

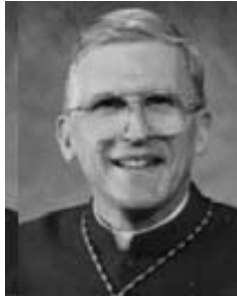
Practicing Chastity in an Unchaste Age

By Most Rev. Joseph F. Martino, Bishop of Scranton

An American bishop's pastoral advice.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I write as your bishop and spiritual father on a matter of great importance and great good news: chastity.

Why chastity? That is really two questions wrapped up in one.



First, why do I write on this subject just now? Violations of chastity in our Church and our diocese have made some people skeptical when the Church speaks on sexual morality. But for just that reason it is more necessary, not less, to speak the truth about sexual morality. Sin and confusion cry out for honest, truthful speech.

The Church has always taught—and I teach here—that we need to find our happiness and holiness in a commitment to the chastity lived out in marital love or the chastity of celibacy lived out either in the consecrated life or the life of a single layperson in the world. These are the two paths to happiness and eternal life. There are no others.

Second, why is chastity so important? Is this really a virtue for our times? Don't other subjects take priority?

In fact, chastity is a virtue for our times, and it does take priority. That should be clear, for instance, in the wake of the scandalous events in our own Church as well as those in secular society.

One sad thing I've read was the final paragraph of the New York Times obituary of the popular French novelist Françoise Sagan. In a 1993 interview before her second drug trial, Sagan recalled:

I had incredible luck because just when I grew up, the pill came along. When I was 18, I used to die with fear of being pregnant, but then it arrived, and love was free and without consequence for nearly 30 years. Then AIDS came. Those 30 years coincided with my adulthood, the age for having fun.

In this "age for having fun," Françoise Sagan was twice married, twice divorced, twice convicted of narcotics offenses. God rest her soul. God rest the souls of all who thought as she did. And may God come to the rescue of all who now think as she did. It is the spirit of this "age for having fun" that makes the Church's teaching on chastity so necessary today.

There is a vast gulf between the secularist view of sex and the Christian view of chastity. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2337) says:

"Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human

when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman.

The virtue of chastity therefore involves the integrity of the person and the integrality [i.e., completeness] of the gift."

Sacred Scripture says the same thing in its own way. The single most important fact about biblical anthropology may be that it views the human body as integral to the human person. In contrast with ancient and modern dualisms, the Bible makes it clear that we do not possess our bodies, as if they were apart from us; rather, we are bodily persons. God created us bodily persons and communal in nature by being related to him and one another.

The biblical testimony has serious moral implications. What people do in and to their bodies touches the core of their personhood (cf. 1 Cor 6:9). Chastity, as a principle of personal integration, is crucially important to holiness and happiness—to being healthy, integrated human beings.

The contemporary context

Chastity is closely related to the virtue of temperance, which regulates the use of food and drink—and sex. Regulation is in order precisely because these things are good. If they weren't, we would be obliged to shun them, not regulate them. As it is, chastity empowers us to make right use of a great gift from God.

Fully to appreciate chastity, we need to reflect on attitudes and ways of acting opposed to it. This will not be pleasant. As C.S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*, "perversions of the sex instinct are numerous, hard to cure, and frightful." But the cure begins with recognizing a perversion for what it is.

The list is long and depressing. It includes pornography, masturbation, premarital sex, cohabitation, homosexual relations and unions, sexual promiscuity, adultery, divorce and remarriage without an annulment, contraception, sterilization, abortion, cloning, and the destruction of human embryos for stem-cell research. Currently, a campaign of legal pressure and media propaganda seeks to force a change in the definition of marriage so that homosexual unions will be accepted as marriages.

Secular culture as it is reflected in the media not only accepts sex outside marriage but also encourages it. One result is that many people hardly even understand what the Church says about sexual morality. Many, for instance, not only do not practice modesty in dress but also have little or no idea what "modesty in dress" might mean. And how often, unfortunately, the young are left uninstructed about the evil of masturbation, with the result being a vicious habit they must truly struggle to overcome.

Consent is the supreme principle supposedly legitimating virtually any sexual behavior. This radically libertarian mindset still recognizes rape as a sexual aberration, but if people are willing, virtually anything else goes. "Who am I to judge?" others say with a shrug. "They're old enough. Nobody else is hurt. So why shouldn't they if they want to?"

Here is the rationale for the casual sexual encounters—not just

loveless but without even emotional attachment—now common on college campuses and in other settings. Many young women complain of the boorishness of men who take casual sex for granted, as if this were something they have a right to expect after paying for a meal and drinks. Women, often on the birth-control pill without any medical reason, feel under pressure to comply. Wouldn't people think them strange if they said no? Sexual harassment, stalking, and violence also are part of this ugly scene.

Sometimes, of course, unmarried young women and men do say they're "in love" when they engage in sex. Then the relationship ends, the partners enter into new relationships, they again have sex, and again they say they're "in love." It mocks love to call serial fornication by this name. And it mocks parental responsibility for parents to imagine they've done their duty by telling their children to avoid unprotected sex and have sex only in a caring relationship.

Legalized abortion flows from the mentality I am describing. Despite dishonest chatter about making abortion safe, legal, and rare, there have been 45 million abortions in the United States since the Supreme Court gave its blessing to abortion in 1973. The destruction of 45 million human lives in a little over thirty years is not what most people would call "rare."

Veterans of the abortion movement now speak of the need to preserve their daughters' right to choose abortion. "If you want to kill our unborn grandchildren," they say in effect, "that's your right." Disordered sexual behavior lies at the root of this cancer in our society.

Disordered sexual attitudes and practices before marriage make chastity harder after marriage. Women are encouraged to be as "liberated" as men. But disordered sex is a recipe for conflict, infidelity, self-hatred and hatred of the other, for violence, desertion, and the breakdown of relationships in marriage. This is a strange liberation that entraps, enslaves, and destroys!

Sex education in the schools—unfortunately, even in some Catholic schools—frequently has little or nothing to do with morality. Concentrating on the physiology of sex and contraception, its message to young people is that when they have sex, they should take steps to prevent pregnancy and disease. This destructive miseducation is reinforced by television, movies, music videos, and youth magazines.

The meaning of chastity for everyone

The Church's message about chastity is simple: the great good of sex may not be separated from procreation, love, and marriage. Sexual intimacy and sexual relations are only appropriate between a man and woman united in marriage. Consent isn't enough; faith and reason should govern and guide desire and passion.

My predecessor, Bishop James C. Timlin, once pointed to the likeness between the appetite for food and drink and the appetite for sex. If food and drink are to accomplish God's purpose, the health of the body, then the appetite for them must be regulated; otherwise, they become threats to health.

"The other powerful appetite given by God," Bishop Timlin wrote, "is the sexual appetite. Unlike the appetite for food and drink, which is directed to maintaining the life of the individual, the sexual appetite is provided by God to maintain the continuation of the human race. If this appetite is to do the good for which God gave it, it too must be regulated. Both individuals and society suffer when it is misused or used without regulation."

Unchaste men and women can hardly say with Mary, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." (Lk 1:38) Unchaste people do as they please, not as pleases God. They should recall Scripture's warning: "No immoral or impure man...has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph 5:5). The oldest piece of Christian writing outside the Bible is *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. Known as the *Didache*, it calls abortion, infanticide, fornication, and adultery "a way of death."

Certainly, someone may object: "God is a God of mercy. He doesn't condemn people. Jesus didn't condemn the woman caught in adultery, did he?" Let's see. Here is the passage from chapter 8 of John's Gospel:

Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they [those who had wanted to stone her to death]? Has no one condemned you?" She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."

No, Jesus did not condemn her. And neither did he excuse her. "Go, and do not sin again," he said. This is a message we all must take to heart.

Chastity has never been easy, but today it is harder than ever because of the many inducements to be unchaste and the widespread ignorance of the Christian tradition and the teaching of the Church. Many people would like to do the right thing—if only they knew what that was and felt up to the effort.

Back in the 4th century, St. Augustine knew what wanting and not wanting to be chaste was like. He called it "sickness" for the soul to be "so weighted down by custom that it cannot wholly rise even with the support of truth." But persistence seeking chastity is crowned with success. Thanks to God's help, Augustine succeeded. As charity increases, he wrote later, "greed diminishes; when it reaches perfection, greed is no more." Similarly the growth of charity in the soul eventually removes the lust that inclines people to act unchastely, for lust is a form of greed. Good love drives out bad.

Now let's look at some specific issues.

Marital chastity

Aristotle remarked in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1162a, 25-30) that while men and women marry for reasons of usefulness and pleasure, their "friendship may be based also on virtue, if the parties are good.... And children seem to be a bond of union (which is the reason why childless people part more easily); for children are a good common to both and what is common holds them together."

Chastity, which embraces openness to children and the choice to stay together, is the key to a happy marriage.

The Bible makes it clear that married love is a great gift from God. This is the message of the Book of Genesis and the Letter to the Ephesians.

Genesis makes two enormously important points about human beings. First, they are made in the image and likeness of God. Second, seeing "it was not good for man to be alone" (Gn 2:18), God created woman and, by ordaining that the two become "one flesh" (Gn 2:24), made the love of husband and wife a visible sign of his love for the world. And, as Ephesians points out, by the redemptive activity of Christ, the love of husband and wife is a sign—a kind of sacrament—of the mystery of the love between Christ and his Church (Eph 5:32). In marrying, a man and woman establish a lifelong partnership, for their own good and the good of their children. Because Christian marriage is a sign of Christ's covenant with the Church, its covenantal nature makes divorce impossible for a man and woman joined in sacramental marriage. "To bear witness to the inestimable value of the indissolubility and fidelity of marriage is one of the most precious and most urgent tasks of Christian couples in our time," according to Pope John Paul II. (*Familiaris Consortio*, 20)

Soon after becoming Pope, our Holy Father devoted a famous series of Wednesday audience talks to a theology of the body. It is a theology rooted in his philosophical studies and one of its key insights concerns the body's "nuptial" meaning.

"Right from the beginning," he said, the human body in its masculinity or femininity includes "the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love...in which the person becomes a gift and, by means of this gift, fulfills the meaning of his being or existence." Does the Catholic Church take a negative view of sex and seek to deny people the pleasures of sexual expression? Critics say so, but they're wrong. As Pope Paul VI wrote in *Humanae Vitae*—citing the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*—the Church teaches that conjugal relations between a husband and wife are "good and worthy of human dignity." Marital chastity preserves that goodness and protects that dignity.

Growth in friendship between husband and wife requires that they make constant efforts to grow in love of God and neighbor and avoid sin—not only sins against chastity but also sins like pride, anger, alcohol abuse, drug addiction, laziness, holding grudges, withholding forgiveness, and much else.

To do this, a Catholic couple must know their faith, receive the sacraments, and strive for the perfection of charity. With God's grace, mediated especially through the sacrament of matrimony, as well as frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, wife and husband can conquer their sins and disordered inclinations and love one another as Christ loves the Church and the Church loves Christ. Then their marriage and family life become manifestations of great beauty, sources of happiness for themselves and their children, inspirations to others. Then they are on the way to being—I write these words gladly—married saints.

Contraception and natural family planning

The Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor called the Church's doctrine on contraception "the most absolutely spiritual of all her stands." Then this tough-minded realist about human nature added a catch: "With all of us being materialists at heart, there is little wonder that it causes unease."

Pope Paul VI stated the teaching clearly in his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (12): "There is an unbreakable connection between the unitive and procreative meaning, and both are inherent in the conjugal act. God established this connection, and man is not permitted to break it through his own volition." Even so, people—including many Catholics—do break that connection all the time. Does that have something to do with our being, as Flannery O'Connor said, "materialists at heart?"

But after all, what's wrong with contraception? By contraception, people willingly act against both the procreative, life-giving meaning of conjugal intercourse and the unitive, love-giving meaning. Setting one's will against, as well as acting against fundamental human purposes like these, is moral evil: sin.

It doesn't help to say that one is avoiding procreation so that love can be more freely expressed. The two things are so intimately linked, Pope John Paul II points out, that "the conjugal act deprived of its interior truth, because artificially deprived of its procreative capacity, ceases to be an act of love."

What does someone who practices contraception communicate to his or her spouse? "I love you deeply—but not completely, of course. I give myself to you entirely—but only up to a point. I trust God unconditionally—but we've got to look out for ourselves." This is a badly mixed message, to say the least.

Things are very different with a husband and wife open to bringing a new life into the world. They are prepared to live even more fully in service to one another and to sacrifice for the common good of their family.

But what about couples who have a good reason to put off having a child? Then the morally right answer is Natural Family Planning (NFP). NFP today is not the calendar-rhythm method of the 1940s and 1950s. NFP refers to scientifically proven, morally acceptable methods by which a couple determines the woman's fertile and infertile periods, with a view either to conceiving a child or postponing conception. Both artificial contraception and NFP can fail when not used properly, but the success rate of NFP is fully comparable to that of contraception. And the rate of divorce among NFP couples is much lower than among contracepting couples, thanks to the high degree of communication, mutual consideration, and respect that NFP involves.

Homosexuality and same-sex unions

Widespread acceptance of contraception paved the way for approval of the homosexual lifestyle and efforts to have same-sex unions accepted as marriages. As with many other bad ideas, the logic is unassailable once you grant the fundamental premise: that

it is all right to separate the procreative purpose of sexual intercourse from the unitive purpose. Of course the same logic can just as well be used on behalf of other sexual practices that are still generally considered unacceptable.

If homosexual "marriage" ever becomes the law of the land, the views pronounced by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts when legalizing it in that state will be imposed on the rest of the country. For instance, these views include the notions that marriage is intended mainly to benefit adults; that children do not need a mother and a father; that other ways of raising children are as good as the mother-father way; and that marriage is the creation of the state.

Then society will attempt to condition us to stop speaking of "husbands" and "wives" and to speak of "partners." Children will have to be taught about homosexual sex in marriage-preparation and sex-education classes. Anyone who objects will be branded a "homophobe." Churches that teach the contrary doctrine of their sacred books and traditions will be called bigoted and threatened with legal coercion.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2357) presents the teaching of the Catholic Church in these words:

"Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave disorder, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved."

Recognizing same-sex unions as marriages would be a serious blow to traditional marriage for it would demean the unique relationship of wife and husband. It would be like giving a diamond and a piece of glass the same name—"diamond"—and the same price.

Traditional marriage was already under assault—from cohabitation, contraception, infidelity, and divorce—before same-sex "marriage" came along. But traditional marriages and families are essential to a healthy society. For the sake of the common good, as well as individuals, they should be defended and preserved.

At the same time, people with a homosexual orientation deserve the same respect and fair treatment as everyone else. They should not be targets of unjust discrimination and certainly not targets of violence. Called to live chaste, holy lives, they should receive the support of the Christian community in their efforts to practice chastity. The organization, Courage, offers important ministry to aid those seeking to live chaste lives.

Education in chastity

Many persons and groups have roles in educating children and young people in chastity. The need for such education is greater than ever today because of the miseducation in unchastity that American children and young people receive from other sources.

Parents should teach their children from an early age that chastity

is to be prized and cherished and that unchaste behavior is sinful. Parents must of course be models of chaste behavior themselves. They can help their children develop self-mastery by cautioning them against unchaste thoughts and immodest behavior, and warning them against—when they are young, denying them access to—movies, TV shows, Internet sites, and other sources of lewdness and pornography.

Parents should chaperone children's parties and social activities and supervise dating. (Pre-pubescent and pubescent children shouldn't date at all.) Catholic parents must see that their children learn and practice the faith. In the present unhealthy cultural environment, faith and virtuous behavior can't be taken for granted or left to chance.

Parishes and Catholic schools and religious education programs are obliged to support and reinforce the teaching of conscientious parents. Bearing in mind that they are role models as well as information sources, religion teachers and catechists—indeed, all teachers, administrators, coaches, librarians, and other staff—should know and observe the teaching of the Church. Every class, subject, and activity, from science and literature to athletics and the school play, is a potential setting for communicating sound principles.

Like responsible parents, teachers face a daunting task today, given the fact that children are bombarded with incitements to be unchaste and may have hardly heard the word chastity, much less learned what it means and been helped to live it out. Among other things, teachers need to encourage their pupils to attend weekly Sunday Mass and receive the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist regularly.

Parish priests should speak the truth about human sexuality and sexual sin. Homilies, the sacrament of Penance, and sacramental preparation, especially before marriage, are important occasions for doing this. Pastoral sensitivity is always in order, but silence is not.

Careful instruction in Natural Family Planning should be part of marriage-preparation programs. NFP should never be presented as merely a subject for discussion that listeners are free to ignore. Where our own knowledge may be behind the times, we bishops and priests need to update ourselves on Natural Family Planning, Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, and other developments.

Let us take the Blessed Virgin Mary as our model and guide. As the Second Vatican Council affirmed in *Lumen Gentium* (64), Mary "preserves with virginal purity an integral faith, a firm hope, and a sincere charity." Her special spiritual fruitfulness comes from purity and openness to the Father's will; by imitating her, we too can be spiritually fruitful.

But the Blessed Virgin is more than just someone to imitate. As mediatrix of grace to those who call upon her with sincere devotion, she helps us in our efforts to be holy. Loving us with a mother's compassion, she wants Christ to be born in us individually and as a pilgrim Church. With God's grace, through Mary, may we all be chaste. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." (Mt 5:8)