THEME 3 APPENDIX 9

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**Chastity as purity of heart and intention**

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To live a chaste life is not easy, not just for celibates, but for everyone. Even when our actions are all in line, it is still hard to live with a chaste heart, a chaste attitude and chaste fantasies. Purity of heart and intention is very difficult.

Why? Chastity is difficult because we are so incurably sexual in every pore of our being. And that is not a bad thing. It’s God’s gift. Far from being something dirty and antithetical to our spiritual lives, sexuality is God’s great gift, God’s holy fire, inside us. And so the longing for consummation is a conscious or inchoate colouring underlying most every action in our lives.

And so it is hard to pray for chastity because to pray for it, seemingly, is to pray that sexual yearning and sexual energy should lessen within us or disappear altogether. And who wants to live an asexual and neutered life? No healthy person wants this. Thus, if you are healthy, it is hard to put your heart into praying for chastity because, deep down, nobody wants to be asexual.

But the problem is not with chastity but with our understanding of it. To be chaste does not mean that we become asexual (though spirituality has forever struggled to not make that equation). Chastity is not about denying our sexuality but about properly channelling it. To be chaste is to be pure of heart. That’s the biblical notion of chastity. Jesus does not ask us to pray for chastity, He asks us to pray for “purity of heart”: Blessed are the pure of heart, they shall see God. They also channel their sexuality properly.

What is purity of heart? To be pure of heart is to relate to others and the world in a way that respects and honours the full dignity, value and destiny of every person and everything. To be pure of heart is to see others as God sees them. Purity of heart would have us loving others with their good (and not our own) in mind. Karl Rahner suggests that we are pure of heart when we see others against an infinite horizon, namely, inside of a vision that sees the other’s dignity, individuality, life, dreams and sexuality within the biggest ambiance of all, God’s eternal plan. Purity of heart is purity of intention and full respect in love.

When we understand chastity in this way we can more easily pray for it. In this understanding we are not praying to have our sexual energies deadened, we are praying instead to remain fully red-blooded but with our sexual energies, intentions and daydreams properly channelled. We are praying too for the kind of maturity, human and sexual, that fully respects others. In essence, we are praying for a deeper respect, a deeper maturity and a more life-giving love.

And this is a much needed prayer in our lives because sexuality is so powerful that even inside of a marriage relationship sexuality can still have an intentionality that is not wide enough. Charles Taylor, in his book A Secular Age, argues the point that sex too easily loses the big picture and becomes narrow in its focus, a point that is often missed in our understanding of it: “I am not trying to be condescending about our ancestors, because I think that there is a real tension involved in trying to combine in one life sexual fulfilment and piety. This is only one of the points at which a more general tension, between human flourishing in general and dedication to God, makes itself felt. That this tension should be particularly evident in the sexual domain is readily understandable. Intense and profound sexual fulfilment focuses us powerfully on the exchange within the couple; it strongly attaches us possessively to what is privately shared... It is not for nothing that the early monks and hermits saw sexual renunciation as opening the way to the wider love of God ... (And) that there is a tension between fulfilment and piety should not surprise us in a world distorted by sin, that is separated from God. But we have to avoid turning this into a constitutive incompatibility.”

Unfortunately that is forever what both the secular world and Christian spirituality (without a proper understanding of chastity) struggle not to do.

Given the power of sexuality inside us, and given the power of our human drives and yearnings in general, it is not easy to live a chaste life.

It is even more difficult, and rare, to have a chaste spirit, a chaste heart, chaste daydreams and chaste intentions. Our hearts want what they want and pressure us to ignore the consequences. We can easily feel a certain repugnance to praying for chastity. But that is largely because we do not understand chastity properly: It is not a deadening of the heart, a stripping away of our sexuality, but a deeper maturity that lets our sexual energies flow out in a more life-giving way.

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