

# Chastity and Love: “Sex” is a Holy Word

In our culture, “sex” generally means sexual activity that is associated with the genitals. However, the word “sex” expresses a sense of being “cut off” or “sexed” (as in section or dissect). It alludes to how we long for relationship and connection with others. To reduce sexuality to “having sex” tragically ignores the goodness and gift of sexuality. Sexuality that is truly human is as much an expression of our desire for love as it is of the glands and muscles. Father Ronald Rolheiser, in his excellent book, “The Holy Longing” (Doubleday 1999), describes sexuality as an all-encompassing and powerful “energy for relationships.”

The power of this sexual drive requires self-discipline, a virtue we call chastity. Chastity is “an attitude of the heart” that respects the dignity of others and following a disciplined call to integrate sexual feelings and behaviors into responsible loving. It comes from the Latin word for “pure”, not just in sexual behavior but also in the sense of being “whole” or authentic before God, life and relationships. Our interactions with all other people – not only with a spouse in marriage – will be holy and appropriate if you understand and practice chastity.

All disciples face serious challenges in living an authentic Christian life as sexual persons. Sexual morality is not just about what behavior I can and cannot do, must and must not do, at various stages in my life and in various relational contexts. Sexual morality has to do with personal integrity and character. In his “Theology of the Body,” Pope John Paul II described how sexual expression can be understood as a language. Sexual touch has meaning that no other touch can convey, and we can tell the truth or tell lies with our bodies. Singles as well as married persons are called to make covenants with God, self and others particular to their vocation in life, as fulfilled in work and service commitments and in relationships with others.

If sexuality is appreciated in its full meaning, Jesus is truly our model for healthy sexuality and chaste living. Jesus teaches sexuality in the context of covenant relationships. We become who we are in how we relate to others. While Jesus was celibate, his single state does not negate his human sexuality. In his life, Jesus

teaches us that love and sex are not always the same thing. He enjoyed relationships that were intimate, faithful, equalitarian, and self-less – without genital relations.

Each disciple of Jesus is called to grow in self knowledge and find healthy alternatives for behavior that one wants to avoid. This may mean avoiding media, places or persons that are sources of temptation. Especially, one should ask for support and enlist the help of family and friends. We each need to live in a network of friendship where we will really find our place and where we will be valued.

Married people also practice chastity by faithfulness to one spouse and openness to life in their lovemaking. The goodness of healthy and holy sexual relationships between men and women is celebrated in the Bible. The first Man and Woman experienced fruitful relations and peaceful community in Paradise. The sensual poetry of the Song of Songs is an open and frank celebration of physical beauty, passion and sensual pleasure – a strong affirmation of human love expressed bodily. Jesus honored marriage and made a wedding the setting for his first public miracle.

To follow Jesus is to be like him, including acting as he would act, love as he would love. Jesus shows us how to live a full and holy life as authentic human beings. Attending to Jesus, God Incarnate, can provide an important corrective to today's confusion about sex, sexuality and chastity.

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