



**Boston Catholic Journal**



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DEDICATED TO MARY MOTHER OF GOD

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# SEX, GOD, AND LIES



## THE STRUGGLE TO BE CHASTE

**The struggle for chastity** is not so much a *contention* of the body with the mind, as matter of the *cooperation* of the one with the other, and in a more profound sense, a matter of the *subjugation* of the one by the other, *the body by the mind* — and so we begin to understand that the battle waged is far more one of the *mind* than of the body.

We are inclined to think that the response of the body in our encounter with the desirability of another is the *cause* of temptations and sins — when in fact the source or the root cause begins, as *every* sin begins, in the mind. The body is not *sentient* (and therefore not culpable) but *reactive*. It responds *physiologically* to what is first introduced to and apprehended by the *mind*, which elicits an instinctive and very natural response from the *body*. The point is that before the body *begins* to *react*, it is first mentally stimulated — most often by images.

Produced by the media, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, the cinema etc. these images are carefully, and always artificially, manipulated to produce precisely this effect. It is important to understand this. This concatenation of events does not randomly occur, nor is it gratuitous: either in your body, or in the media. There is a *reason* that your body responds the way it does, and there is equally a *reason* why the media focuses upon that basic human response.

## **Big business and big money — and an even bigger lie**

Open any magazine or newspaper and in short order you will be introduced to the most absurd and patently artificial postures of women — and increasingly, men — in scant or suggestive attire. You will see flawless (and largely undernourished) women assuming the most suggestive postures and stances, making unmistakably lewd gestures that you would *never* encounter in real life, or if you did, would likely prompt you to laugh at its absurdity.

What is the not-so-subtle suggestion, the implication of the image or photograph? It is this:

“You’re only seeing *part* of it, *you rogue* ... can you imagine *all* of it? And can you *imagine* what *all of that* could do for *you* ...? And its only a few buttons away ... at *such and such* Boutique and *only* for this *incredibly low price* in our unprecedented one day sale!”

Given our fallen nature and our subsequent inclination to sin, what do you suppose such images are intended to stimulate? Our intellect?

Through Adamic Sin we are predisposed to concupiscence, or inordinate sexual desire, just as we are predisposed to corrupt virtually *any* intrinsic good through disordered indulgence, or excess. Sex is not sinful, and sexual desire is not sinful. Do you think that the Saints, both married and unmarried, did not experience sexual desire? What is important is not the *impulse*, over which we exercise no willful control — but *how we deal* with the impulse, how we *respond* to it beyond the initial physiological reflex it arouses.

What is more, that such impulses are *capable* of being elicited from us, and are experienced *within* us — that we *begin* to instinctively respond physiologically to the stimulus — is no reproach to us, nor to our moral or spiritual integrity. It is part and parcel of our fallen humanity in which reason is diminished in its capacity to rightly order sensibility. We hear this echoed in St. Paul:

“The good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do. Now if I do that which I will not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that when I have a will to do good, evil is present with me. For I am delighted with the law of God, according to the inward man: But I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members. Unhappy man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7.19-24)

*Wall Street* understands this. *Marketers* understand this. *Pornographers* and *smut-dealers* understand this. Isn't it time that you understand this? Their lie is that they are so clever, their anorexic models so convincing, and your own susceptibility to both so overwhelming that you have little choice in the matter, and must both physically and morally collapse under the collective weight of their blandishments and your weakness. Couple this with the enticement and deceit of the “*father of all lies*”, and you find your own predicament, and the human condition at large, a bit more lucid.

## A Long, Hard Journey

The journey, it is clear, from sexual pre-occupation and *inordinate desire*, to *chastity*, is very, very, long and arduous. In fact, we begin to realize that chastity is not so much a virtue that will one day be *finally acquired*, eventually *attained to*, as it is a virtue to be *constantly* and diligently embraced, enacted. **Certainly, if *chaste* means “free of sexual desire”, then it is either unattainable or altogether a fiction.** This is not to say that there *are* individuals who experience no sexual desire whatever, but given St. Paul's own problematic, and that of humanity in general, such an absence would seem to be more of the nature of a *pathology* than a *virtue*.

How then, in the midst of the turpitude and moral morass by which we are surrounded, do we embrace chastity, enact it, and in that *perpetual choice* become what we understand to be chaste?

We become chaste by involvement with others and through learning to love rightly.

It is a long process of the **purification of memories, memories of sin in which we had once delighted**, through which we found pleasure, satisfaction, and what we experienced, however transiently, as momentary “fulfillment”. It is also an active and vigilant practice of self-discipline, a self-discipline that enables us to be judicious and wise as to what images we allow to penetrate our minds, what literature we read, what movies we watch, by our conversation, or at the very least, the tenor and nature of conversations in which we participate.

We all know our points of weakness and our susceptibility to temptation. This recognition and the acknowledgement of our weakness is the first crucial step toward chastity. Knowledge alone, however, does not suffice. It requires cooperation with grace and the resolve to resist our own inclinations and all that would lead us to mindless sensual indulgence. We must recognize that we have a deeply *personal responsibility* in the struggle for chastity. We must never succumb to the feeble excuse, the lie really, that, “*I can't help it — therefore I am not morally responsible for it. I am, after all, just human.*” So was St. Paul. We must love both ourselves and others *responsibly*. Love without responsibility is not love at all — it is a euphemism for indulgent selfishness.

## **The Fire Within ...**

We have two choices, then: **we can either subdue or we can sublimate our sexuality. What we cannot do is avoid it.** We cannot avoid it because we cannot extinguish it. Even if we could, we would not, for that reason, be more perfectly human, but rather *imperfectly* human; we would not be possessed of a virtue, but deprived of a perfection, the perfection of that *being* human which is *human* being — we would be in a state of *privation* — but deprived of a perfection, the perfection of that “being human” which is “human being” — we would be in a state of privation — of a good (sexuality) that *ought* to be present and is *not*. Sexuality, sexual desire, *is a good*. Why? God created it, endowed us with it. And everything God created is good.

Instead of coming to terms with our created sexuality, however, we mistakenly, and vainly seek to extinguish sexual desire altogether through every conceivable form of

self-denial, abnegation: not eating, wearing sackcloth, punishing our bodies, avoiding the other gender. Of course it is prudent to avoid the *Occasion of Sin* — the person, place, or thing that is likely to induce us to sin — but **we do not subdue what we avoid; we merely defer the conflict**; still less do we sublimate the encounter through *ennobling* it.

We remain, all our lives, sexual beings. In profound ways it is the source not only of the unspeakably beautiful creative act culminating in children, but must at least be conjectured upon as a mysterious part of that vital impulse expressing itself through *creative* love: music, poetry and art.

This creative and irrepressible impetus to life and being, this capacity to give life, cannot be confined solely and exclusively to the vocation of marriage, excluding those who are single, Consecrated, or Religious men and women (that is, belonging to a Religious Order). ***Grace perfects nature; it does not destroy it.*** The tremendous creativity we find in figures so disparate as the Franciscans Thomas of Celano, Jacopone da Todi, Sister Maria Innocentia Hummel, and the composer Franz Liszt, to name a few, can only be expressed in terms of *passion*; passion deriving from love which is always procreative and in the *being* we understand as *human* — the human being — **a procreativity that, whatever its nature, finds its paradigm in the procreative love that is inseparable from human sexuality.**

We blench at this suggestion as unworthy — that things noble, lofty, even holy, should proceed from what we have reflexively come to esteem as base — **the very thing that alone yields the most beautiful and holy of creatures: our very children.**

The most perfect moment of union between the bride and the groom, husband and wife, the lover and the beloved — the literal climax of love (love's most exquisite expression, utter consummation) in which lover becomes one with the beloved — is disdained not just as base, but as *abysmally* base.

What madness is this?

What evil and distorted inversion has caused us to esteem what is beautiful and holy as ugly and profane — such that the foulest word in any language is synonymous with it!?

We speak of “making love, as though love could be *made* ... and then do not recognize it apart from its epithet!

## “SEX” is not a “Four Letter word”... and neither is “CHASTE”

At this point, I think it fairly clear that our disordered perception of sexuality has skewed not only our understanding of *God*, but of *ourselves* — and most importantly, the *relationship* between the two.

Even the notion of *sin*, in all its complexities, is more readily understood by us in our relationship to God, than *sex* — which, paradoxically, to so many of us is fraught with sin, or what is worse yet, indistinguishable from it! Were most of us asked what physiological feature in both men and women is most susceptible to sin, and most likely to lead us to sin, we would point, like ill-taught and unthinking children, immediately to our loins.

The fact of the matter, however, is that in the way of preponderance of sin, our sexuality would be fifth at best, the first four, in order of gravity and number, would be:

- the *heart*, in which *every* sin is first conceived,
- then the *mouth*, through which most often it proceeds;
- thence to the *ears* that take either delight or offense,
- and from the ears to the *hands* that murder, maim, or otherwise trespass.

Is this to diminish the gravity of sexual sin? Of course not. It is, however, helpful in placing our perception of sexual sin into perspective. We must remember that sexual sins are considered by the Church to be sins proceeding from *weakness* — as distinct from sins proceeding from *malice*, the latter, of course, being the more grave of the two.

But we must see that it is equally indicative of our inability or unwillingness to come to terms with the the *other* 8 Commandments that prohibit *other* sins – sins *not* of a sexual nature – but upon which we are seldom so fixated:

- *Idolatry*
- *Refraining from using the Lord's Name in Vain*
- *Keeping the Sabbath Day Holy*
- *Failing to Honor our Mothers and Fathers,*
- *Killing,*
- *Adultery*
- *Stealing*
- *Lying*



- *Coveting your Neighbor's Wife*
- *and Coveting Our Neighbor's Goods.* (Exodus 20:3-17 and Deuteronomy 5:7-21).

## Of the *Ten*, why the Sixth and the Ninth?

Of the 10, it is most often the 6th and 9th that we focus upon. Why?

This is an odd state of affairs. *The first sin, that of Adam and Eve, so often depicted in sexual terms, had nothing whatever to do with sex* — it was disobedience prompted by the sin of pride. Succinctly put, they sought to be like God (even though they were already created in His image, which is to say that they were *already* like unto God — but not in plenitude, hence the pride, and from thence the disobedience) As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us,

“Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted of.<sup>278</sup> All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.” (Part I Section II, 397)

In fact, the most persistent and pernicious sin of which the Chosen People of God, the Israelites, were guilty was idolatry. For this reason they wandered in the desert for 40 years. It was a sin that provoked God, through their obstinacy, ultimately to banish them in the Babylonian Exile for 70 years. Once again, it stemmed from the immediate sin of disobedience to the First Commandment — not the Sixth or the Ninth.

There are **121** references to **idolatry** and in the Bible, **40** relative to **adultery**, and **36** to **fornication**. Why, then, the *inverse* disproportion that we append to sins of a sexual nature? The breach of each Commandment is equally repugnant to God, so we have, on the one hand, no warrant to minimize one, and by the same token, no warrant to emphasize another, either. Certainly some appear to be more reprehensible than others, and most of us would likely deem killing a more grave offense than, say, adultery or lying. In other words, the proscriptions that we encounter in Exodus 20 do not appear to be hierarchical. There is a reason for this. But we do not, it is clear, acquire our focus on sexual sin from the Decalogue, nor, if we examine it further, from the Books of Leviticus and Numbers, both of which are replete with ancillary laws. Why are some apparently more abhorrent to us than they are to God?

Again, what is the provenance of our fixation on the 6th and the 9th Commandments? Both call us to be *chaste*. Each is a clarion for *chastity*. **Could it be that the 6th and the 9th somehow incorporate all the others?** Jesus summed up *all* the Commandments in *two*, telling us that our observation of the two was simultaneously our observation of the others. Let us look at this more carefully.

## Adultery and Coveting our Neighbor's Wife

The Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) distinguishes between the two.

Jesus does not: “**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. Matthew 5.28) The connection between the two is more than a matter of mere hermeneutics, the first follows upon the second, the 6th after the 9th, the *desire* before the *commission* of sin.

It is not that Jesus is saying something “*other*” than we find in the Decalogue; He has simply elucidated the obvious nexus between them. They are one and the same sin. The bringing to completion in the body what has already been consummated in the mind is, in the way of sin, only distinguished chronologically: the one precedes the other, and is no less grave and no less culpable than the other. In fact, Jesus says, the latter, the physical consummation, is not even necessary to the imputation of the sin of adultery! It is already committed in the thinking, the desiring, the willing. The physical act itself is only a matter of opportunity, of the body participating in what the mind has conceived, willed, and already done! It is co-opting the body — which is a physical, and not a moral entity — to be complicitous in the sin, and the sin then corrupts the *total* being, body and soul.

St. Paul speaks of, “**sinning against our bodies**” (“**he that commits fornication, sins against his own body**” (1 Cor. 6.18) — an odd statement until we consider that not only do we “use” the body of *another* to fulfill the sinful desires within the mind — but our *own* as well! We subject our *own bodies* to sin, by bringing them into complicity with the sinful mind and making them *instrumental* in the sin — the sin erstwhile only affecting, injuring, our own souls without bringing sin and injury to the person desired. **This is abuse of the body, ones own body, by making it accomplice to the desire of the mind** and resulting in the abuse, injury, and corruption of others, of the world at large — *beyond* the confines of ones mind.

In other words, sin begins in the mind and corrupts the soul, but goes no further unless opportunity affords it. The injury caused is to oneself solely (the *offense*



always against God). The vitiating nature of sin is confined to the abscess of desire: its purulence poisons only the soul that conceives it. **Through (ab)using** the body, however, the destructive nature of the sin extends beyond this abscess, this self-injury; it suppurates and, through the instrumentality of the body, becomes injurious to others. It has already been destructive to the soul. It will now become destructive to others.

This is of the essence of the pernicious nature of sin. It corrupts by seducing to complicity everything that it touches upon. That the sin of one man, Adam, should touch upon every human being, is, in this sense, completely coherent.

This effectively forms the matrix of the answer to our question: the reason that we seize upon the 6th and 9th Commandments is that, in being called to chastity, we are called away from that vicious concatenation of sin and destruction that follows ineluctably upon the assent of the will to desire unlawfully. Chastity calls us away from destructiveness. In fact, it calls us to *creativity* through calling us to create ourselves in ever greater conformity to the image of God in Whom our own perfection and felicity consists. *It does not call us away from desire; only unlawful* desire, desire that results not in something creative and beautiful, but destructive and ugly; desire whose consequence is life and not death. The call to chastity, in effect, is no less the call to abundant life than it is the call away from suicide and murder — inasmuch as our pursuit of sinful desires always entails the destruction of the self and the destruction of another.

Every Commandment, we eventually find, implicates every other Commandment, for Jesus said,

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets.” (St. Matthew 22. 37-40)

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for the Boston Catholic Journal



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