

Pastoral Letter to Young People on

Chastity

From the Episcopal Commission for Doctrine



Living a life of chastity is an ongoing journey which requires both guidance and encouragement. In order to help young Catholics on this challenging journey, the Episcopal Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops would like to show its solidarity with them by providing some words of direction and support.

Introduction

Fascination with sex is as old as the human race; it is vitally important to all of us. Not surprisingly, we live in a world which pays a great deal of attention to human sexuality. But with so many voices and opinions about sex, it is often confusing to know how we are to use this precious gift. Fortunately, God's wisdom and word have enlightened our path. Through the teaching of Sacred Scripture and the Church we have sure guides which tell us how to live our sexuality with delight and respect for God's loving plan.

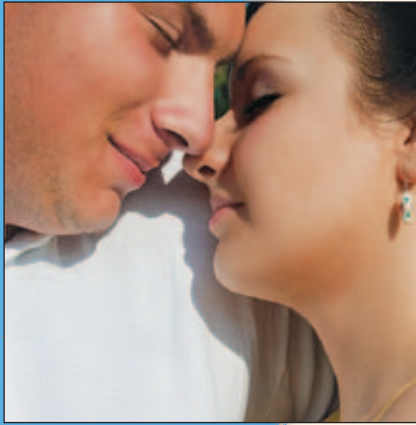
Our faith takes with joyful seriousness the mystery of the Incarnation: that the Son of God took flesh for our salvation. Jesus' body scourged, crucified and risen for us, tells us that God uses the human body to make his love present in our world. The body is our doorway to salvation, and so how we treat it matters.

The Bible itself lays the groundwork in telling us how to live our sexuality in light of our human dignity rooted in God's creating us in his image and likeness (cf. Gen1:27). From the dawn of creation God gave us more than one language to speak. Besides the gift of speech, he gave us our body. This body expresses itself through gestures that are themselves a language. Just as our words reveal who we are, so also does our body language. The Lord intends that we speak this "sexual language" truthfully because it is the way to live our sexuality joyfully.

This truthful living out of the sexual language of our bodies is what the Church calls "chastity." Today, chastity is often mistakenly associated with being old fashioned, with a fear of passion or with sexual inhibition. But in reality it is much more than simply the absence of sexual relations. Chastity calls for purity of mind as well as body.

If we are not working to develop a pure heart or a pure mind, then our bodily actions will reflect this. If we have no control over our desires or passions, then we cannot be trusted in either the big or the small things. We will remain slaves of our own passions and weak in spirit. If we cannot say "no," then our "yes" will mean nothing. The more we accept chastity and make it our way of life, the more people around us will sense that the Holy Spirit dwells within us.





Our Bodies: Temples of the Holy Spirit

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians of Corinth: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20).

When we became Christians at the moment of Baptism, the Holy Spirit came to live in our bodies. What an awesome truth! If our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, then what dignity we have! And people should be able to find God through us! Do we reverence our bodies in these ways?

Sexuality is a gift from God and a fundamental part of what makes us human. Each of us is called to acknowledge this gift and the One who gave it. When this gift is used as the Father wills, we give him glory and build up his Kingdom. When we live our sexuality in the proper way, according to our state in life, others will be able to find God through us.



Living Chastity Today

Our sexuality and our spiritual life are intimately linked. The chaste person integrates sexuality within the personality and thus expresses his or her inner unity as a bodily and spiritual being. The chaste person has the capacity to relate to others in a truly human way, reflecting a person's state in life: single, married or consecrated celibacy.

Living the virtue of chastity means placing our desire for sexual pleasure under the guidance of reason and faith. It is one of the cornerstones of the temple of our body, a necessary pillar of right living. It leads to wholeness and unity, for individuals, married couples and society.

The virtue of chastity involves the integration of the powers of love and life placed in us. This integrity ensures the unity of the person and is opposed to any behaviour that would distort it. Chaste persons tolerate neither a double life nor duplicity in the "language" of their bodies. Failure to live chastely leads to a self-centered existence that blinds us to the needs, the joys and the beauty of the world around us.

Living chastity is no easy business in the sex-saturated world of contemporary Western culture. It's impossible to walk through a shopping mall, turn on a computer or television, glance at an advertisement or browse through a bookstore without being bombarded by sexual imagery of every kind. Pornography has never been more widespread, reaching almost epidemic proportions. It denigrates authentic sexual expression and encourages masturbation, sexual intimacy outside of marriage and the separation of the life-giving and love-giving meaning of sexual relations.

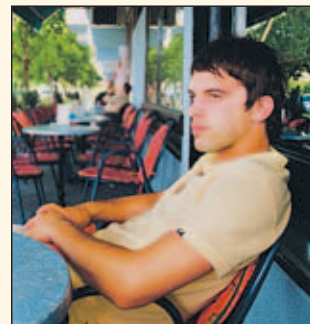


The challenge of living chastely in these circumstances is difficult for everyone: single, married or consecrated. The world around us promotes distorted ideas about our bodies and relationships, ideas that can cause people to lose their balance and let destructive views of sexuality have sway. If we wish to remain faithful to our baptismal promises and resist temptations, we need to develop strategies that will help us live in holiness and freedom.



Chastity for Single Persons

For people who are not married, chastity entails abstinence, because God's design is that sex belongs in marriage. When two people are dating, being chaste allows them to concentrate on what is important and to avoid "using" each other. Together they can see what authentic love means and can learn to express feelings in a mature way. Chastity highlights a couple's love for each other and says, "I will be patient and pure, and I respect you." It means saving the sexual expression of love exclusively for one's spouse.



When a couple is not chaste, their understanding of love may be reduced to the physical dimension of their relationship. This weakens their ability to move forward towards marriage, putting the relationship at risk.

Persons who experience attraction to those of the same sex are also called to chastity. They too can grow in Christian holiness through a life of self-control, prayer, and the reception of the Sacraments.

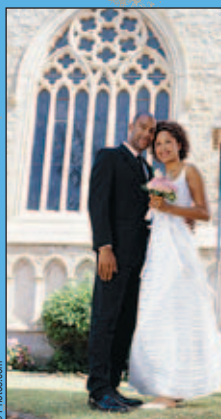


Chastity for Married Persons

Sexuality becomes truly human when it is integrated into the total relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman. Pope John Paul II wrote: "Only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love." This means that married people are also called to be chaste if they are to truly love each other.



Married people living chastely can have vibrant sex lives. In the relationship between a man and a woman, chastity helps them love each other as persons rather than make each other an object of pleasure or satisfaction. Despite what the media and Hollywood suggest, the value of sexual intercourse does not lie in recreation, or physical gratification. Any physical pleasure should lead toward the ultimate expression of love between husband and wife, the total self-giving of one person to another. Sexual intercourse in marriage can be so intimate that it becomes an emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual experience. It strengthens and completes the bond of marriage. That is why the sexual act has to have a unitive and procreative meaning and why some kinds of sexual activity are not chaste. Though pleasure may be present, some acts are a misuse of sex when they fall short of what God intends.



Consecrated Chastity and Celibacy



God calls some women and men in the Church to a life of consecrated chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of God. This charism entails the renunciation of marriage and is meant to unite a person more directly to God. In imitation of Christ and his Mother, consecrated virginity is a divine gift for “those to whom it has been given” (Mt 19:11). Similarly, priests of the Latin Church make a promise of celibacy before ordination to the diaconate.

Even those called to a life of consecrated virginity or celibacy must still struggle to be chaste in thought, attitude and action. Chastity is meant to create a “space” which frees the human heart so that it burns with love for God and all humanity. If the decision for celibacy is not well integrated into the whole of a person’s life, however, it can lead to self-centredness. The consecrated and celibate life is a “yes” to love that is to be lived out with passion and enthusiasm by those called to it.



Fostering and Recovering Chastity in One’s Life

Catholics are called to be examples to others of chaste living. By cherishing the gift of our body and helping others to truly respect themselves, we show God how much we love him.

Any young person who desires to be chaste or to recover a chaste lifestyle has the opportunity to take up the cross and follow Jesus. He has promised always to be there to help us. The Lord never abandons us, but we must be open to receiving his assistance.

Jesus asks us to pray constantly. This is necessary for anyone trying to live the virtue of chastity. Uniting ourselves to Christ in an ongoing relationship of prayer is the only way to succeed. This includes anything from the simple yet profound “Help me, Jesus” to more formal prayers such as the Rosary, or asking Mary, our Mother, and the Saints and Blesseds to help us by their intercession.

The Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist help us on our journey to live chaste lives. If we commit a sin of impurity alone or with another person, the Sacrament of Reconciliation communicates to us God’s forgiveness and merciful love. All we need to do is approach his throne of mercy with sincere sorrow in Confession and we are assured that all our sins are forgiven. We can start anew with hope. The Eucharist is the summit of our faith because through the Sacrament we enter into an intimate union with Jesus Christ by receiving his body, blood, soul and divinity in Holy Communion. His body nourishes us and sanctifies our body.





What Chastity Requires of Us

Chastity expresses respect for persons and their capacity for self-giving. It assures us that we are being loved for ourselves and that we are loving others for themselves and not only for the pleasure they can give us.

In a culture that wants things immediately, chastity also teaches us to wait. Do we want sexual activity right now or do we want something more, even though it will take more time to achieve? To live chastely means not to give in to pressure which can come from friends who think that engaging in sexual activity defines masculinity or femininity.

Today's prejudice against chastity is especially disturbing because of the view of sexuality it implies: that we "hook-up" with each other for pleasure. Not only is this an offense against the dignity of the person being used but it also holds the user in bondage to practices that cause physical, emotional and psychological harm. Moreover, despite its prevalence, the enslaving and addictive effects of pornography, especially on the Internet, cannot be minimized or made light of.

Chastity requires constant discipline. It means the right ordering of our hearts: put God first, and everything else will follow. To live chastely means to live according to the design for which God has created us. The efforts to control one's sexual drives can be difficult, even painful. Yet control over them gradually leads men and women to sexual maturity and brings inner peace.



Chastity is a Constant Challenge

To live chastely today means to go against the grain! We are called to follow Jesus, to be counter-cultural. If we want to find serenity and joy, then we must live in accord with God's will. He has created us in his image, and if we live according to his commandments we will be happy. Of course, Jesus didn't say it would be easy. In fact, he said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34).

Chastity is a challenge – but it is not impossible. We can surround ourselves with friends who also want to live in a chaste manner: people who will support us on our journey. We can dress modestly, recognizing that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, and that our bodies are sacred. We can choose our entertainment wisely, seeking what uplifts the human spirit and expresses truth, beauty and goodness. Most importantly, we can live our union with Christ by receiving the sacraments regularly, particularly the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

The practice of confessing not only sins of impurity but also of discussing our temptations with a spiritual guide can help purify our minds and hearts. This can teach us the humility we need to accept our weaknesses, while at the same time providing us the Lord's strength to grow in chastity.



Young, Chaste Lovers and Holy Role Models

Every Christian is called to holiness. "Saints" and "Blesseds" are men and women whose lives have so transparently been filled with the love of Christ that the People of God have seen Jesus in them and then, after their lives have been carefully studied by the Church, they have been judged worthy of our veneration and imitation.

In his message to young people for World Youth Day in Canada, Pope John Paul II wrote: "Just as salt gives flavor to food and light illumines the darkness, so too holiness gives full meaning to life and makes it reflect God's glory. How many saints, especially young saints, can we count in the Church's history!"

Let us remember a few of these holy women and men who were striking examples of purity, chastity, charity and joy, true temples in whom the Holy Spirit dwelt: St. Augustine, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, and St. Gianna Beretta Molla. One came from the ancient Roman world, one from 17th century North America and two from 20th century Italy. Though they lived in different times and places, they teach us the same lesson by their example and witness.



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St. Augustine (354-430)

Augustine was a man of passion and faith, of high intelligence and tireless pastoral charity. He has left a very deep mark on the Church's cultural, moral and theological life. The son of a pagan father, Patricius, and a devout Christian mother, Monica, he was raised as a Catholic. As was frequently the custom at the time, he was, however, not baptized as a child. His youth was turbulent. Augustine was intellectually restless, ambitious and sexually active from the age of seventeen.

As a young man he established a relationship for more than a decade with a woman, whose name we do not know. Because of the difference in social class, he did not marry her. Together they had a son named Adeodatus, who was very dear to him; he died before reaching adulthood.

Augustine was always fascinated and drawn to the person of Jesus Christ, but he took many detours before committing himself to him. Like many young people, his process of conversion was marked by a struggle with his sexuality. He knew that being a Christian would involve living chastely. Once Augustine even prayed, "Make me chaste and celibate, but not yet!" After a long and tormented inner journey, and helped by the prayers of his mother, he was finally baptized by St. Ambrose in 387, in Milan. Following his conversion, he embraced a life of celibacy, leaving aside his partner of many years.

Augustine then returned to his homeland in North Africa. After founding a monastic community, he was ordained a priest, and later, the Bishop of Hippo. He was a prolific writer, a man of unsurpassable psychological and spiritual insight and a vigorous defender of the truth and beauty of the Catholic faith. Above all, St. Augustine tells young people what St. Paul wrote to the Philippians: with God's merciful grace "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13).

Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha (1656-1680)

Kateri Tekakwitha, the “Lily of the Mohawks,” was born in 1656. Her mother was a Christian Algonquin who had been captured by the Iroquois. When Kateri was about four years old, her parents and brother died of smallpox, and she was adopted by her aunts and an uncle who had become chief of the Turtle clan. Smallpox had marked her face and seriously impaired her eyesight. As a result, Kateri was a very shy young girl.

In 1667 she secretly accepted the Gospel taught by Jesuit missionaries and was baptized at the age of eighteen. She lived her Christian faith and chastity courageously in the face of almost unbearable opposition, since virginity and the single life were considered out-of-step with her own culture. In her love of chastity, she was radically counter-cultural. Finally Kateri was forced to escape to Kahnawake on the St. Lawrence, just south of Montreal.

Her whole life was devoted to teaching prayers to children and helping the sick and the aged until she was struck with a serious illness. She died in Kahnawake on April 17, 1680, at the age of 24. Her last words were “Jesus Konoronkwa,” which means “Jesus, I love you.” Fifteen minutes after her death – before the eyes of two Jesuits and all the natives surrounding her – Kateri’s scars disappeared and her face was beautifully transformed. On June 22, 1980, she was beatified by John Paul II and became the first Native American to be declared “blessed.”



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Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati (1901-1925)

Pier Giorgio Frassati was born in 1901 in Turin, Italy. He was educated at home and at public school before attending a school run by the Jesuits. At the age of seventeen, he joined the St. Vincent de Paul Society and combined in a remarkable way political activism and social justice work, piety and devotion, humanity and goodness, holiness and daily life.

Athletic, handsome, full of life, always surrounded by friends whom he inspired, Pier Giorgio chose not to become a priest or religious, preferring to give witness to the Gospel as a lay person. Indeed he once fell in love with a lively, spirited girl but did not pursue the relationship. He understood the meaning of chastity and put it into practice in all of his relationships and friendships. God gave Pier Giorgio all the external attributes that could have led him to make the wrong choices: a wealthy family, good looks and robust health – but he listened to the invitation of Christ: “Come, follow me” (Lk 18:22).

Just before receiving his university degree in mining engineering, he contracted polio, which doctors later speculated he caught from the sick he tended. He died on July 4, 1925 and was beatified on May 20, 1990. Pope John Paul II called him “the man of the eight beatitudes.” Blessed Pier Giorgio is especially inspiring for young men: he teaches them to express their masculinity chastely by mastering their sexual passions through manly effort and self-sacrifice, as did Christ, the perfect Man.

St. Gianna Beretta Molla (1922-1962)

Imagine the extraordinary occasion of attending the canonization to sainthood of your own spouse. On May 16, 2004 Pietro Molla, husband of Gianna Beretta Molla, did just that. His three living children were by his side, including the youngest, Gianna Emanuela, for whom her mother had given her life. St. Gianna is the first laywoman-physician to be canonized.

Before St. Gianna decided God was calling her to marriage, she discerned this very carefully, and had even considered the consecrated life. She meditated, spent time in silent prayer, and patiently waited for the Lord to reveal his will. In 1955, when she was thirty-three years old, she married an engineer ten years her senior, Pietro, whose sister had earlier been a patient of the young Dr. Beretta.

Letters Gianna wrote during their year-long courtship reveal her deep commitment to this new vocation. Several days before their wedding, Gianna wrote to Pietro, reflecting on their vocation to marriage: "With God's help and blessing, we will do all we can to make our new family a little cenacle where Jesus will reign over all our affections, desires and actions. We will be working with God in his creation; in this way we can give him children who will love him and serve him."

In his homily on the day of her canonization Pope John Paul II said: "Following the example of Christ, who 'having loved his own, loved them to the end' (Jn 13:1), this holy mother of a family remained heroically faithful to the commitment she made on the day of her marriage. . . . Through the example of Gianna Beretta Molla, may our age rediscover the pure, chaste and fruitful beauty of conjugal love, lived as a response to the divine call!"

We should all do the same thing. If we are called to marriage, we should wait to express our sexual love with our spouse, knowing that by obeying God's will he will reward our patience and generosity.



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*St. Augustine, Blesseds Kateri and Pier Giorgio and St. Gianna, pray for us!
Help us to embrace and live our chastity of mind and body
with Gospel joy and deep peace,
so that people around us will see that God dwells within us!*



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