

Pastoral Statement on Marriage, Sexuality and Chastity

The purpose of this pastoral statement on marriage, sexuality and chastity is threefold. First, it is offered to assist pastors in presenting a positive and wholesome Catholic vision of sexuality to their people. Second, it is written to articulate and encourage a convincing case for the value of chastity. And, third, it is meant to address practical pastoral issues which point up the need for a positive and realistic sexual teaching.

The Catholic Church has a long and rich tradition of moral teaching on marriage and human sexuality. Though sometimes caricatured as one-sided in its emphasis on sin, it is much more nuanced and positive than many people realize. In recent years, a renewed approach to human sexuality and chastity has been developed. Based on insights from scripture, philosophy, and psychology, this approach offers a very positive vision of human sexuality as a gift of God. The moral principles that protect this gift and the human failures that threaten it flow directly from this positive vision.

This vision is the first thing that we must attempt to convey today in preaching and catechesis. We must begin by making a positive case for sexuality as a created gift and a spiritual mystery. Only if people appreciate this will they view the moral guidelines we offer as helpful in the pursuit of human happiness, and not as religious hang-ups. This, in itself, is an enormous challenge because of the prejudices and presuppositions people bring to considerations of sexuality and Catholic sexual morality.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), and *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*, USCC/NCCB (1990) present an affirming, constructive, and realistic teaching on sexuality in its human, moral, and spiritual dimensions. These important documents should form the pastoral basis for a renewed catechesis on sexuality and chastity.

THE TEACHING OF SCRIPTURE ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

Scripture provides us with a profound spiritual vision of sexuality and a clear moral framework for sexual behavior. The vision begins in the Book of Genesis, with a narrative of creation that contains two distinct and dramatic accounts. At the heart of the whole creation story runs the conviction that the world is good at its very root. Whenever and however evil may later arrive in the world, creation will always be more good than evil, more original than sin, and more pleasing to God than abhorrent to him. The first story concludes “and God looked at everything he had made and he found it very good.” (Gen. 1, 31)

Inserted into these two accounts are two corresponding depictions of the creation of man and woman. The first version concludes with the majestic theological affirmation that man and woman are created in the divine image—“God created man in his image, in the divine image he created them” (Gen. 1, 27). Nothing could more appropriately dramatize the profound compatibility of body and spirit, of sexuality and soul, than does this declaration. The second version is different. It concludes with an utterly candid recognition of the compelling drive and consequence of sexual communion between man and woman—“the two of them become one body.” (Gen. 2, 24).

The first pages of divine revelation, then, go directly to the heart of the human condition in its most physical and sexual aspects. The Bible doesn’t over-spiritualize human beings, or, as some religions and Christian heresies have done, regard them as angels fallen into bodies. To the contrary, it shows how delighted God is with creation in all its physical expression, how attentive God is to the human longing inscribed in his creatures by their sexual natures.

When Jesus speaks of marriage, he does not quote the prophets or the law, but returns to the second chapter of Genesis for his authority. The union of a man and a woman in marriage is considered so re