



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## Custody of the Eyes



### If you would keep your soul, keep your eyes

**I**mages have a way of burning themselves into remembrance. As one who has looked closely at a series of bright images still sees them when his eyes are closed (a phenomenon called “afterimage” or “image burn-in”) --- long after we have seen things, their image remains burned into memory --- almost akin to a permanent retinal scar from looking too long at the sun. Even as the thing seen has either been removed from sight, or no longer exists, it still affects our vision, distorts it, superimposes upon it something that was once seen, is present no longer, but somehow cannot be unseen even as we look upon other images.

The word “images” is particularly apropos of our discussion of Custody of the Eyes because what we look most intently upon most often --- are other people; people who are created *in imago Dei*, in the image of God. But it is precisely this image that we fail to see when we do not exercise Custody of the Eyes; rather it is the flesh, the outward appearance that conceals it and under which it lies unchanging even as the veil of the flesh ages, withers, and dies. ***In a word, we look upon bodies*** --- and not just upon bodies, but upon bodies *to the exclusion of their souls* --- those visually inaccessible images of God in which the *substance* of their created being unchangeably exists, even as the physical habitat embodying it decays and disappears.

### We cannot “unsee” what we have seen

If you consider this carefully, it really is a very frightening realization. We cannot unmake, erase, or otherwise expunge from memory the images that we have allowed our eyes to see. We can suppress them, and even for a time forget them, but they remain withal in that vast repository of experiences that is summarized in what we call memory. It is a repository with locking gates that

open inwardly only and through which passage is always *in* and never *out*; an almost inexhaustible deposit that is ever accruing and from which nothing can be discarded, no matter how useless or even harmful. Our eyes are those gates. Through them, what we have seen enters and is kept for the rest of our lives. Once we have carelessly allowed our eyes to see something, especially something of our choosing --- and most especially if we subsequently find it detrimental to our happiness --- we cannot open the gates to expel it, we cannot choose to “unsee” it. This is precisely why we must keep custody of our eyes. As our hands only touch what we *will* them to touch, so our eyes only see what we will them to see.

I am not speaking, of course, of what we cannot avoid seeing, or what we commonly see in our everyday activities: most of these are things that we do not willfully *choose* to see, but come to us in our everyday experiences: nature around us, structures built by men, the furnishings that surround us in our homes or places of work. I am speaking of what we *choose* to see --- and linger upon; in other words, the seeing that involves the conscious choice of the *will*.

There are two distinct categories to which we must pay careful attention concerning the custody of our eyes. One leads *to* sin and unhappiness, and one leads *from* sin to unhappiness. The first involves the sin of lust, the second the sin of pride. Both are deadly and both lead to unhappiness.

## I. Avoiding the Occasion of the Sin of Lust

Well you know that of which I speak: the glance that lingers for that fraction of a second longer that separates a mere perception from a willful act; the glance that passes from mere recognition to illicit interest; from acknowledgement to invitation. The glance that is really the unstated question: “Are you interested in me? You see that I am interested in you.” It is unmistakable ... and you know it! What is more *the other knows it, too*, and will either recoil from you or cooperate with you. It transforms a casual encounter into something briefly intimate, from the occasion of sin to the invitation to sin. In an instant we communicate our willingness to cooperate in sin with the other. Our imagination is stirred: “What does her body look like beneath her clothing? Is she likely an adroit lover?” The imagination leaves no part of her body unravished, untouched ... and in a split second you have already undressed her, explored her, caressed her and had sex with her.

If one of them is virtuous (or simply not interested), they will deflect the glance to something politely innocuous, or simply ignore it altogether. The problem, however, is that we have already sinned! We know it. They know it. Almighty God knows it. But we pretend that because the glance was so brief --- and in vain --- we have not sinned. But that is not what Jesus Christ tells us: “But I say to you, that whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (St. Mat. 5.28)

This is Custody of the Eyes: paying attention to what one *willfully* sees, opens ones eyes to, lingers upon. And because the sin to which it most readily lends itself is that of lust, the desire for sexual intimacy, and gratification through the other, Custody of the Eyes is the most effective means to that beautiful virtue of Holy Chastity. The two are inseparable. We only come to desire what we see with the eyes, and for that reason it is paramount that the Catholic keep custody of his eyes, holding them in abeyance to his *will* --- not allowing them to wander wantonly upon all things that present themselves, but carefully choosing what he allows himself to see, knowing his weakness and proclivity to sin, and that the avenue to sin almost always begins with the eyes.

Instead, as a Christian ought, the most proper posture for the eyes is the posture of humility, of looking down when in the presence of the opposite sex, reigning in the wandering of the eyes that, unhindered by the will, would freely and salaciously roam over the body of a woman, taking into himself, desiring for himself, that which belongs to another. It is not only the sin of lust, but the sin of theft, the taking to oneself through stealthy desire what is not offered and what is not ones own. For some [helpful suggestions](#), [click here](#).

## II. Avoiding the Occasion of the Sin of Pride

Custody of the eyes and the sin of pride? What am I talking about?

We lust as much for knowledge in the mind much as we lust for sensuous gratification in the body. We want to *know!* Everything. From the very beginning it has been thrust upon us that all knowledge is good; that he who knows more is superior to one who knows less. We esteem those who know the most and disdain those who know the least. Indeed, it is a matter of pride to possess more of anything, especially knowledge, yes? By extrapolation, then, he who could know everything would be far superior to those who know less. There would be no corner, no aspect of the universe of which he was not potentially knowledgeable. Such an individual would be esteemed beyond measure, and the closer he moves to the total acquisition of knowledge the closer, we believe, he comes to human perfection, and therefore happiness. Right?

Those who would have you believe this --- that *all knowledge*, regardless of what, is good --- are both foolish and dangerous. Do you doubt it? Remember that the Fall of our First Parents, Adam and Eve, was predicated upon the false promise of the fullness of knowledge as the greatest possible good:

“And the serpent said to the woman: No, you shall not die the death. For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, *your eyes shall be opened*: and you shall be as Gods, *knowing* good and evil.” (Genesis 3.4-5)

### III. Not all Knowledge is Good and Beneficial

The consequence, we know, was death, suffering, and misery --- not only for Adam and Eve, but for all their posterity through the sad patrimony of Original Sin passing from generation to generation. Not all knowledge is good and beneficial. Do you doubt it still?

Let us suppose that we *genuinely* sought to know *all* things, thinking ourselves surely to be the better for it. After all, “to know” is always better than “not to know”. To know is to be among the “learned”, and not to know is to be among the “ignorant” --- and who wishes to be ignorant, right? Apart from analytical propositions (for example logical propositions and mathematical utterances) that always resolve themselves into conclusions already implicit within, and derived from, premises already stated, most of our “knowledge” is empirical, that is say, it is derived from sensory experience. To say that we *know* something is really saying that we have experienced something and are therefore acquainted with it. We do not know mathematical propositions in the same way we know the fragrance of a rose. We cannot know that fragrance analytically in the way that we know that  $1+1=2$ . We must *experience* it.

### IV. A better analogy

Perhaps a better analogy exists: to one who is color-deficient and has never seen the color purple, every attempt to help such a person analytically arrive at purple through invoking the science of chromatics, the visible color spectrum, or the graphic designer’s use of RGB or Hex color codes, fails miserably. He is unable to *experience* the color purple because of defective retinal cones in his eyes and nothing short of the *experience* of the color purple will suffice. Only upon *experiencing* purple would he be able to say that he *knows* purple.

Now, this is a very benign paradigm. I think it likely that the color-deficient man would find it beneficial to actually experience the color purple. A garden of flowers would be all the more beautiful for the greater multiplicity of colors. Certainly to one who is deficient in both red and yellow, a clear and distinguishable acquaintance with each would be decidedly beneficial while approaching traffic lights. Such knowledge redounds to both his happiness and his safety.

### V. Other ... Paradigms

Let us now consider our acquaintance with *other* types of experiences that would qualify us as *knowing* certain things, and see, in light of them, if we will still maintain the proposition that *all knowledge is good and beneficial*.

In order to do this, however, we must be prepared to accept the fact that our subsequent knowledge of them will remain with us, and that we will be unable to “unknow” them once we have acquired knowledge of them. You will probably *know* more than you presently know, and whether you deem this as having redounded to your *happiness and well-being* only you will be able to decide afterward ... but the preponderance of the likelihood that such knowledge will be detrimental to both is of the highest order of probability. This is not for the faint-hearted. Be forewarned! If you nevertheless adamantly hold that *all knowledge is good and beneficial to us*, then proceed, even as I discourage you to. To proceed is pride and arrogance --- and the foul fruit of it will be commensurable with both.

After serious consideration we have decided, for the sake of our readers, to include no hyperlinks to graphics and topics of the types of “knowledge” available to us --- *at will* ... things that we could learn about in depth, or visually experience, that would “add” to the sum of our knowledge even as it would detract from our happiness, or at least our peace of mind. Instead we will leave it to your imagination and allow you to decide if acquiring such knowledge will be good for you and redound to your happiness because it redounds to your knowledge. Such topics would include, among, many, many, others:

- Body farms
- Bacteria on our skin
- The Procedures of Forensic Pathologists
- Dust mites
- The Procedures of Undertakers
- Autopsies
- Pornography
- Necrophilia

Our learning, *knowing*, of such things would surely accrue to the sum of our knowledge ... but not to our happiness. Upon learning of them, we would that we had never known them --- our limited world of knowledge would be a decidedly happier place for us --- but once known such things cannot be “unknown”. *What we choose to acquire in knowledge* we sometimes purchase at the cost of *happiness*. In a word, what we let into our minds --- what we *choose* to let into our minds --- is of vital importance and will directly affect our happiness, both our *natural* happiness in this life and our *supernatural* happiness in the life to come. The latter, especially concerning the acquaintance, knowledge, and experience with pornography and its detrimental effect on our moral and spiritual lives we need not elaborate upon.

## 6. Am I Suggesting that Ignorance is Bliss?

Of course not! Only the most superficial reading would lend itself to this brainless interpretation.

My present reflection, both in meaning and tenor, is not to denigrate education. A properly educated man is an asset in every way, both to himself and to those around him. I hasten to add that education is not to be confused with possessing diplomas or degrees. I know too many men with both, who possess far less knowledge than some who have neither. Sadly, we need Forensic Pathologists, Morticians, and Epidemiologists, to name a few.

What we do not need is *indiscriminate knowledge*: knowledge of everything and anything. This is neither possible nor, as we have seen, desirable. In the end, it is the *Custody of our Eyes* --- what we allow, permit, *will* to see, and thence to know --- that is really the most vigilant guardian of both our happiness in this life and our redemption in Christ that culminates in the total felicity of our souls in the next.

As a postscript, I would add that it is extremely unlikely that the educated man will find his academic faculties of any use whatever in Heaven ... or of any avail in Hell. I suspect that the latter is more populated than the former with men and women of extraordinary academic credentials. Simple souls who know less and love more are far more likely to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (St. Luke 10.21).

## Honoring a Woman and Keeping Oneself Chaste

- **When greeting a woman do not attempt to speak to her with your eyes.** You know what I am talking about. Human communication does not rely solely upon words. What you would not dare to say with your lips you attempt to say with your eyes. Do you think that she does not know what you are doing, implying, attempting, suggesting? If you would not dare say it with your tongue, do not attempt to surreptitiously say it with your eyes. If your lips say one thing and your eyes say another, you are being both dishonest and deceitful. You know it, and she will, too. You already have broken trust; what more can she expect from you, given this?
- **You may look into a woman's eyes only to the extent of being courteous** and acknowledging her presence. That should take no longer than a second. If she is with her spouse, fiancé, or boyfriend, it is your obligation to address *him*, not her. This prevents jealousy and establishes a firm recognition of her relationship to him (which is intimate) as distinct from her relationship to you (which is not).
- **Never allow your eyes to wander over the body of a woman.** Do not disrobe her with your eyes to make a physical assessment of her attributes, no matter how suggestive or open to scrutiny her clothing makes her. Reign in your eyes if you would reign in your passions. You will only desire what you see, and you will only *deliberately* see what you *will* to linger upon.

- **Never allow yourself to be alone with a woman**, if at all possible. Find a reason, any excuse, to avoid being alone with another woman. This protects both you and her --- not only from the occasion of sin, but of scandal. Make every effort to include someone else to be with you. From a merely practical point of view in these days of endless litigation, especially concerning sexual harassment, you are leaving yourself open to embarrassment at best or a lawsuit at worst. How are you to counter what she may say that you said or did "in private"?
- **Never touch a woman needlessly**. Those seemingly harmless, utterly innocuous gestures in which you lay your hand upon a woman's arm while speaking, or gently touch her back to gain her attention, are, more often than not, a purposeful touching of her body --- and you know this! They are pretenses of gestures of friendliness or undue familiarity in which you violate that physical distance that separates you from what your eyes have already lingered upon with desire. They are often implicitly sexual, for now you have actually touched what you have desired --- perhaps not to the extent that you would like, but in an almost vicarious substitution for what you cannot touch without reproach, you touch under the guise of innocence ... when it is not innocent at all.
- **Avoid innuendoes**. That "jesting" reference to something unseemly or inappropriate is most often not a "jesting", but a "testing". "How far can I go in my suggestive language or carefully crafted innuendoes before I can ascertain if she is willing to cooperate with me? Where is the threshold? Can I move further beyond it?" What you are really doing is testing the water. "Is it inviting?"
- **Respect her privacy**. Do not attempt to gain more personal information about a woman than is necessary to the occasion. What her name is, where she lives, how long she has lived there, what her interests are, what she does for a livelihood, if she is married or unmarried, has children or not, is none of your business. Prying into her life is invading her privacy. It is a deliberate attempt to bridge the distance between you and her: you gain a kind of "possession" of her by being privy to these things that are not public. It suggests intimacy, or the desire for intimacy, where none is appropriate.

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