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### LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2018

# CHASTITY: THE SCHOOL OF LOVE

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*

(2 Cor 13:13)

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[1] In Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*, the hero Ulysses on his way home from the Trojan War has to pass by a lovely island where the Sirens dwell. These beautiful sea-nymphs were known to lure sailors to their death by their sweet music. To avoid hearing their bewitching song, Ulysses orders his sailors to fill their ears with beeswax. With this ruse, his men successfully escape the fatal danger of the Sirens' seductive song.

[2] Like the Sirens' song of ancient mythology, modern advertisers lure their audiences with the seductive appeal of sex. Companies in business to sell everything from clothes and cars to food and beauty products have adopted the strategy of programming sexual imagery into their commercials. In fact, seductive images and appealing promises of pleasure pervade one out of every three commercials aired on television. Advertisers understand that sex sells.

[3] According to a recent study by the Parents Television Council, television programming spotlights more promiscuity and adultery than marital fidelity during primetime broadcasting. A staggering 70 percent of TV shows that target teenagers have sexual content. Films, magazines, billboards and TV routinely use sexually graphic language, nudity and sexual activity. As a result, the authentic understanding of human sexuality is being undermined.

[4] In the 1950s, sitcoms like *Father Knows Best*, *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners* gave America a chaste image of the reality of sex. These programs showcased the traditional family of husband and wife and mother and father with their biological children. Today's TV sitcoms portray divorce, infidelity, homosexuality, promiscuity, pregnancy out of wedlock and abortion with a regularity that is reshaping the American understanding of sexuality itself.

[5] We reap today the harvest of ideas sown in the 18th century. On its ruthless gallows, the French Revolution guillotined the Christian concept of the human person as created by God and ultimately responsible to him. With the Enlightenment that followed, reason alone became the guiding light; and, man, as the Greek philosopher Protagoras once taught, was now "the measure of all things." With the rejection of divine revelation as a source of knowledge came the demise of absolute moral values and the reign of relativism. As a result of these philosophical changes, human sexuality has become merely a social construct that can be changed at will with no reference to the design of the Creator. (cf. Gabriele Kuby, "How a rolling sexual revolution is crushing freedom," July 8, 2016).

## PASTORAL LETTER 2019

[6] Our secular culture rejects human sexuality as a gift given by God to be enjoyed according to his plan. It denies the very distinction between man and woman. Society says that every individual can be whatever he or she chooses to be. As sex is divorced from God's design of responsible love at the service of fatherhood and motherhood, more children are born out of wedlock; cohabitation, promiscuity and infidelity are becoming commonplace; and, healthy families are more and more rare (cf. the Pontifical Council for the Family, "The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality," no. 6).

[7] The sexual revolution that began in the 1960s has changed people's attitudes about human sexuality. It has led to man-made laws that contradict the natural law inscribed in creation itself. It has trampled objective morality underfoot. It has lessened the restraints on sexual behavior. It has confused the license to indulge in sexual intimacy with the freedom to love another person.

[8] In such an environment, every follower of Jesus is called to witness to the true meaning of human sexuality by embracing the virtue of chastity. Abstinence from sexual activity is not in itself chastity. It is merely "the lamp without the oil" (St. Bonaventure). Chastity is love in action. A chaste love in accord with the Creator's design leads to personal freedom. A chaste love builds up a healthy environment for families to thrive. Chastity for the married and unmarried is the way of authentic love.

[9] Sadly, some individuals do not see chastity as something good or attainable. Rather, they portray chastity as harmful to the psychological and emotional well-being of the individual. They argue that sexual desires are so essential a part of human nature that denying them is unnatural. For these individuals, chastity is a repressive attitude that limits one's development. As C. S. Lewis once remarked, "Chastity is the most unpopular of the Christian virtues." But, not so for those who faithfully follow the teaching of Jesus!

[10] God has imprinted the fundamental capacity to love on our very bodies. Creating us either male or female, God has inscribed a nuptial meaning on human sexuality, leading man and woman to find fulfillment in the gift of self to the other. Truly, "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gn 2:18). Man and woman realize their full potential by loving each other.

[11] Sexuality, therefore, is not something purely biological. It touches the intimate nucleus of the person (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2332). Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person. It concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and the ability to form bonds of communion with others. By fashioning us in his own image, God who is love gives every individual the fundamental vocation to enter into communion with others by loving them (cf. 1 Jn 4:8).

[12] In God, love is the total and complete self-giving of each person of the Blessed Trinity to the other. So, too, for each of us. Love is the gift of self to another. But, no individual can truly give himself or herself to another if that person has not achieved a possession of self. One cannot give away what one does not possess. An individual who has not mastered his or her passions remains dominated by them and is not in full control of self. In such a case, the individual lacks the self-giving necessary for love. (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2338-2339; 2346)

[13] This side of the Garden of Eden, self-mastery means a daily struggle. Our human nature suffers the results of Adam and Eve's rejection of God's plan for our happiness. In committing original sin, our first parents rejected their dependence on God. They cast off the moral norms that God had established for the authentic use of freedom. Their sin not only shattered the harmony of creation but also destroyed "the control of the soul's spiritual faculties over the body" (cf. *ibid*, 400).

[14] As a result of original sin, there is a tension between our body and soul. "Each of us is like a charioteer who must control two steeds: one material, instinctive, unruly, and seeking only its own low pleasures; the other spiritual, brimming with nobility, honor, and courage. The charioteer's identity survives death, for it is spiritual, the rational principle, the soul. But the steed that is his body must perish" (Thomas Cahill, *Heretics*

## PASTORAL LETTER 2019

and Heroes, pg. 5).

[15] The apostle St. Paul speaks about this struggle as the rebellion of the “flesh” against the “spirit” (cf. Gal 5:16-24; Eph 2:3). We experience this rebellion as concupiscence, that is, the strong desire or tendency to satisfy our sensual appetites without regard to God’s plan. The waters of baptism wash away original sin. But, the effects of original sin remain.

[16] Because of concupiscence, we are inclined to indulge our desires rather than to control them. It is easier to satisfy our hunger and thirst than to fast. It is easier to lose our patience than to remain calm. It is immediately more gratifying for the moment to indulge our sexual appetites than to control them.

[17] Human sexuality cannot be separated from God’s design for love. It is a gift given by God to unite a man and a woman in a faithful, exclusive and mutual love lived within the commitment of marriage open to life. Even when there is some affection and love in relationships other than that of husband and wife, these relationships are not the *total* giving of one person to another in faithful love according to God’s plan. There is a holding back, a self-centeredness, that inhibits the authentic freedom to love. (cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 292)

[18] Any sexual activity outside of marriage is outside of God’s plan for our happiness (cf. 1 Cor 7:4-5). In varying degrees, adultery, fornication, masturbation, artificial birth control, in-vitro fertilization, same-sex relations, cohabitation and the use of pornography all belie the nuptial meaning of marriage that God intends for sexuality. It is for this reason that the Church urges her faithful to avoid these sins and counsels both the married and unmarried to be chaste (The Pontifical Council on the Family, “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality,” 17).

[19] God intends sexual intimacy in marriage to give joy and pleasure to spouses. Through their bodily expression of love, they “become two in one flesh” (Mk 10:8). God wants them to be total in their giving of love to one another, not holding back and remaining open to life. When each spouse reverences each other and expresses the total giving of self in sexual intimacy, the marriage mirrors Christ’s self-sacrificial love of the Church. Such chaste love sanctifies the couple and builds up the Body of Christ, the Church. (cf. Candice Watters, “How is chastity lived out within marriage,” Sept. 1, 2008)

[20] Chastity for the married means not using the other merely to gratify one’s own desires. It excludes using sex to hurt or humiliate. It means respecting the other, not making selfishly excessive demands as well as not denying one’s spouse conjugal rights without sufficient reason. Chaste conjugal love is unselfish and open to the gift of children.

[21] For the unmarried, chastity means living a continent life. No doubt the very idea of not engaging in sexual activity for someone who is not married is counter-cultural in our secularized world. But, it is important to realize that sexual activity cannot be separated from who we are. We are not simply spirit or body. We are both. And, so we cannot simply engage in giving ourselves away sexually again and again outside of God’s plan for marriage without diminishing our own integrity.

[22] The engaged who live a chaste courtship prepare best for marriage. They use their time of engagement to mature in their relationship. They grow in respect, self-sacrifice and fidelity. They are well-prepared to face the challenges of married life with a strong foundation of patience, reverence and self-control so necessary for a happy marriage.

[23] Statistics report that 60 percent of couples who live together do not go on to get married. Thirty-nine percent eventually break up. Couples who live together before they marry have a divorce rate that is 50 percent higher than those who do not. Chastity before marriage is the best preparation for the life-long commitment of marriage itself.

[24] In terms of chastity, “parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or

## PASTORAL LETTER 2019

for worse. It follows that they should take up this essential role and carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably and appropriately” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 259). Both by word and example, they should encourage their children to be modest and chaste.

[25] Sadly, some parents and grandparents do just the opposite. They condone sexual relations as just part of growing up. Too often children see their elders living with others outside of marriage. The witness of such a casual attitude toward sexual intimacy undermines chastity. Sometimes parents encourage their children to cohabit before marriage by their silence or even their actual support. Jesus had strong words for those who lead others to sin (cf. Mk 9:42).

[26] Parents who encourage their children to value and live the virtue of chastity teach them the profound meaning of love as self-giving. They prepare them for a joy-filled life on earth, enabling them even now to see God in their lives. As St. Augustine taught, “Chastity, or cleanness of heart, holds a glorious and distinguished place among the virtues, because she, alone, enables man to see God; hence Truth itself said, ‘Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.’”

[27] As long as we are alive, chastity will always be a challenge. Even such great saints as Augustine, Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena struggled with temptations. Certainly, during our early years of adolescence and youth, the temptations to yield to our sexual urges are greater. But no age is exempt. We must constantly renew our efforts to be in control of ourselves and live holy lives (cf. Ti 2:1-6). Prayer, frequent reception of the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist give us the grace and strength to be chaste. Works of charity, moving beyond our own desires to meet the needs of others, is a most effective way of dealing with temptations.

[28] We belong to the Lord (cf. Rm 14: 8). He himself loved us to the point of his death on the Cross and now he gifts us with the Holy Spirit. In the struggle to be chaste, the Holy Spirit enables us to achieve what we cannot do on our own (1 Jn 3:3). Thus, a life of chastity is possible when we are in right relationship with Jesus.

[29] Chastity brings its own reward. “Chastity is beauty to our souls, grace to our bodies, and peace to our desires” (Solon). It is the positive harnessing of our inward urges for a good greater than self-satisfaction. It matures us and brings inner peace. By chastity, we take control of ourselves. We are not dominated by our appetites and passions. We are not slaves to our instincts and urges. When we are chaste, we are free and can truly give ourselves to others in love. As St. John Paul II wrote, “Only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love.” In a word, chastity is the school of love.

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson,  
on the Feast of St. Agatha, Virgin and Martyr,  
the sixth day of February in the year of Our Lord,  
two thousand and nineteen.*

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