



Is Purity Possible?

By Joseph L. Soria

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Is Purity Possible?

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By Joseph L. Soria



Scepter Publishers

PO Box 360694,

Strongsville, Ohio 44136

Toll Free: 800-322-8773 (US & Canada only)

Tel: 212-354-0670

Fax: 646-417-7707

info@scepterpublishers.org

www.scepterpublishers.org

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INTRODUCTION

“God is love,” we are told in the first of St. John’s epistles (1 John 4:8). Everything that God is, everything that comes from him, is intimately connected with love, from the highest and greatest — the blessed Trinity itself — down to the smallest detail of creation.

And so the precepts the Lord has given us as rules for human conduct are expressions of love, for God “wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). These commandments are the way or path that leads to love, and therefore they must be lived with love.

What could be more natural, then, and more wonderful, than for Jesus to sum up all the divine commandments in our duty to love? When asked by a lawyer, “Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?,” Jesus replied: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law, and the Prophets also” (Matthew 22:35–40).

The commandments, therefore, are not laws or rules to be followed merely in some external way. Nor are they a list of impersonal commands and prohibitions thought up just to make life difficult for us. The divine commandments, each and every one of them, are an example of God’s loving mercy. For the Law was given “to specify crimes. . . . [It] was promulgated by angels” to make our way easier (Galatians 3:19). These commandments are for our benefit: “Keep them, observe them, and they will demonstrate to the peoples your wisdom and understanding. When they come to know of all these laws they will exclaim, ‘No other people is as wise and prudent as this great nation’” (Deuteronomy 4:6).

If God forbids something, whether it be killing, lying, stealing, fornicating, or anything else, he does so not just because these things are evil in themselves, but also because they make us evil, lowering our nature to the level of the beasts. In this context it is easy to understand St. Augustine’s exclamation: “What am I to you that you should command me to love you,

and if I do not, are angry and threaten vast misery? Is it then a trifling sorrow not to love you?”

Therefore the sixth commandment, though formulated negatively, is fully understood only within the context of the love of God — for this is how we are to understand that the prohibitive nature of the commandment actually entails positive dimensions. It makes little sense if we interpret it from an exclusively negative point of view; for indeed it is an invitation to love.

VINDICATING PURITY

These pages have been written on the basis of what Christ has taught us — namely, that everything we are commanded by God’s law is easy if there is love. This message is conveyed quite clearly: “My yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matthew 11:30); and “this is what loving God is — keeping his commandments; and his commandments are not difficult” (1 John 5:3).

Confronted with cultural and social attitudes fixated on the things that afford pleasure, comfort, and easy living, Christians must show optimism and fortitude. In the words of St. Josemaria: “There is need for a crusade of manliness and purity to counteract and undo the savage work of those who think that man is a beast.” There is a great need for a new and generous attitude, one that gives witness by means of a pure life, to show that chastity is neither a virtue of people who are somehow incomplete nor a duty required of children alone. For, in fact, purity is an essential element of Christian life, a virtue for men and women who are mature in every sense of the word. Far from childish, it is a virtue practiced by those who leave behind the things of childhood.

In short, we must make fashionable this virtue which many people regard as old-fashioned simply because it confronts their comfort-seeking and eroticism, their single-minded search for pleasure which dominates and excludes all other interests and pursuits. We must show by our humble yet daring example that contemporary Christians are people who are as advanced as anyone else but, at the same time, through God’s grace and without any false sense of superiority or inferiority, who control their senses, for they are aware of the dignity of their bodies and remember the demands of God’s love.

To live a pure life does not mean singing songs in praise of purity. Nor is it the same as just wanting to live purely; it is not simply a matter of one’s desires or good will. To live a pure life involves a number of practical duties based on the love of God and on the fact that our human nature is constituted as the unity of one particular body and one particular soul.

We repeat, then, that purity is not just abstaining from certain things. It is more than just not doing, not thinking, not desiring. More than this, it

entails knowing what we are positively supposed to do, think, and desire. So in order to practice the virtue of chastity, there is one basic requisite: we must understand both what sex is and its place in God's plan.

A GOD-GIVEN POWER

When the Church first announced the Good News, it conflicted with certain widespread currents of thought concerning sexuality. Generally speaking, these regarded the issue from opposite though equally erroneous points of view. For some, sexuality was understood an easy, uncomplicated way of obtaining pleasure without restriction. It is not surprising that people with this sort of attitude deemed harsh and perhaps even incomprehensible Christ's teachings on the importance of chastity, marriage, and the excellence of virginity.

The opposite attitude, which considered sexuality a degradation of humanity, was also prevalent. This outlook, which originated in certain Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, despised everything having to do with our bodily nature. Later on it was also associated with the Manichean gnostic heresies.

Both of these attitudes toward sexuality can still be found today. Quite evident is the practical paganism that has invaded our streets, entertainment, family life — indeed our whole outlook on life. It dangerously promotes a very selfish and superficial view of sexuality, which in fact, in God's plan as well as in human nature, has certain pure and clearly defined purposes. Perhaps less evident, but still present and perhaps more widespread than one might think, are those who regard sexuality as a sort of a defect or deficiency, not intended in the original plan of creation but rather caused by man's original sin. For these people marriage is an escape valve to legitimize something that is not good in itself.

St. Paul is very clear when he advises Christians to avoid both extremes. On the one hand, he says:

Keep away from fornication. All the other sins are committed outside the body; but to fornicate is to sin against your own body. Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God. You are not your own property (1 Corinthians 6:18–19).

On the other hand, he insists that we should not listen to deceitful spirits and doctrines that come from the devils; and the cause of this is

the lies told by hypocrites whose consciences are branded as though with a red-hot iron; they say marriage is forbidden, and lay down rules about abstaining from foods which God created to be accepted with thanksgiving by all who believe and know the truth. Everything God has created is good (1 Timothy 4:1–4).

So the Christian must regard sex and, more specifically, the power to procreate not as something evil but as a power granted by God to man. It is intrinsically and essentially related to marriage, because the ability to transmit life, which is an essential aspect of the genital function, of its very nature is directed toward an end that surpasses anything confined to the individual. Being for the preservation and propagation of the human race, St. Thomas calls it an even greater good than the preservation of the bodily nature of the individual. He adds that, without Adam's fall, the human race would also have been propagated by the carnal union of man and woman, but with an even greater sensual experience, for man, as he says, had a purer nature and a more sensitive body before the fall.

The sixth commandment, therefore, does not forbid the use of the power to transmit life, nor can it be used as a justification for any attempt to diminish the importance of sex. The prohibition against committing impure acts means, simply, that we are not to exercise that power except on the proper conditions and in the proper manner, namely, within lawful marriage and in a manner consistent with our human nature. It is helpful to note that the Lord decided to complete the precept of the sixth commandment, which covers only external actions, with the prohibition of the ninth commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife" — which forbids us internally to entertain impure thoughts or desires. So the sixth commandment is fully understood only together with the ninth; for chastity means both abstaining from certain external acts and maintaining a certain internal attitude, a purity of heart. Both are essential if the virtue is to be lived properly.

A PREREQUISITE OF LOVE

Chastity, which is part of the cardinal virtue of temperance, is usually defined as a moral virtue that inclines us cheerfully and without hesitation to moderate the use of our power to transmit life, in accordance with reason enlightened by faith. But a definition of this type, though substantially accurate, risks our failure to understand the virtue in all of its implications. It may also give a poor, watered-down impression of what chastity really is, resulting in a deficient grasp of how the sixth commandment ought to be lived.

No supernatural virtue is possible without charity, the love of God and love of our neighbor for God's sake. Charity is the foundation and mother of all the other Christian virtues, their root and their ultimate justification. From a supernatural point of view, all the moral virtues are essentially ways in which charity manifests itself, and they differ based on the particular objects to which a person's moral activity is directed at any given moment. Thus, for instance, charity will take the form of temperance when, for love of God, we regulate everything associated with sensory pleasure. It will take the form of chastity when we abstain from anything to do with genital activity which is contrary to God's will. St. Augustine, in fact, defines chastity as "an ordered love, which does not subordinate greater things to lesser things."

This is not to say that everything we do without charity is sinful, or that if we practice chastity from purely human motives we are doing wrong. What it means, rather, is that the fullness of chastity is attained only in the love of God. Thus we understand that to be virtuous means to be ready to love deeply, as befits a child of God; to be chaste means to love God and, because of this love, to control and regulate the sexual tendency — which became disordered after original sin — within both reasonable limits on the human level and fruitful limits on the supernatural level. We use the word "regulate" deliberately, for it means not to eliminate but to make something conform to a rule or regulation. No virtue, chastity or any other, sets out actually to suppress or eliminate anything human.

We need to be chaste if we are to avoid becoming slaves of selfish desires that are contrary to the proper use of those tendencies the Lord

instilled in human nature precisely for the purpose of transmitting life. Hence it offends God if we seek sexual pleasure inordinately, and so chastity is a necessary virtue for every Christian, whatever his or her state or situation. Chastity is virtue for the married and the unmarried alike. Pleasure is not bad in itself, but it cannot be divorced from the duties accompanying whatever acts produce it, and it must not be sought inordinately or according to one's personal whims.

SUPERNATURAL CONTROL

The pleasure that normally accompanies the acts related to procreation is no exception to this rule; therefore chastity must temper, order, and harmonize everything to do with this particular aspect of human nature. Our sexual tendencies must be moderated, regulated, and channeled properly, in accordance with the obligations of the individual, whether married, single, or widowed. We do this by exercising not just control but supernaturally virtuous control. This distinction is important, and it is worth taking a moment to consider.

If I know that I ought to do something, I may or may not actually do it; if in fact I do it, I may do so with or against my inclinations. If I do it against my inclinations, then it upsets me — it is something I feel forced to do, I find it difficult, and it makes me miserable. We could summarize this situation by saying that my intellect tells me what I should do, and my will is prepared to act, but my desires and inclinations are not.

If I do something willingly, then my mind, which knows what I ought to do, and my will, which is prepared act, are reinforced by desires and inclinations as well as a cheerful disposition.

Something like this occurs in the practice of virtue. In the virtuous soul, the love of God, that interior desire which is both the consequence and the cause of a genuinely Christian, apostolic life, causes one's desires and inclinations to play an active role in everything we do through our intelligence and will. In consequence, the senses and all the tendencies are aligned with God's law easily, happily, and with a stable disposition. This is precisely the psychological essence of virtue. The personality is then an integrated one, properly ordered to one end, and there is no danger of any spiritual or mental imbalance, though of course there may well be moments of difficulty and struggle.

Until this situation is actually achieved, one does not possess the specifically Christian virtue of chastity. One may perform individual acts of chastity, certainly, but a life lived without the stable grounding that is love of God hardly deserves to be called a chaste life in the deepest sense of the word.

At best it will be a decent life, a life lived without causing scandal, a

respectable life; but it will almost certainly be mere continence, not chastity. If one is motivated by fear or by respect for others, or if one simply finds no particular difficulty in living in that way, the virtue is not truly present. Mature continence may approach the virtue and be supported by supernatural motives, but it is not really chastity. As St. Thomas describes it, continence is an imperfect virtue.

SUPERNATURAL MOTIVES

For these reasons, we must repeat that purity should never be regarded as something that concerns the body alone. Chastity — and consequently, of course, apostolic celibacy and virginity, which are particular ways of practicing chastity — imply a free interior act, by which a human being actively gives up any exercise of sexuality which may be contrary to the duties imposed on him by the love of God, in accordance with his or her state in life. What may appear to be chastity actually lacks full moral value, therefore, if it is motivated by fear of the flesh or desire to avoid the responsibilities that accompany human love, or by innate aversion to the opposite sex or to having children. So we can see that just as lust is an aberration, so too there may be aberrations within continence, which outwardly looks like chastity. Certainly these are less frequent than the perversions of lust, but perhaps they are even more insidious because of the veil of apparent purity hiding their true face.

Let me repeat that chastity is not something negative; it is not ignorance, fear, hypocrisy, pretense, or mere decency. It is something positive — a deep understanding of the meaning of sex and the importance of the ability to procreate. It is the courage to say ‘no’ to selfish indulgence and ‘yes’ to the love of God. It is right conduct. It is at the basis of a Christian conscience. It is virtue.

Indeed, chastity may be supported by human motives as well: respect for the natural law and for the dignity of the person — whether oneself or another — who can never be treated as an object; regard for social order or convention; faithfulness to a particular person based on a perfectly noble type of human love; the need to control the disorderly tendencies of the flesh; the advantages of purity for family life; the benefits or concerns of health; and so on. But anything based solely on such considerations is not chastity, the Christian virtue requiring that purity be founded above all on the grace of God and motivated by love of him.

In other words, to fulfill the sixth commandment properly, the material fact of abstaining from acts contrary to chastity is not sufficient, for this must be done from a supernatural motive, namely, the love of God.

From this fundamental consideration, other supernatural motives will emerge, such as the respect which a Christian has for his body — as the temple of the Holy Spirit and the dwelling place of the blessed Trinity, and as matter consecrated by the Eucharist and destined for the glory of the resurrection; a delicate and faith-inspired regard for the act of procreation, which makes us sharers in God's creative power; a realization of the dignity of the Christian as a child of God and member of Christ's mystical body; a consciousness of the example of Christ our Lord and his mother Mary. In short, our fundamental consideration, which is our love of God, will foster an understanding of the teaching of sacred scripture, the word of God, which in turn will reinforce our purity

CHASTITY REGULATES

The organs in which the power to transmit life is situated are called genital organs because they are the means for exercising the power to generate. Both in the man and in the woman these organs have internal parts, not visible but enclosed and protected inside the body, and external parts which make the conjugal act possible. Because these organs form part of a living organism and serve to fulfill certain biological functions, they are subject to certain changes and modifications (in moral theology called “motions of the flesh”) whose purpose is to facilitate or enable them to fulfill their function, the essence of which is the creation of a new life.

A comparison may be useful. The hand, for instance, is not always outstretched or still. When we read a book, the hand moves, turns pages, picks up a pencil, and so on. In short, the hand adapts to whatever function it performs at a given moment. Furthermore, the individual is aware that the hand is working in such situations. He is conscious of the fact that it is taking a pen or closing a book. Something similar happens to the organs we are now discussing. The changes they undergo in particular circumstances are related to the functions for which they are intended, and these changes are also felt by the individual, although of course they feel very different from what he feels when he moves his hand.

When we speak, walk, write, or work, we feel what we are doing, we are conscious of it, but no particularly pleasant bodily sensation accompanies the experience. The changes undergone by the genital organs, on the other hand, are felt in two different ways: first, as everything else that happens in the body is felt, in the sense that we are conscious of it and know it is happening; second, they are felt as something specific and different from any other sensation — they give a type of bodily pleasure which we call sexual or genital. This pleasant sensation accompanies the changes that affect the genital organs, enabling them to perform the marriage act. The changes in question are of two kinds: those that prepare for the conjugal act and make it possible, and those that follow and are caused by the first type.

The first kind can be brought about voluntarily or involuntarily, but once the biological mechanism controlling them is set in motion, it leads

automatically to the second kind, unless it is halted in time. These will therefore merit the same moral consideration and judgments as the first. If they are brought about within marriage and without placing obstacles in the way of procreation, the whole activity will be virtuous, good, and noble. It will be chaste and form part of conjugal love. If the changes are provoked outside marriage, in any direct and completely voluntary way, a mortal sin will be committed, for we are making use of the generative power, totally or partially, in a way contrary to nature and God's will. Outside marriage, then, a sensitive conscience must avoid anything that provokes these motions of the flesh: thoughts, readings, images, touches, memories, and so on.

We must not forget that these motions of the flesh are governed by various nervous mechanisms, which sometimes function voluntarily and at other times involuntarily. Perhaps another comparison may be useful here.

Consider these bodily phenomena as similar to water that overflows from a container: if the container is to overflow, the first requirement is that it must be full. Three pipes run into the container and can fill it. The first pipe represents our thoughts, what we read, what we see and hear, and so on — everything that passes through our mind. If we let our thoughts run wild and, if instead of rejecting them we entertain them, this is like opening the valve on the first pipe and letting the water into the container. If the container overflows, it is our own fault, because we have voluntarily taken measures that result in filling the container.

The second pipe has no valve, so water from it may enter the container without our consent. This represents those organic stimuli that are independent of our will, for which we may not be directly responsible or be blamed. These can occur during the day, but they are more frequently at night. We are not to blame for the overflowing that results in these cases; it suffices that we should not accept or consent to what we feel.

The third pipe, like the first, has a valve, which represents our will. Here again the things that may fill the container and cause it to overflow are or may be voluntary: touches, postures, or actions outside marriage and performed only to procure sexual pleasure. These constitute an offense to God and are contrary

INTERNAL SINS

The St. Pius X Catechism tells us that the commandment not to commit adultery forbids infidelity in marriage as well as any action, look, or conversation contrary to chastity. Obviously this is not a complete list of the duties involved. To begin, in addition to what is prohibited, there are positive duties that derive from a consideration of the sixth commandment in light of the first, namely, the commandment to love God above all. Also, the prohibitions must be complemented by the provisions of the ninth, which, according to the same Catechism, expressly forbids any desire contrary to the fidelity promised at the altar by the marriage partners, as well as all culpable thought and desire of the actions forbidden by the sixth commandment.

We shall not deal with the ninth commandment here, but we should mention that everything we have to say about outward actions applies also to inward culpable desires and thoughts relating to those actions. We emphasize the word culpable because the ninth commandment does not condemn every thought relating to the actions forbidden by the sixth. Only desires to which we fully consent are sinful, for to desire evil is a sin. However, the difficulty is knowing whether in fact we have consented, or whether the desire or thought was just a fleeting image, completely theoretical and abstract, passing through our mind like a flash of lightning, without any acceptance or commitment on our part.

It may be useful to recall what we have said about the sixth commandment and the bodily sensations related to the power to transmit life, for when dealing with desires and thoughts, these sensations can often serve as alarm signals. Often we are not conscious of the fact that our imagination has taken a wrong turn until we actually notice some bodily effect. What we have to do, then, is to rectify generously and turn with the faith of a child to God our Lord and to his blessed Mother.

Of course this is not to say that all thoughts on this subject are good provided they produce no bodily repercussions, because it is quite possible for something to be not contrary to the sixth or ninth commandments but nevertheless dangerous or even wrong. For instance, the fantasies we entertain when reading love stories, the thoughts we entertain as we delight

in real or imagined situations where we are the center of attention, the vagaries of the imagination in which we identify with some hero of a film we are watching — these may not be directly against the ninth commandment, but it would be wrong to conclude that they are necessarily above moral criticism. They are often occasions of temptation, aside from the fact that they are rather immature, un-Christian, and irresponsible means of evading our duty by taking refuge in a comfortable but false and cowardly world of romance.

At the other extreme, we must also point out that not all thoughts on matters relating to sex are bad. Sometimes they may go no further than being mere temptations, actually helping the soul in its spiritual progress if, with humility and faith, it resists and avoids them. At other times, such thoughts may take the form of theoretical, speculative, or abstract considerations that may even be an obligation for reasons of study or training in some field or other.

Here again the St. Pius X Catechism tells us that thoughts against purity that come to our mind are not in themselves sins, but only temptations or incitements to commit sin. Bad thoughts are sins, even if they are ineffective, even if the action suggested in them is not carried out, when we culpably provoke a reason for having them, when we consent to them or expose ourselves to grave danger of consenting.

AND MODESTY?

On this point, St. Thomas makes a relevant distinction. Chastity, he says, is made easier by a particular passion — note this is not a virtue but a passion. This passion or instinctive sentiment is called modesty, which is the feeling of shame or aversion to anything indecent in sexual matters, particularly in the exercise of the procreative power and the external signs proper to it and accompanying it. Modesty is, therefore, something instinctive that may help us become chaste and live the virtue of chastity; but it must not be identified with supernatural chastity, for the motive for modesty — as an instinct — is a natural aversion, and the motive for chastity, if properly practiced, can only be love of God, which is something supernatural. Modesty encourages chastity, for it shies away from what is contrary to that virtue, but by no means is identified with it. In fact, once we attain fullness of chastity, modesty ceases, as St. Thomas boldly declares, for the soul which is virtuously chaste never feels moved by aversion or fear, though if it did commit some indecent act it would then feel the shame that goes with modesty.

We are not, of course, seeking to diminish modesty, but rather to transform it by the grace of God from something akin to fear to something based on love. It must also be mentioned that easygoing attitudes, lack of sensitivity, frivolity, and barefaced pornography are all bolstered by the growing scarcity of modesty. Under the pretext of naturalness or regard for human nature in general, which is something good, naturalism or exclusive concern for the bodily dimensions of humanity comes to the fore. This is bad, for the children of God are not composed of body alone but have been raised to a supernatural level. Consider, for example, that though it is a natural thing to belch, this does not mean that it is good to do so openly in public. Let us practice, and encourage others to practice, what is natural, but let us not be deceived or infected by anything that falsely understands the proper ends of human nature.

To return to the actions forbidden by the sixth commandment: let us remind ourselves that in sacred scripture this divine precept is formulated,

“You shall not commit adultery.” It is strictly confined to the improper use of the power to transmit life and matters directly related thereto. So, for example, the tendency to show off or the desire to be admired are related not directly to chastity but only to vanity, although these are based on the attraction between men and women and may open the door to other things that threaten purity.

The question of dress also is related directly, not to chastity, but to modesty. Unless there is a definite intention to seduce, a few inches of cloth, one way or the other, may be a question of frivolity, or poor taste, or perhaps even scandal, a sin against the charity we owe our neighbor. Certainly all the Christian virtues are closely connected, and these things can support our purity if observed delicately, or they may threaten it if they are neglected. In themselves, however, they do not pertain to the sixth commandment.

A few comments are necessary here. If we consider the different psychology of men and women, and the personalities of each individual, some actions cannot be judged solely in terms of to the intentions of the agent; rather, because of their repercussions on others, some must also be measured in light of charity. For instance, a girl wearing an immodest dress may be a serious occasion of sin for people who see her, even though she may have chosen it simply because she found it attractive or fashionable.

We may further clarify the point by noting that a conversation need not be contrary to chastity just because it concerns sexual matters. For instance, there is no offense against chastity in anything parents say on this subject when teaching their children to have a Christian outlook on life; or in a medical professor’s lecture dealing with sexual matters; or in a joke, a coarse word, an obscenity, or other expression having to do with these issues, although here again we are in a more delicate area. A joke may in fact be a sin against the sixth commandment if it is intended to induce someone to sin, or if told in a way that involves indelicacy or delight in those things forbidden by this commandment. A swear word or obscenity will be a sign of bad manners or a lack of charity if it offends someone, but it will not necessarily be a sin against the sixth commandment.

Clearly these examples, and many others we could mention, are not intended to diminish the importance of these things or to relax anybody’s conscience. We are only trying to point out what is and what is not directly related to chastity, what is and what is not involved in the commandment we are considering.

Strictly speaking, the sixth commandment forbids nothing but the improper use of the power of generating life. We must repeat, however, that chastity is related to many other virtues and that, although the object of holy purity is very clear, there are many things that indirectly help or hinder it. As St. Josemaria has noted: “Decency and modesty are ‘little brothers’ of purity”; and, “Gluttony is the forerunner of impurity.”

ON THIN ICE

We have touched upon another relevant aspect of the question, namely, compensating or making up for some deficiency in our lives. Purity, like all virtues, should be practiced cheerfully and generously. In the words of St. Josemaria: “When you resolve firmly to lead a clean life, chastity will not be a burden for you: it will be a triumphal crown.” This is why, unless there is a firm decision to live chastely, a person — sometimes quite consciously, at other times less so — may look for satisfactions to balance what his ungenerous attitude regards only as difficulty, sacrifice, abstention, and self-denial. These satisfactions may include a veiled search for affection; taking refuge in romantic fantasies which, if not grave sins, are certainly not virtuous; certain indelicacies in the question of personal hygiene; and so on. Such a person may think that even if his hunger cannot be completely satisfied, at least he should be allowed a little nibble from time to time. But this is a mistake, because these smaller indulgences are just like nibbles: they do not satisfy hunger but only increase it. Instead of calming concupiscence they arouse it. This search for relief only brings unrest.

Hence, though the sixth commandment directly covers very specific areas, indirectly it calls on us to avoid opening the door to temptations or sins against purity.

There is another question that makes it difficult to know what God wants us to avoid. There are some things — good or at least indifferent in themselves — which, as we said earlier, may cause the body to experience the physical changes that arouse sexual sensations. For example, there are a number of natural phenomena that occur at varying intervals and usually take place while we are sleeping. These are means by which nature releases certain products of the organism that are concerned with procreation. They are accompanied by certain sensations and often impure dreams. If these things are neither provoked nor accepted, there is no need to be troubled about them. In the words of St. Josemaria: “Whatever happens, there is no need to worry as long as you don’t consent. For only the will can open the door of the heart and let that corruption in.” So there is nothing to worry about, whatever we may feel, provided we do not actually consent, just as we

do not consent to the bitterness of medicine just by realizing that it tastes bitter.

Sometimes things that are good in themselves may cause us to experience sensations which we could not provoke directly without giving offense to God our Lord. When these sensations are neither willed nor aroused directly, there is no need to lose any peace of mind. These may be related to activities of personal hygiene, medical examinations, athletics, and so on.

UNCHASTE ACTIONS

Lust, which is directly forbidden by the sixth commandment, may be defined as a morally disordered search for sexual pleasure, an abuse of the power of transmitting life by exercising it outside the conditions laid down by God, for the sake of the pleasure itself or for gain, false love, and so on. In brief, this commandment forbids under pain of mortal sin anything that involves a voluntary or conscious exercise of the power to procreate apart from its legitimate use within marriage. If the biological mechanisms specific to the conjugal act function fully, then lust is complete. This may happen alone or with another person.

For the same reason, this commandment also forbids under pain of mortal sin everything that involves seeking sexual pleasure directly through incomplete carnal acts, whether internal (thoughts, fantasies, or desires which pertain to the ninth commandment), external, or both types simultaneously; this is incomplete lust.

It should be mentioned that there are some acts which are always contrary to the sixth commandment, whatever the state or situation of the person involved: fornication, the complete sexual act outside marriage; and masturbation, the solitary sin which consists of procuring the bodily phenomena and the consequent pleasure proper to the sexual act without carnal intercourse. In short, any action performed outside of marriage, alone or with others, whose purpose is something proper or specific to the power of transmitting life, is always contrary to the sixth commandment. Of course there are also sins against chastity within marriage, but we are not concerned with these here.

Sacred scripture shows us the gravity of sins against the sixth commandment, referring explicitly to some of them:

You know perfectly well that people who do wrong will not inherit the kingdom of God: people of immoral lives, idolaters, adulterers, catamites, sodomites . . . will never inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

And:

When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility. . . . I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Ephesians 5:3–7).

That is why

...among you there must not be even a mention of fornication or impurity in any of its forms, or promiscuity: this would hardly become the saints! There must be no coarseness, or salacious talk and jokes — all this is wrong for you. . . . For you can be quite certain that nobody who actually indulges in fornication or impurity or promiscuity — which is worshiping a false god — can inherit anything of the kingdom of God. Do not let anyone deceive you with empty arguments: it is for this loose living that God’s anger comes down on those who rebel against him. Make sure that you are not included with them (1 Corinthians 6:13-15, 19–20).

Naturally St. Paul is not implying that anyone who sins against purity will not be forgiven. What he means is that impurity in its various forms is a sin and a grave sin when there is perfect knowledge and full consent, in spite of the fact that these sins are usually not of malice but of weakness. Thus it is a mistake to think that the sins of lust are not serious simply because we do not want to act against the will of God, just as it would also be senseless, in light of what sacred scripture tells us, to think that acts against chastity are not wrong provided they do no harm to anybody except ourselves.

When someone offends God, even though no other person may be harmed, he is still doing the greatest wrong possible in this world, namely, committing sin, and for this he must repent humbly, ask God’s forgiveness, and make a sincere confession — a completely sincere confession, full of sorrow and love.

It is significant that St. Paul should draw our attention to these things and insist so much on their importance. It is as if he foresaw that concupiscence and doctrinal deviations would call into question the idea that lust is illicit. We seldom find in scripture so many warnings as those given us on the matter of purity: “You know perfectly well . . .”; “I warn you . . .”; “For you can be quite certain . . .”; “Do not let anyone deceive you.” We see that when St. Paul was writing, just as in our age, there were many erroneous positions on this subject.

FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD

Purity, then, is required if we are to have a close relationship with God our Lord. It leads us to him. Certainly it is not the first or most important of the virtues, nor can the Christian life be reduced to the practice of chastity, as if the only things we must avoid are those connected with lust. Nevertheless, without chastity there can be no charity, and charity is indeed the first of the virtues, which gives perfection to all the others. We know the great importance of chastity: “Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:14).

It must also be mentioned that purity is not a virtue for little angels, as is sometimes remarked. On the contrary, it is a specifically human virtue, proper to men and women, who are not pure spirits and therefore must control their disorderly nature and struggle against the tendencies that lead them toward sin.

St. Gregory says that lust gives rise to blindness of spirit, lack of consideration, hastiness, inconstancy, selfishness, hatred of God, attachment to this world, and aversion to the world to come. From this we can deduce the value and the consequences of chastity. St. Augustine tells us that appetite, in the sense of concupiscence, reigns where the love of God does not. Thus we can say that where concupiscence reigns there can be no love of God. And St. Josemaria has commented: “Without holy purity one cannot persevere in the apostolate.”

There has been plenty of criticism of the attitude that regards everything having to do with sex as an enemy of the soul and of the Christian life, and certainly we must admit that there have been excesses which deserve this criticism. But at the same time we know from Christian experience, and we must not forget, that the emotions and temptations of the flesh threaten our close relationship with God in a special way, even though of their essence they may not be incompatible with this union.

In particular, it must be remembered that marriage is itself a path to holiness. But overindulgence in sexual matters, or any sexual activity contrary to the divine will, is one of the greatest obstacles to understanding and appreciating the true value of supernatural realities. Yes, we must

condemn any systematic aversion to sexual matters as if they were God's enemies, but we must also remember that a religious respect for everything concerned with the transmission of life is essential for a full Christian life.

PURITY IS POSSIBLE

In declaring that chastity is necessary, revelation and the Church's doctrine have always taught that it is possible to put it into practice. However, there have been many questions and objections to the possibility of living a pure life, especially as far as chastity outside marriage is concerned, not because this virtue is any easier to practice within marriage — though again there are some who wrongly consider marriage a solution to all problems regarding this matter — but because it is often confused with continence. In actual fact, the two are different. From the material point of view, continence means abstinence from any sexual act, while chastity implies abstinence from any sexual act contrary to the obligations of one's particular state. Thus, for single or widowed people, chastity is materially identical with continence, while married people using their marriage in accordance with nature and God's will practice chastity but not continence.

Now even if the fact that God requires us to practice chastity does not convince us, in order to realize that it is in fact quite possible, we have only to look at the testimony of the millions of souls who have lived lives of chastity and practiced the virtue fully, ever since our Lord was here on Earth. But if even this is not sufficient for some people, perhaps we ought to examine the question more closely. The first point worth mentioning concerns the sexual instinct, which undoubtedly exists in man but must on no account be regarded as the same thing an animal has. In the case of man, this tendency does not imply an absolute need, because he has a will that permits him to resist his instinctive impulses. In fact, the difference between human and animal sexuality is so great that nowadays we are inclined to avoid the word "instinct" in reference to man, and instead to use the terms "sexual tendency" or "impulse."

There are many supporting arguments, but present limitations of space do not permit us to list them all. We can only refer to a few concrete facts. The first is that only a very small proportion of the sexual tendency is automatic in man, while by far the greater part is voluntary or at least provoked, in the sense that it is stimulated by the person himself. Images, acts, memories, and certain forms of entertainment become temptations that impel him to exercise his sexuality, only because he accepts and wants them

to influence him. When these same things are regarded from some other point of view, they normally cease to have any influence on sexual conduct. Hence the importance of regarding everything with pure eyes, so as not to distort the true meaning of what is before us. We must not forget, however, that nowadays — for reasons of frivolity, sensuality, or commercial propaganda, for material gain or simply base corruption — we are subject to a constant bombardment that employs a variety of audio-visual and psychological techniques to provide sexual stimuli by all sorts of means. If we remember this, we may at least be on our guard.

TO REALLY WANT TO

Some people who try to deny the possibility of celibacy, and consequently of chastity outside marriage, will claim that unless we have engage in sexual acts we are susceptible to neuroses, inner conflicts, or spiritual dryness. Let us reply, first, that the selfish, mercenary, unloving exercise of our sexuality does not in the least help to remedy these dangers. In fact, it makes them worse. It is true that, in some cases, emotions and feelings left unsatisfied may certainly lead to problems of this type, but if that happens the individual in question is not one who possesses genuine chastity. For if love of God is not the basis and motive of our chastity, then indeed interior difficulties may arise. Here is relevant our Lord's phrase, "by their fruits you shall know them." If the fruit of our chastity is love, cheerfulness, happiness of soul, a feeling of completeness, and a generous desire to serve, then we may be sure it is genuine chastity. On the other hand, if its fruits are feelings of frustration, envy, sadness; if it makes us lonely or leads us to seek satisfactions secretly or eagerly, then it would be unfair to blame chastity, for the simple reason that in such cases there is no genuine chastity.

The only honest attitude in such cases is not to excuse oneself by saying that chastity is impossible, but to rectify whatever is going wrong and take the means necessary to practice genuine chastity.

It may seem a mere truism or platitude, but I do not hesitate to say that in order to live chastity, above all the most important thing is to want to be chaste: to want it with great determination and firm resolve, decisively willing to take the necessary steps, and with sufficient humility to accept our failures and to get up again, to be sorry and ready to make reparation. When we say we must want to practice chastity, we are not talking about a blind, immoderate faith in our own will power, but a real decision to do whatever is necessary to live a pure life.

We have spoken of the primary importance of love of God. Naturally, then, anything that can help us to have a solid spiritual life will be an invaluable means to practicing chastity fully. We ought not neglect frequent reception of the sacraments, tender devotion to the Blessed Virgin, and

sincere prayer. But we must remember that these supernatural means will not necessarily work miracles; they are not magical panaceas that eliminate the need for making personal effort.

Indeed it may happen that a person may take refuge in some purely formal, external practice of supernatural means, and then complain that these means are ineffective. We must remember, therefore, that it is not enough simply to pray, to go to confession, or to receive Holy Communion. The important matter is how we pray, with what kind of contrition and purpose of amendment we receive the Sacrament of Penance, in what manner we receive the Eucharist. Lukewarm or half-hearted observance of these practices is of little help, and they will be of even less help if we are not willing to take other necessary steps. The means, therefore, must go hand-in-hand with a sincere desire to be converted, but without that attitude which St. Augustine crudely but sincerely found in his own life: “I had entreated chastity of you and had prayed, ‘Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.’ For I was afraid lest you should hear me too soon, and too soon cure me of my disease of lust which I desired to have satisfied rather than extinguished.”

That is why the main thing about chastity is that we should want to live it. Consider the words of St. Josemaria: “To defend his purity. St. Francis of Assisi rolled in the snow, St. Benedict threw himself into a thorn bush, St. Bernard plunged into an icy pond. . . . You . . . , what have you done?”

THE MEANS

As far as the supernatural means are concerned, we have already mentioned the most important ones in speaking of prayer and the sacraments, especially Penance and Communion. Let us consider briefly the value of confession. A confession made with minimum effort — one that borders on insincerity, in which we tell our confessor as little as possible in the vaguest of terms, still ensuring that our conscience will not be able to accuse us of having committed outright sacrilege; or a selfish confession — a confession motivated above all by a desire to set our mind at ease, while presenting ourselves as really not that bad, is a sign that we are not really and genuinely sincere. This is because there is no deep conversion here, no true prodigal son attitude, no repentant return to our Father's arms (cf. Luke 15:11 ff.), careless of whether he will treat us as a son or as a servant, because contrite love stifles all pride.

Let us also briefly consider prayer. We should not confine ourselves to making petitions — obviously it is rather petty to turn to St. Anthony only when we have lost something — but when we do ask for something we should be sincere and determined. In other words, prayer is a way to attain purity because it is a means to know and love God better, and to have a deep friendship with him. St. Josemaria has noted: “Holy purity is given by God when it is asked for with humility” So we could say that genuine purity, whether practiced by a man or a woman, is directly related to how much and how well we pray for it.

As regards mortification and the need to mortify ourselves, we need only say that it is another indispensable means to keeping concupiscence at bay and living a pure life. It should be practiced far from the main walls of our spiritual fortress, so that the enemy is met and fought before he comes too near. Consider the words of St. Josemaria: “[I]n your small mortifications, your customary prayer, your methodical work, your plan of life: and with difficulty will he come close to the easily-scaled battlements of your castle. And if he does come, he arrives exhausted.”

One particular aspect of mortification as a means to the practice of chastity consists in delicately guarding our imagination and our senses,

especially the sense of sight, for this is essential if we are to guard our heart. The vast majority of temptations against the virtue come to us through this channel, and so it must be sealed off. If we do not do so, we do not really want to be chaste.

A final thought from St. Josemaria: “Don’t try to reason with concupiscence: scorn it. Don’t show the cowardice of being ‘brave’; take to your heels!” These two pieces of advice, so brief and yet so full of meaning, point to other means of living a pure life, namely, flight from or the general avoidance of opportunities for sin. We must remember that quite often flight is the best defense. If a hungry man is served an appetizing dish but does not want to eat it, he must simply leave. If he continues to look at the food while trying to think of good reasons for not taking it, his efforts will be in vain, for sooner or later he will eat it.

A large part of our bravery can be put to good use in cultivating modesty and decency, and above all in fleeing from occasions of sin. We must realize, however, that it is not only the blatant, obvious occasions — those that would be a danger for anyone — that should be avoided. It is also important — especially in cases of where we find ourselves repeatedly failing — to avoid all the psychological dangers, all the circumstances that have led us to fall in the past, whether alone or in the company of others. These are the most likely to tempt us again. Idleness may be an example of this sort of circumstance.

Let us end by saying that, if we add to the means already mentioned an attempt to acquire an outward looking attitude, constantly attentive to the needs of others, and if we take certain other human steps — even medical or psychological steps if need be — then our Lord will fulfill his promise: “You can trust God not to let you be tried beyond your strength, and with any trial he will give you a way out of it and the strength to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). That way leads us to the powerful and motherly intercession of Mary, holy mother of fair love.



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