

Chastity

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

Chastity creates in us a pure heart that is able to see reality and other people in God, it also makes us living reflections of God's love

Speaking about chastity is not easy. It is a word, and a reality, often understood in a reductive way or even misunderstood and ridiculed; at times, it is confused with virginity or identified with sexual abstinence. Rediscovering the anthropological value of chastity can help us rediscover its spiritual value in Christian life. The word's background suggests that the chaste person (*castus*) is one who refuses incest (*in-castus*) - a person who is not chaste, etymologically, is incestuous. A chaste person accepts distance and respects alterity (which cannot be reduced to difference) in his or her relationships; a person who is not chaste seeks not a relationship but the fusion and con-fusion that normally define incest. This basic definition makes chastity part of the art of learning to love and express one's sexuality in a mature and adult way. This does not make it a negative virtue, marked by prohibitions, but one that is eminently positive and that "gives human relationships their sincerity and warmth, and allows people to recognize one another in the respect of their inmost self" (C. Flipo). J. Gründel writes, "Chastity is the inner availability that allows a person to affirm fully his or her own sexuality, recognize the personal and social nature of sexual impulses, and give them a meaningful place within human life as a whole."

Chastity is "well-ordered love (*amor ordinatus*) that does not subordinate greater things to lesser ones" (Augustine). It implies a radical assumption of responsibility for one's body and demands not repudiation of the body or sexuality, but their integration in one's personal life. Each of us is called to obey the command to be our own body, to express our sexuality according to the logic of the symbol and not that of the object. In particular, we need to remember that integrating temporality in love is essential: chastity is waiting, gradation and duration. It refuses the fusionality of an 'everything now' mentality and the logic of immediacy and consumerism. We can also see it as a way of resisting blind obedience to the sexual impulse, its impersonalization, the search for satisfaction at any cost, dissipation, and an excessive exaltation of sexuality. Chastity reminds us that love is also discipline, work and effort and that it requires a process of purification if it is to become intelligent and respectful of the other person and his or her mystery, and thus truly attentive to the other's well-being. Rilke writes, "There is nothing more arduous than love - it is work, day after day. Young people are not at all prepared for the difficulty of love; convention has tried to turn this great and complex relationship into something simple and light, something that is within everyone's reach. But that isn't how it is. Love is difficult!"

Chastity, then, concerns each person. From a Christian perspective, it is not the unique responsibility of so-called 'consecrated celibates,' but is an aspect of Christian life that should be taken seriously by every baptized person, whatever his or her life situation may be. Certainly, from a Christian point of view chastity is connected to one's faith in Christ and personal attachment to him; it is rooted in the decision to follow him and is an expression of love for him. In marriage just as in celibacy, chastity is respect for the mystery of one's own body and the bodies of others. It allows us to perceive the body as personal and expressive before grasping it as an object of desire. In fact, we are led to confess that the human body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and the dwelling place of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:19), as well as the place where God is glorified (1 Corinthians 6:20). Only great love for the Lord and faith in the resurrection, together with human maturity characterized by adherence to reality and the ability to love, make it possible to live in celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God. As Freud himself observed, human equilibrium can be essentially defined as the concrete ability to love and to work efficiently. These two capacities characterize the human maturity that is essential to full spiritual growth, not only in married life but also in celibate life.

Chastity implies a profound orientation of the heart and is therefore a journey, a battle that requires constant vigilance, and never a condition reached once and for all. St. Cesarius has the following to say: "Among all the battles Christians have to fight, the hardest are those for chastity: here one combats daily, and victory is rare." Victory is always a gift, an event of grace in which the energies of the resurrection triumph, through faith, over human egocentric impulses. Christians find sustenance and direction for this struggle in the Eucharist, which reminds them that "the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body" (1 Corinthians 6:13). There, as they examine their own lives before the body of the Lord given in love, they come to understand the relationship they should have with their own body and with the bodies of others. They also see themselves confirmed in their vocation to communion, love, and fellowship, and this calling leads them to make themselves a sign of God's love for humanity. As chastity creates in us a pure heart that is able to see reality and other people in God, it also makes us living reflections of God's love and power - the power with which "God raised the Lord and will also raise us" (1 Corinthians 6:14).

From: ENZO BIANCHI, *Words of Spirituality*,
Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London 2002