartily the message of chaste self-possession. We must help our communities educate children in temperance and other virtues from the time they are young. When they are led to taste the goodness of the better way, they will acquire also the will and the power to follow it. Before that, not much will move them. St. Thomas, following a long patristic tradition, spoke of what he called the offspring of lust. They included: "blindness of mind, lack of balanced consideration, inconstancy, precipitation, excessive clinging to pleasurable things, despair" of doing what is good. The lustful person finds it hard to take faith seriously. But the person gently educated in virtue is set free. Such a one knows well the attractiveness of pleasure, but knows that pleasure is far from the only good, and that it disappoints the heart if it is disassociated with faithful pursuit of real good. Education in chastity is education in the truth of things, in realism about humanity. It is worth our care to understand it as well as we can when we teach NFP, and to share the light we receive with all whom we teach.

But we must add also: we cannot teach chastity effectively in this world if we do not also teach NFP. This is part of a more general pastoral principle well known to Christianity, and stressed by our present pope. He writes:

Authentic ecclesial pedagogy displays its realism and wisdom only by making a tenacious and courageous effort to create and uphold all the conditions — psychological, moral, and spiritual — indispensable for understanding and living the moral value and norm The necessary conditions include knowledge of the bodily aspect and the body's rhythms of fertility. Accordingly, every effort must be made to render such knowledge accessible to *all* married people and also to young adults before marriage, through clear, timely, and serious instruction and education given by married couples, doctors, and experts. Knowledge must then lead to education in self control.

(F.C. 33)

The point of his thought is this. In fact, for most people today, because of economic and other considerations, it is necessary to have effective family planning of some kind. But if the only kind really accessible to people is one which involves acting directly against the procreative good, as contraception does, and hence which is gravely immoral, people will be intensely inclined to accept it, whatever its morality. It may prove to lead to a contraceptive mentality; it may do psychological harm; it may alienate them from faith and from Christ. But if they think this is the only effective way to do something they feel necessary, even though they should not do so, they are most likely to do it.

The Catholic teacher of NFP, then, is more than a skilled technician. His or her motivation is more than a concern to teach good techniques. One teaches out of a love of persons, and out of a love of God. Whether or not Catholic faith will survive with strength in our country at this time depends

largely on whether we begin to teach self-possession more effectively. For, as Aquinas notes, many virtues (like faith, hope, love, justice) are far more excellent and important than chastity. But there is a little problem. We cannot have the greater virtues if we do not also have chastity.

In the light of this, let us recall the stirring words of Pope John Paul II. "The difference . . . between contraception and NFP . . . is wider and deeper than is usually thought. The difference involves, in the final analysis, two irreconcilable concepts of the human person and of human sexuality." (loc. cit.) That is to say, the person who really understands NFP will have a different idea of what it is to be a person, of who one is and what one exists for, than the one who practices contraception will. One's ideas of sexuality and of love will be radically different, if one has learned what NFP means.

What faith teaches always seems strange to those who have not tried to live it consistently. It is a way of life and the right way of life. We need clarity of thought to serve people of today well. We need also the experience of goodness. That is why both Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II felt the importance to the family of the faith of those people who have learned NFP in order to live chastely, and have experienced for themselves that the ways of the Lord work, and are very good indeed. To these people, who have experienced for themselves the soundness of what faith has ever taught, said Paul VI, "To them the Lord entrusts the task of making visible to people the holiness and sweetness" of the Catholic vision of love and sexuality.
