

CHASTITY, COMMUNION, HEAVEN AND HELL

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Once regarded as a virtue, chastity is now largely considered a fool's quest. Those perpetrating chastity's demise depict its death as a victory for life and love. Yet the opposite is true; an unchaste world is one of self-absorption and death. In subordinating the procreational nature of sex to recreational purposes, an unchaste society will always produce children it does not want. In such a society abortion is not an option but a necessary solution. The newly discovered right to live one's "sexuality" cannot be freely exercised without displacing a child's right to life. That these rights are incompatible should indicate something has gone wrong. To live our sexuality is, indeed, the most basic of rights. To follow where it truly leads is to pursue life itself. But those rights and the life to which it leads are not in erotic desires but in the true nature of our sexuality. Chastity's redemption lies in the redemption of sexuality itself. Only with sexuality not defined by desire, will we then see that chastity fulfills its true meaning and restores every child's right to life and love.

To understand this we must first reclaim today's undefined sexuality from the ever-shifting clouds of desire and restore its earthbound meaning. Regardless of species, our sexual nature, by definition, pertains to the biological creation of life. The truly sexual begins with this definition. Seemingly sexual acts that controvert its inherently creative nature are not true sexual acts. These would include both contracepted coitus or inherently infertile acts, such as sodomy or masturbation. Without connection to the propagation of life they are aberrations of sexuality. To consider them otherwise separates sexuality from either definition or meaning. Removed from these aberrations, sexuality restores its role in the creation of life. In loving the life biology creates, our sexuality becomes both procreative and unitive. This inseparable combination distinguishes our sexuality from the animal kingdom and makes it truly human.

Sexuality becomes unitive when it accepts its procreative nature. In accepting responsibility for the power to create life, "me" gives way to "we." In seeing the child he can father, a man will see every woman as a mother of that child. He will see her need to be loved as a woman, a person who can be a mother. A man loves all women when he leads a life that helps every woman experience motherhood at the right time in the right place. By loving every woman he loves every child, seeing the need all children have for parents who love one another for life. So also a woman must see a father in every man and a child beyond every man. Without this recognition of each other as potential mothers or fathers, there is no inherently unitive nature to our sexuality. The procreative begets the unitive.

Designating the sexual act as a conjugal act recognizes this inseparable unity. A chaste life honors that designation and directs itself to the proper formation of marital unions. It requires that we live as interconnected men and women, as potential mothers or fathers. In the full realization of our sexuality we embrace every child yet

conceived as worthy of our love. Chastity is not the vocation of single men and women but of all men and women. The goal for all is a child conceived in love. To live chastely is to participate in the joy of every child so conceived.

This is not abstinence but a call to ecstasy. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI tells us that ecstasy is not "...a moment of intoxication, but rather ... a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God." Chastity is an act of communion that brings all men and women into unity with God and the joy of creation itself. Its unitive nature brings all together in a communion of love and not simply a man and woman. Chastity invites us to live the ultimate communion of heaven here and now. To call this abstinence is absurd.

Yet the absurd reigns in today's world. While castigating chastity as an archaic burden, the Sexual Revolution marches willing men into slavery and death. Abortion, abandoned children, and broken families are not accidents but the natural outcome of sexuality separated from its creative nature. Its lifestyle is not a lifestyle at all, but a death-style, a rejection of life. It offers a faux heaven of self-fulfillment while destroying the communion of "we" to the battle cry of "me." Behind that faux heaven lies the hell of self-absorption. The Sexual Revolution is simply an invitation to start living that hell here and now.

Chastity is the answer to the false sexuality of the Sexual Revolution. It is the only true lifestyle, a life styled to life. Yet, most of us see chastity as a life of denial. Perhaps the problem is not with chastity but how we see it. The unrepentant thief taunted Jesus on the cross, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" Without shame, the thief saw only pain without purpose. But looking at the same man hanging on the same cross, the good thief saw beyond the pain into heaven itself, "Lord, remember me..." One thief saw Jesus without grace. The other saw Jesus through grace. Likewise, we can see the chaste life without grace as pain without purpose or we can see it with grace as an invitation to participate in the joy of creation. The former diminishes and embitters, while the latter draws us toward heaven, a heaven that extends into eternity.

The choice between heaven and hell is before us now. Today we face a choice between a lifestyle that rejects life or one that embraces life. Chastity rejects the self-absorbing hell of false sexuality and fulfills the heaven bound nature of true sexuality. Through grace, the chaste participate in the communion of man and God, living their sexuality radically and ecstatically. This is not less but more. It is not a way to earn heaven, but to live heaven here and now. Only a world upside would consider this a fool's quest.

THE CHURCH TEACHES – AND JUDGES – CONSCIENCES

By Fr. Timothy V. Vaverek

A number of bishops have announced that Catholics in irregular unions whose consciences are “at peace” with God must be allowed to receive Holy Communion. This has never been the belief or practice of the Church, yet they assert it is rooted in the traditional teaching that conscience must be respected, even when mistaken. They fail to mention, however, that only the *dictates* of conscience are binding, not all its *judgments*, and that conscience is subject to the teaching and judgment of the Church. Once these truths are taken into account, the coherence of the Church’s apostolic practice stands out as clearly as the errors of the recent, unwarranted innovation.

In Catholic thought, conscience has two roles. First, it sometimes *commands* that a particular action be done or avoided. The action can be external or internal. Conscience has this authority naturally because it is an expression of practical reason, which comes from God. Although distorted by imperfection and error, the dictate must be obeyed because it is the echo of God’s voice. This is why our primary duty in life is to form conscience according to the truth and to obey its commands regardless of any earthly authority.

The second role of conscience is *judging* past, present, or hypothetical actions. This might be called our “sense of morality.” It judges, for example, whether certain acts are right or wrong, better or worse, or permissible, but without commanding a present action. At times it lacks clarity or certitude. As a judgment of reason, it cannot be equated with feelings or opinions. Unless joined in a particular instance to a dictate for action, these judgments can and must yield to commands from legitimate authorities.

We obey the *dictate* of conscience because we must, not because it is correct. In that moment, it is all we have to guide us. Afterward, the *judgment* of conscience may reassess our actions or previous judgments in light of a better understanding of the truth. It might even reveal that we were culpable about an erroneous dictate rooted in an ill-formed conscience. Thus, the two roles are distinct, but inseparable.

It is crucial to recognize that conscience, like the related human capacities of reason and will, has been created for a purpose: to enable us to respond and to commit ourselves to God, others, and creation. As such, conscience engages the entire human person, expressing an on-going dialogue that shapes our relationships and who we become. It has eternal significance.

This means that conscience, both in its dictates and its judgments, is personal and communal, not “private” in an autonomous or subjectivist sense. No one stands as an isolated individual before God in conscience because everyone exists in a myriad of relations with others. This includes a relation to Christ and the Church, who intercede and collaborate with the Holy Spirit to draw every person to share life with God. Christians, of course, stand as members of Christ and his Church.

These truths about conscience present a dilemma. The fallible dictates of conscience must be followed in response to God for the sake of ourselves, others, and the world. We do not want, deliberately or innocently, to act or to judge incorrectly because of the harm this would do. Nevertheless, we know that through innumerable and unrecognized influences – including sin –we suffer from defects and errors that distort our perceptions and judgments. Who, then, can trust himself, alone, to judge morality and circumstances accurately, especially when these involve vested interests (e.g., the validity of a marriage)?

It was precisely to enlighten and strengthen conscience that Jesus proclaimed the Gospel and drew humanity to himself as members of his Church, establishing her pastoral office and infallible Magisterium. The Church, like her Spouse, does not replace or coerce conscience, but with Him serves conscience by teaching, correcting, healing, and, when needed, rebuking. That is the entire mission of Christ and the Church, since in conscience we acknowledge sin, receive the Gospel, and live as children of God. Thus, it would be a betrayal of Christ to suggest that conscience, as dictate or judgment, lies outside the Church and her judgment.

Recognizing her apostolic duty, the Church has undertaken to declare consciences wrong when they violate the Gospel and has applied various pastoral remedies to bring her members to alter mistaken beliefs and practices. Her motive is simple: Jesus came to free everyone to share his joy by living God’s truth in love, even those burdened and imprisoned by innocent errors.

Consequently, the Church has never limited herself to helping the faithful discern whether their conscience is “at peace with God,” as some have recently claimed, insisting instead that Catholics are bound in conscience to accept and to live the Gospel as taught by the Church. Otherwise, no one in good conscience could ever have been refused Holy Communion, even if their beliefs and behaviors were damaging to themselves and others.

Contrary to recent innovations, the Church has consistently taught that a judgment of conscience cannot appeal to “the greater good” to justify evil actions, such as targeting civilians during war, contraception, or sexual relations outside a valid marriage. Those making such appeals must set aside the fallible *judgment* of their conscience in favor of the Gospel proclaimed by the Church. Of course, they must obey their conscience if it erroneously *commands* the action. The Church, however, can still seek to dissuade and correct them, even withholding Holy Communion, in order to lead them and others from harmful behaviors to healthy ones. This in no way judges their personal culpability or denies them access to God’s grace.

The Church must judge consciences and confront error and evil, culpable or not. We know the tragedies that have unfolded when bishops and clergy set aside Catholic teaching and discipline in their lives and in the Church. That some pastors have mandated a repetition of this mistake is disheartening. That genuine pastoral care continues nevertheless is a source of solace and hope.

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