



# Boston Catholic Journal

Nihil autem nisi Jesu

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Dedicated to Mary, Mother of God

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## Chastity and Charity: Beauty Unveiled



by a Cloistered Poor Clare Colettine Nun

*"Since our Lord has said follow me, I understand that we really are to follow Jesus Christ - the spotless lamb, the virginal Son of a Virgin Mother - through true purity of heart and body until death. Through this true vow of angelical chastity, one becomes a loyal bride of Jesus Christ, in*

*virtue of that faithfulness promised and given at the time when we made our vows in the hands of superiors, who represented God on earth; a pledge made in the presence of witnesses:- the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Francis, St. Clare, and all the Saints, and before those other witnesses who were present when we made our vows at our holy profession; a profession through which we obtained the remission of all our sins and the full assurance of eternal life." (St. Colette: Testament )*

## **The Vow of Chastity**

**A good deal of confusion surrounds the notion of the vow of chastity.** While most Religious accept without question that one must learn to be poor and obedient, it comes as a surprise to some that one equally must *learn* to be chaste. What is more, to add to the confusion, chastity is — in a way that poverty and obedience are not — a universally governing precept that applies with equal rigor to the single, the married, and the Religious state. Does this surprise you? Several years ago, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, was taken to task by the secular press for urging husbands to exercise chastity in their marriage. "Absurd", they cried in protest, being clueless of the concept of chastity itself, understanding concupiscence in the most superficial and vulgar terms.

The confusion arises, because we misunderstand the word itself. It is derived from a Latin word of which only the past participle is still in use. *Castus* was the word the overseer used when his slaves had finished scrubbing the marble floors at the crack of dawn each morning, having reported to the mistress that the floors had been scrubbed and hence were clean, the mistress then proceeded with affairs of the household.

It is important to note that *castus* not only denotes the accomplished fact of cleanliness, but it also denotes that it was a cleanliness achieved by the process of scrubbing. It is that awareness of a *process*, not in itself an end, but aiming toward an end more important than the act by which the end is realized and through which it is attained.

Applied to the concept of chastity, it is to be noted that the process of cleansing is not only apropos of the end, but necessary to it.

## **Chastity is not Simply Abstinence from Sex**

It is a pity that the word chastity has come to acquire such a shallow connotation limited to abstinence from sexual activity, for even in the married state chastity needs to be practiced. Mutual agreement to intimacy is necessary and each partner needs to listen to the wishes of the other. The single state is the training ground for this discipline which is as necessary to Religious life as to marriage. If one cannot be chaste outside of marriage (natural or mystical) or Religious life, it is unlikely that one will be able to be truly faithful in the single state.

To be chaste is to be exclusively another's — and not, as it were, the common property of many. The mystical marriage of a Religious to her Divine Spouse Jesus, Whose Ring binds her to Him, together with her vow, is as real as any marriage in the world. She belongs to Him alone! He has taken her to Himself and her betrothal to Him excludes all others. She is called to the chastity of a marriage! How differently we understand this than the world does, even as it failed to understand the Pope John Paul II's insistence that *the married be chaste* — free from desire for another, and absolutely faithful to each other.

## **We are all Called to Chastity**

In both cases the aim of chastity is charity — although in a Religious it extends to *all* in a way that is super-eminent — for a man does not see his wife in all women, nor a woman her husband in all men — but the consecrated Nun sees her Divine Spouse in *everyone*, and fidelity to Him is her fidelity to them! It is, to them, the pledge of His love — for in her, they find Him!

This pure love that expresses itself, pledges itself, in chastity, is a striking testimony to the reality that nobody can rightfully be treated as so much chattel. No! The needs of the other in whatever form they present themselves, and in whatever state — and preeminently in the Religious state since the Spouse is God Himself — are essential to the practice of chastity in all its venues.

We now see that *we are all called to be chaste!*

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*"Consecrated chastity therefore means to follow the Lamb through true purity of heart and body until death". (St. Colette: Testament )*

It is interesting to observe that for St. Colette, purity of heart preceded purity of body. It has always been understood in the Franciscan family that the vow of chastity, consecrated chastity, looks forward and not backwards.

From the moment the realization of invitation shines on the face of the one invited ... from *that* moment onwards ... she must keep her eyes on the Lord, and leave all for the sake of the Kingdom.

To be a loyal bride, fidelity at all times is required, but it must be noted, that the term of angelical chastity can be misleading. We are not angels, nor are we going to be angels in Heaven. Angels and men are of entirely different created natures.

Our human body is not only the instrument of sin, but far more importantly the instrument that leads chastity to charity. Our vows made into the hands of the Mother of the Community are therefore made into the hands of God.

Also present as witness, we call on the Blessed Virgin Mary, our founders Clare and Francis, the Saints and Angels, to remind ourselves that we call on their help each day of our life. In fact we renew our holy vows three times everyday, when we pray the *Angelus*. Together with Our Lady, who gave her consent, to bring forth the Word of God, we too, in fruitful chastity we rejoice in our spiritual motherhood, by bringing forth the Word of God as we pronounce our holy vows.

Again and again Christ is being born into this world as we proclaim our holy vows.

*A Cloistered Poor Clare Colettine Nun*