

Reflections During Advent-Part Three, Chastity

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Summary: Paints a picture of chastity as “a positive virtue, a strength and a power in the great world around us” through personal stories, and quotes from literature, scripture, and spiritual writers. The marriage act is compared to love and union with God. Speaks of chosen and unchosen celibacy. Extols friendship, community, and the need to express tenderness.

Other keywords: sex, abortion, purity, new morality (DDLW #561).

HOW PRESUMPTUOUS it is to try to treat of such a subject in a short article, when great books (like Dietrich von Hildebrand’s *In Defense of Purity*) have been written on the subject. I can only put down a few thoughts, a few incidents, perhaps a few things I have read which influenced my thinking profoundly.

A few years ago a young woman came to our farm-retreat house to spend a few days before Pentecost, on which great day she was going to be confirmed together with two or three other adults in the local parish. You could not say she was spending her time in silence and recollection, because she was an ardent and lively creature and shouted rather than talked and moved swiftly rather than with the thoughtful deliberation one might expect for such an occasion. She was as happy as a lark and after the great occasion when we all sat down to table to celebrate with a good Sunday dinner, she snatched the short breviary from her pocket and called out loudly, “Listen to this! Listen to St. John Chrysostom: ‘ . . . the grace of the Holy Spirit . . . has been poured out abundantly and has transformed the whole world into heaven; not by changing of natures, but by correcting of wills. For it found a tax gatherer and transformed him into an evangelist; it found a persecutor and made him into an apostle; it found a robber and conducted him to Paradise; it found a prostitute and rendered her equal to virgins; it found the learned and showed them the gospels. . . .’ A prostitute—equal to virgins! That’s me. That’s me today. A miracle!”

IT SEEMS TO ME (I have not a copy of the book by me) that Faulkner’s “The Wild Palms” has a passage which refers to the loss of virginity as irreparable. It is contained in a strange passage, a long conversation between friends in a railroad station while they were waiting for a train. In page-long, involved sentences the thought is difficult to disentangle from the story which deals with the black power of sex to bring two people to their death, one a physical death through an abortion and the other a death in life, a moral death. A loss of virginity is a loss of integrity, wholeness, a solitary completeness. In marriage, it is a surrender, a giving of one’s self to another, “a dying to self,” a “putting off the old man” and putting on the new in that one is on the way to becoming cocreator with God of another human being. Sex, having to do with life itself, affects us, body, mind and soul.

It is generally conceded, taking in the whole man as it does, that the marriage act purged of impurities is the nearest thing to the beatific vision we can know. The intense pleasure and delight of the act itself may be like a sword piercing the heart, but though momentary in itself, it colors the hours and days, people and events, before and after, so that one is apt to feel that one is seeing others as God sees them, loving them as God loves them.

These things cannot be described except by the saints who knew that sin is a turning from God and a turning to creatures, a perversion, and pleasure becomes pain and light a most heavy darkness, and delight a deep sadness of the heart.

“What do I love when I love Thee,” St. Augustine cried out in *his Confessions*. The entire Book Ten of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (it can be obtained in paperback) sings the beauty of sex and the surpassing beauty of God. “But what do I love, when I love Thee? not beauty of bodies, nor the fair harmony of time, nor the brightness of the light, so gladsome to our eyes, nor sweet melodies of varied songs, nor the fragrant smell of flowers, and ointments, and spices, not manna and honey, not limbs acceptable to embracements of flesh. None of these I love, when I love my God; and yet I love a kind of light, and melody, and fragrance, and meat, and embracement when I love my God, the light, melody, fragrance, meat, embracement of my inner man: where there shineth unto my soul what space cannot contain, and there soundeth what time beareth not away, and there smelleth what breathing disperseth not, and there tasteth what eating diminisheth not, and there clingeth what satiety divorceth not. This is it which I love when I love my God.”

I read a story by Maxim Gorky once, called “Twenty-Six Men and a Girl” and it was about men who worked in an underground bakery, a cellar perhaps like those of Italian and Jewish bakeries which still flavor the neighborhood on the Lower East Side of New York.

In a shop above the bakery there was a delightful young girl, and the joy of these men’s lives was to catch a glimpse of her beauty and unsullied joy. To them she was the image of purity and the thought of “making” her never crossed their minds. They loved her as the only spot of beauty in their laborious lives and they enjoyed seeing her radiant and unclouded face looking in on them every now and then as they toiled. But there came a day when an outsider, persisting in his advances to her, made the grade, so to speak, and the image faded and the men sank back into the dullness and ugliness of their daily lives, unvisited any longer by the vision of chastity.

It was a long time ago that I read this story, but I thought of it when a dozen young men from the Deep South sat in the *Catholic Worker* office one day and confronted me with the question, “What is wrong with sexual intercourse outside marriage?” They asked me this because they had read in my column, “On Pilgrimage,” a few remarks “in defense of purity.”

What is purity? According to my little desk dictionary, it is the state or quality of being clean; freedom from foreign or adulterating matter; innocence, virtue; freedom from evil or improper motives. And the word chastity is freedom from obscenity or depravity in life or thought; sexual purity.

I could not answer these young boys from the dictionary, I could only say, “I believe in God and His Commandments and I believe in Scripture as the source and re-source of our life. I believe that adultery is not just having intercourse with a married person but it is being

unfaithful to God. In the Old Testament and the New we are called adulterers and fornicator in the sense of being unfaithful to God. We are all guilty.

“Of course sex is good. It is good and beautiful. In the Bible the Canticle is a love poem and all Catholic mystics turn to it for a description of God’s love for the soul. He is spoken of as the Bridegroom, ‘Behold thou art fair, my beloved, and comely. . . . His left hand is under my head and his right hand shall embrace me. . . . In my bed by night, I sought him whom my soul loveth. . . . Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth. . . .’”

“The tracing of analogies holds an honored place in Catholic theology,” a priest writes to me. “Outside of divine revelation itself, it is the only positive means we have for studying and contemplating God. By means of it theologians seek to fill the gaps left by revelation in our knowledge of God. And in this particular case, the analogy between sexual union and the union of love between God and the soul is at once affirmed by reason and pointed out by divine revelation itself.”

CERTAINLY it would seem that the world is obsessed by sex these days. When there is talk of the new morality, young people think of it as a new sexual morality. Fr. de Menasce, writing in *Commonweal* a good while ago, says that the reason men are obsessed by sex is that there is so little satisfaction in their work life. The majority of them work to earn a living by nerve-wracking toil in a factory or at a machine, work that exhausts them nervously but not physically. They do not use their bodies for working, walking or playing. There is no sense of creativity in their work. They work to gain money to support them in the comforts they have become accustomed to, the pleasurable but not particularly nourishing food, the recreation of sex, included in every “good time.” The lack of tenderness in people’s relations with each other. tenderness expressed by warmth of voice and speech, handclasp and embrace—in other words, the warmth of friendship—lack of these things too means a concentration on sex, and the physical aspects, the animal aspects of sex.

I remember a 16-year-old bringing in a record called *Fever* and when I got tired of the panting voice and the throbbing drums on the record I said that it reminded me of an animal in heat, and when a younger sister laughed, the hurt 16-year-old said to me haughtily, “You are too old to know what it means,” and to the younger sister, “and you are too young.” It seemed to me to be a far cry from my own romantic attitudes at the age of 15 when the mere sight of a certain boy would make my heart turn over in my breast and I worshipped from afar all one winter without having ever spoken to him.

Oh, the need there is in us to express tenderness! When there is a small child in a family where there are teen-agers who are having a hard time of it, I have often noticed how they spend their tenderness, express their physical love in the tenderness they expend on the littlest one.

THERE WAS AN ARTICLE once in *Blackfriars*, the English Dominican monthly, dealing with the “unwilling celibate,” and I suddenly realized how many there were of such in the world. Teen-agers are unwilling celibates and widows and widowers, separated husbands and wives, and prisoners and the countless millions of people who live alone in the world, who are not chosen, as they think, by another, who go about their work and their family lives never having known “the grand passion” of sexual love. I cannot believe that it is coldness and

selfishness that unfits them for love. Man is made to love and be loved and the need for love is always there.

Community of work, community living certainly can take its place with its demands. One of the attractions of war, Antoine St. Exupery wrote in one of his books, was that sense of community men felt at moments in dire hardships shared, danger and suffering faced bravely. One might say that modern man almost craves this initiation, this trial by fire, to prove to himself his manhood; and though not recognized immediately by the thousands behind the lines, in future years "service" is looked back on as a time of sharing together an experience, a great trial of endurance, if only of boredom and work.

To offer the suffering of celibacy, temporary or permanent, to the Lord is to make use, in the best possible way, of man's greatest joy.

As I conclude these brief paragraphs, I am on my way to Boston to be present at the funeral Mass at the cathedral for Jane Marra, who was the founder of the House of Hospitality in Boston. She was in her 80's when she died, a single woman, a woman who was a worker (a member of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union), who lived her entire life with an asthmatic sister and a deaf-and-dumb brother in the slums of Boston which surround the cathedral. She spent her last days in a rest home run by the city, her brother and sister having died before her.

Her association with the *Catholic Worker* began in our second year, 1934, when she sent in a dollar though the subscription price is only 25 cents. A few months later, when the son of a Chicago newspaper editor visited us in New York on his way to Harvard and asked what he could do to help the work, I gave him a list of our subscribers in Boston, not more than a score then, and told him to send postcards to them and ask them if they wished to start a center.

From that first small meeting, Jane emerged as the one to rent a loft to serve as the first House of Hospitality and meeting place. It was through her that Arthur Sheehan and John Magee came into the work and took over an entire house on Tremont Street, and from that house and its meetings thousands of readers were added to the mailing list. A farm was bought by the group, in Upton, Massachusetts, where three or four families lived and raised their children, children who are married now and have children of their own. The Worcester house was started from the Boston house.

It was through Jane that two of our editors came to work with us, Arthur Sheehan and John Cort, the latter spoken of as an illustrious alumni of the CW in that he served as head of the Peace Corps in all the Philippines and is now with the poverty program in Massachusetts. Was it the House of Representatives which objected to the cost of transporting John and his ten or so children to the other side of the world? Perhaps that is why the government is keeping him at home now.

It was John and Helen Cort who sent me the telegram about Jane's death, and there will be many there at that funeral whose lives were changed by the quiet, unobtrusive work and presence of Jane Marra.

I think of Jane now, her long and useful life of celibacy, one might say of poverty, chastity and obedience, though there were no vows made and none of the security of the religious life

to sustain her. But such evidences of the power of grace in the world today, “that which is of God in every man” as the Quakers say, gives one knowledge as well as faith that chastity is a positive virtue, a strength and a power in the great world around us.

I am sure that Jane met death with serenity and strength and when I hear the *In Paradisum* sung for her, I will exult with her happiness crowned and her expectation of happiness fulfilled.

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