

Chastity and Mercy 1: *Beauty Trumps Brokenness*



A tough woman careful to avoid the gaze of others hears a man asking for her help. She turns toward Him. Jesus needs water, yes, but more than that He wants to give her what she needs—mercy that will well up from her depths and satisfy her forever. We discover her morally broken state later on in John 4; all that matters now is that Love has come to her and that Love alone can make her whole.

Chastity is all about wholeness. Far from the pale and passive face we ascribe to it, chastity gives generously, purposefully. ‘The successful integration of sexuality within the person’ (CCC#2337) means that we can be liberated from lust and rigorous self-concern and free to offer ourselves to others for their good.

Jesus embodied that self-giving as a man—as God yes, but most definitely as a man. He is tender and strong. Jesus is appealing, and probably as puzzling to the Samaritan woman as He was desirable to her. No matter: Jesus was clear in love; clear in what was best for her.

In that way, Jesus the merciful is also Jesus the chaste. Chastity means His gendered, sexual self is united—in no conflict—with His worship of the One. Seamless integrity: the chaste Son’s need for ‘water’ in whatever form was sourced in the River of His Father’s love for Him. Committed to the Father’s will alone, His very human encounters with women and men alike resulted in greater wholeness in their lives, as we shall see throughout these six weeks.

We are not Jesus, nor are we exact replicas of the pre-fallen pair who celebrated their loss of loneliness in bold, shame-free sexual love (Gen.2:18-25)! Today we live East of Eden, as inclined to shame and fear and exaggerated desire as we are generous self-giving. No matter. Though God’s image in us may be broken, it is not destroyed. Something deeper in us longs to become potent in love and lovely in response to it. While we have breath, we represent Him on earth as either male or female, of which the Catechism sings: ‘Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way’...their union grants them a share ‘in the Creator’s generosity and fecundity.’ (CCC#2335)

Bearing His image means that we can know this truth—you are a good gender gift. Marriage is but one expression of such gift-giving. Your masculinity is potent, capable of engendering life in others; your womanhood is creative in its exquisite response to such life. Whether single or married, chastity is the virtue that frees us to grow into the gift we are and to learn to offer that gift.

Scary yes. The Samaritan woman may have averted Jesus' gaze altogether had He not met her with such kindness. Similarly, He meets us this Lent with Almighty mercy, longing only to unite us with Himself. He is the source of 'living water' who seeks to well up in us. Might we leave old 'wells' behind this Lent and journey with Him toward chastity, the art of generous self-giving?

“Father of mercy, You made me and now You seek to redeem me. You know me better than I know myself. I ask for the mercy to linger in Your presence and wait for You. I am confident that Your eyes of Love will reveal what is truest and best about my humanity. I marvel at how I am made to be like You. I welcome You as my Source, the Love I need to live and to give as a sexual, gendered being. Spring up, O Well.”

Chastity and Mercy 2: *United We Stand*



The Samaritan woman of John 4 represents many Christians today; you could say she is a 'type' of the Church in the 21st century. Her Jewish roots inspired a 'holiness' tradition of which she was proud. At the same time, her heritage was also sourced in the intermingling of the Jews with the Canaanites, a nation that worshipped many gods through a variety of sexual practices. She too is divided--a woman of faith ("I know that Messiah is coming" v.25) fractured by a series of failed, dehumanizing relationships with men (v. 18).

Split between the proper and the profane, the Samaritan woman is us. Our love for God is often not reflected in the sexual decisions we make, if we take seriously the rates of divorce, co-habitation, and porn use among Christians (not to mention our lack of clarity on why the 'gay' and 'trans' self may not be God's best for His kids).

We are a people divided who, if not caught in the undertow of dehumanizing passions, are at least painfully aware of loved ones who are. In the words of Joseph Pieper, we witness how 'the same forces that give rise to life also have power to destroy life.'

We want more for our loved ones, more for us too. Sick of sensations that ignite souls only to burn them out, we are a people ready for chastity. Something in us knows that we are created for wholeness, for integrity. Chastity means that we are seeking to live a united life; in chastity, we effort to align 'the powers of life and love' (CCC#2338) within us with the God who placed them there in the first place. United with the Creator, we begin to discipline our creative powers. The chaste person 'seeks not itself blindly but with open eyes endeavors to correspond to the true reality of God, self and the world' (Pieper).

We can know reality! And reality in the sexual realm corresponds with what is good and right and true for others. We know that the sexual bond belongs only to a man and a woman united for life, and we know that creative self-giving, fully clothed, is God's call upon everyone--a fruitful expression of the connectedness that is related to sexual love. Chastity opposes any behavior that impairs such fruitfulness, and 'tolerates neither a double life nor duplicity of speech' (CCC#2338). Informed by reality, chastity discerns and refuses the enslaving power of sexual 'unrealities' and so can act clearly on behalf of others' good. In so doing, we the chaste reclaim our dignity (CCC#2339).

Getting there would be impossible if not for the God who looks upon us divided ones with almighty mercy. Just as Jesus engaged the Samaritan woman, He waits to catch our gaze. He sees what is most real about our sexuality; His Spirit ('living water') summons that reality. In His love, He grants us the choice to become chaste, to participate in our becoming whole-enough expressions of His will for us and others. Will we unite with Him this Lent and so allow wholeness to define us more than our divides?

'Father, our tendency to live divided lives seems woven into the very fabric of our histories, our culture, even our Church. Have mercy, Lord of mercy. Renew our vision of chastity that we might aspire to a whole life, a life of integrity founded on reality, not the unrealities that have deceived us. Thank You that they have not destroyed us. In mercy, do not let them destroy our loved ones. Have mercy on Your divided creation. Unite us in holy love, we pray. Breathe on our cry for chastity. Divided we have fallen, united may we stand.'

Chastity and Mercy 3: *Just Love*



'We seek to be chaste because someone we love needs us to be chaste.' Heather King

Justice means giving to another what is due him or her. In the sexual realm, chastity serves justice by freeing humanity to be good and faithful gifts to others; that involves keeping our sexual promises with those we most love. Therein lays our happiness, and another's. The person undivided by lust of any kind exercises justice by employing one's self-gift to confirm, not confuse or diminish another's gift. In so doing, we discover 'human freedom' (CCC#2339).

Such freedom is miles away from the enslaving drive to withhold from the beloved or to partake of one not our own. That applies to real people as it does to a host of sexy, romantic illusions that captivate us; the screens that ensnare us with stories and pictures of lust have rendered most of us adulterers of heart. Jesus cites such interior compromise as a sin on par with obvious sexual acts in Matthew 5:28. Rather than grant us sinners a 'pass' when it comes to our sexual musings, He applies the sin of adultery to any way we objectify others and make them players in the bedroom of our hearts.

So when a woman is caught in the act of adultery and dragged before Christ by a group of law-abiding elders in order to 'out' Him as either a libertine or a hardliner (John 8: 1-12), we need to listen. How does Jesus serve justice?

In order to answer this, we must take seriously how chastity serves justice and conversely, how sins against it are always profoundly unjust. Take adultery: the Mosaic law is utterly clear that to withhold from God and/or one's spouse and to partake of another not one's own is always profoundly unjust, so much so that it warrants a sentence of death (Lev. 20:10). Pieper is right: 'every external act has social consequences', including illicit sexual ones; we are now accustomed to so neutering sexual sin that 'we fail to see its impact on the order of our communal life and the realization of the common good.' We have all witnessed the wounding of families, communities and nations (Bill Clinton, anyone?) due to sins against chastity.

Like Jesus, Pieper also applies sins against chastity to 'lust of the eyes' when he refers to 'the roaming unrest of spirit' that drives us to relinquish ourselves to the world and its idols. Unable to live peacefully in our own flesh, we adulterous ones stuff ourselves selfishly with the flesh of others; here we must make real people unreal by separating them from love

and honor. Ultimately, we lose touch with reality altogether. Persons who suffer most are not ourselves but loved ones who have experienced the gradual loss of us 'to the seductive power of stimuli from an artificial civilization, in which the dishonorable team of blind lust and calculated greed' surround our broken sexuality (Pieper).

Persons familiar with the dehumanizing impact of their sexual sin do well to reckon with the injustices we have incurred. At once withholding and violating, we have damaged others. Sin brings death and warrants death. Further, our enemies are merciless and want nothing more than for us to live accused until death destroys us forever. Many of us have descended into despair, which has driven us into the oblivion of greater sins.

Here we must allow ourselves to be dragged by our accusers before the feet of Jesus. (We resume our glance on Jesus' treatment of the adulterous woman.) Knowing the merciless hearts of our accusers and His, He refuses to dialogue with them. (a good rule btw for all confronted by the clever and mean-spirited)

Rather, He bends down and considers the many ways these ones avoided dealing with their own sins and so failed to welcome the mercy they needed. Realizing the folly of the unjust passing judgment on the unjust, He asks: 'If anyone is without sin, cast the first stone.' Waiting guilty on the firing line, we hear only the sound of stones falling in the sand. When we look up we see only Jesus standing straight in order to look deeply into our eyes and say: 'Where are your accusers?' 'Gone', we admit. Then neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more.' His voice is as firm as His eyes moist with mercy. We straighten up as He did, at once peaceful and provoked to leave our sins at His feet. Merciful Jesus serves justice.

'Mercy is not opposed to justice but rather expressed God's way of reaching out to the sinner by offering him a new chance...God does not deny justice. He rather envelops it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice.' *Misericordiae Vultus*

'Grant us mercy, O God. Our sins and our accusers are many, the damage deep. May we never minimize its depth; may mercy alone silence and surpass it.'

Chastity and Mercy 4: *River Near*



'She who has been forgiven of much will love much'
Luke 7:47

Turning from our unchaste ways becomes beautiful when we turn toward Jesus. It's not only family and friends we violated with our jagged divides; we pierced Him too. He retaliates by releasing a fountain of affection for us (Zech 12:10-13:2) that cleanses and feeds us like the best mother and confirms us like the best father. St. Augustine said that the Church herself was born from Christ's wounds-- the blood and water released at Calvary (John 19: 34). I would add that her chastity was born there too as we the divided bathe and become whole in the river of His life, poured out for our freedom.

No-one better reveals the magnetic pull of Jesus' mercy than the sinful woman in Luke 7: 36-50. Somehow she knew that He alone could set her free from the shameful divisions in her life (probably related to sexual immorality). Socially, the religious elite withered her with just one glance to remind her that she was unfit for holy love. That did not stop her. When she saw Jesus dining with a Pharisee, she seized the moment, enduring the shame for the Mercy sitting before her. She threw herself at His feet and offered her all to Him with great sobs of repentance. I like to think of her positioning herself before His flood of blood and water until it engulfed her and surpassed her tears.

All the while the Pharisee looked askance at the messy encounter. The woman had to contend with his scorn and judgment, a divide that had separated her for too long from the Source of her wholeness. No more! Mercy had permeated her in the person of Jesus and she drew near to Him, never to let go of Him as the link to the life she wanted to live. Her faith saved her; she proceeded in peace (v.50).

She demonstrates to all of us who struggle with moral divides and shame that our cure lies in positioning ourselves before Jesus. Our chastity depends on Him. And it depends on the moral effort we make to abide in familiar, intimate communion

with Him. The Catechism is clear that our chastity is 'a long and exacting work' that can never 'be acquired once and for all' (#2342). Yet it is also 'a gift from God, a grace' granted to us by the Holy Spirit to become like Jesus (#2345).

The beautiful thing is that we become like Him through Him; we position ourselves before His merciful flood. That should include stirring up the waters of our baptism in multiple confessions, and many trips to the communion table where we unite our ache with the feast of His body and blood. It may involve extended silence before Him, meditating on Scripture, singing simple love songs to Him and listening to Him sing over us. He has given us a host of ways to live in the river. He is near. It is up to us to get in the water.

That means all of us, regardless of our sexual sin. Though no person's disintegration is exactly alike, the source of our wholeness is: Jesus Christ. It is inspired that we do not know the 'sin' of the sinful woman--was it lust, masturbation, pornography, fornication, or lesbian activity? Was she a prostitute, perhaps the victim of rape? All of these are included in the Catechism as offenses against chastity (#2351-2359). We who have fractured and been fractured find freedom at His feet. Like her, may our weeping be assumed in the river of Mercy.

'Jesus, we love You. We thank You, Lord of the Universe, that You draw near to us in our divided state. Help us to see Your mercy more closely than we see the Pharisee. Thank You that You are our one thing, our everything, the consummate friend. Thank You that You are the gift and the goal of our wholeness. Holy Spirit, remind us of the many ways we can live in the river. May we act on those promptings with surety of will and so contribute to the freedom of many. Grant us patience for the lifetime plan of becoming chaste.'

Chastity and Mercy 5: *River Here*



God calls each of us to be a river of life for others. Chastity liberates that flow; sourced in Christ and no longer sidelined by fear and lust, we grow into channels of pure, creative energy. The river's end? To build up Christ's body, one member to another.

It is radically simple, as anyone who attends a Living Waters-like group can attest. We gather in order to overcome sins against chastity then discover that the light of Love is routing dark motives and acts. Forgiven by Jesus, He then asks us to be His rays of light for others. What guides us is the other's good; grace welling up from Truth frees us to deny ourselves for what is best for another. Then, as the Spirit guides and empowers, we summon that good in our brother or sister.

This is the training ground for true friendship. 'The virtue of chastity blossoms in friendship' (#2347) exudes the Catechism, and such life-giving friendship is the basis for all other relationships. We must grasp this: chaste friendship, governed by robust self-giving aimed at the other's good—is the foundation of all other loves. That applies to singles who would love not to be, for marrieds (yes, chastity applies as much to the sexually active as to the abstinent) and to persons who became celibate in response to God's invitation to devoted partnership (#2349).

In each of these states of life, God calls us to rejoice in our sexual longings and with inspired self-control to become a gift that enhances the gift of another. Our greatest temptation may not be surging waters of desire that drown another but rather a neurotic fear of doing so that keeps us isolated. In the words of Aquinas, 'asexuality', more than temperate desire, 'is the moral defect.' The exuberant chaste soul feels many things but chooses the one thing—another's good.

We can witness the other virtues at work in chaste friendship. Pieper highlights prudence—the mature ability to make right decisions--as essential to friends who seek to see the truth and act clearly on it. In other words, a wise friend, governed by love and a truthful vision of the other, will help him or her make true decisions. These may well be in service of clarifying who (s)he is as gender 'gift' and in

helping him or her offer it without compromise. Prudent friendship seems an important antidote to the 'spiritual friendship' group who lose the truth each time they reinforce the 'gay self' as intrinsic to the friend at hand.

Temperance obviously comes to play in chaste friendship. That can apply as much to moderating positive desire as it does negative feelings. For example, one may be tempted to disdain a friend due to character defects. Self-control helps one to not reject but rather to wisely engage the friend for the sake of self-awareness and growth in holiness. And if non-marital friendship should awaken sexual desire then self-control helps one elevate that desire to holy love, which insists on the other's good. Wise and good boundaries protect friendship (and the dignity of the friend and his/her loved ones) from one's still-being-integrated desires. Friendship can still thrive as we become chaste, each of us a work-in-progress.

For this we need fortitude. How essential this virtue in forming good friendships! We who have experienced rejection and fear and sexual confusion in friendship need the will and Spirit to persevere. Pieper writes beautifully: 'Because man is vulnerable, he can be brave.' Every Christian is vulnerable to one's gift being rejected. For this we can choose to put 'on Christ' and unite our losses to Himself, confident that He who created us is ever-beautifying the gift we are. We can hold fast to that truth, especially when fallen creatures inform us otherwise.

Let's not allow anyone to block the stream flowing from the Source through these pretty good vessels. He made us to engender life in others. Where we are, the river is.

'Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers and sisters, love one another deeply from the heart' (1Pet 1:22).

'Father, thank You for releasing "streams of living water within us" (John 7:38) in order to make us sources of Your gift of life. May our friendships reflect this gift-giving. Grant us the prudence, the temperance and the fortitude to build fruitful friendships. Build up Your body as we Your people build up one another.'

Chastity and Mercy 6: *River Rising*



'...Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, in order to present her to Himself as a radiant Church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.' Ephesians. 5:25-27

Jesus reveals His self-giving to the church and world through a host of icons—relationships whose chastity makes Him known in ordered, exuberant love. St. Paul in the above passage uses the whole-enough love of a man for a woman to make earthy and evident Jesus' cleansing love for His Church.

God gives us little room to write off such a parallel as lofty mysticism; rather, He insists that we embody the truth of the Gospel by offering ourselves generously and humbly to each other as His Spirit secures and empowers us. 'Our bodies are a Bible,' insists Christopher West.

Our beautiful challenge? Always and everywhere we offer ourselves as either male or female, blessed with bodies that long for union. Here we discover that it takes God—we who drink deeply of His mercy and revere His truth---to reveal God. We can only master the unwieldy elements of our sexual desire when we are aligned with His desire for the other's good, not merely with what feels good to us. Owning that goal and the gift one is makes us chaste, one day at a time.

And oh what divine strength and beauty flow from the chaste! No conflict here with virility and fragrant womanhood. Chaste sexuality creates a 'glow of the true and the good irradiating from the ordered state' (Pieper) which feeds the souls it encounters, surpassing the adrenal kicks of sexy idols. Icons need not flaunt; they reflect glory from their depths. The Creator shines through His ordered creation and invites the world to know Him though them, through us.

We've all tasted and seen God's goodness through His human 'windows.' Seasoned male friendship has been for me, in the words of the Catechism, 'the witness of God's fidelity and loving kindness' (#2346). Merciful faithfulness assumes the face of Jesus through friendships forged in Him. Such friendship

empowered this icon (however 'chipped') to pursue a particular woman. Annette and I responded 'to God's call to give life by sharing in the creative power and fatherhood of God' (#2367).

Yes, our chaste union is about God's provision for us. And it is equally about creating and raising them—our kids, made and parented in His image as male and female. We are now a gender mosaic, distinct parts yet composed together in the whole of our lives, a glimpse for others of how Jesus' love makes His members strong, fragrant, and fruitful.

My starting point en route to chastity was homosexuality; others begin with more traditional failures or just the nagging lie that 'I will never be a good gift.' We gather before Him as one Church before the one Cross where we welcome His flood of blood and water. As we bear one another's burdens, the river rises--first ankle deep then up to our knees, climbing to our waists and then some until we are immersed in love (Ezek. 47) and confident that the chaste One will complete our chastity. Along the way we become the flood, exquisite witnesses in humble frames whose very clarity and purity releases living water to all who thirst.

'And where the river flows, everything will live' (Ezek. 47: 9b).

'Thank You God for taking our frustrated gift-giving and drenching it in mercy. We just wanted to overcome shameful problems but all along You wanted to enjoy intimacy with us, and to make our joy full by making us Your witnesses. May we delight in the good gifts we are becoming--the clarity of sight and affection we are experiencing. Help us to see others as You do and to love them accordingly, beginning with our most basic commitments. Free us to become a life-giving flow of chaste love, at once tender and bold.'