

Christian motives for the virtue of purity

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by **Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M.Cap.**

In our commentary on the exhortations in the Letter to the Romans, we have now come to the passage that says, "The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:12-14).

St. Augustine in his Confessions tells us about the part this passage played in his conversion. He had now reached an almost complete commitment to the faith. But there was one thing holding him back: the fear of not being able to remain chaste. He was living, as we know, with a woman without being married.

In the garden of the home he was visiting, in the throes of this interior struggle with tears in his eyes, he heard a voice coming from the house next door, a young boy's or girl's voice that kept repeating, "Tolle, lege! Take up and read, take up and read." He interpreted those words as an invitation from God, and having a book of St. Paul's Letters close by, he opened it randomly and decided to consider the first thing he read as God's will for him. The passage his eyes fell on was precisely the passage from the Letter to the Romans that we have just read. A reassuring light (*lux securitatis*) shone forth within him that made all the darkness of uncertainty disappear. Now he knew that with God's help, he could be chaste.

The things that the apostle calls "the works of darkness" in this passage are the same things he defines elsewhere as "desires, or works, of the flesh" (see Rom 8:13; Gal 5:19), and what he calls "the armor of light" refers to the things that he elsewhere calls "the works of the Spirit," or "the fruit of the Spirit" (see Gal 5:22). Among the works of the flesh, he highlights sexual dissoluteness with two words (*koite* and *aselgeia*) that are contrasted to the work of light, which is purity.

St. Paul establishes a very close link between purity and holiness and between purity and the Holy Spirit: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things... God has not called us for uncleanness but for holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you." (1 Thess 4:3-8)

Let us, therefore, seek to take up this last exhortation from the word of God, reflecting more deeply on this particular fruit of the Spirit, purity.

Self control

In the Letter to the Galatians St. Paul writes, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). The original Greek word that is translated as "self-control" or "dominion over oneself" is *enkrateia*. It has a very broad range of meanings. One can in fact exercise self-control in eating, in speaking, in restraining anger, etc. Here, however, as almost always in the New Testament, it means self-control in a very specific personal area, the area of sexuality. We can deduce this from the fact that just above when he is listing "the works of the flesh," the apostle calls *porneia*, impurity, the thing that is opposed to self-control. (This is the same word from which we get the word "pornography.")

In modern translations of the Bible, the word *porneia* has been translated at times as "prostitution," at times as "sexual immorality," at times as "fornication" or "adultery," and at times with other words. The basic idea of the word, however, is that of "selling oneself," of using one's own body, and thus of prostituting oneself (*pernemi* in Greek means, "I sell myself"). Using

this a word to indicate virtually all the manifestations of sexual disorder, the Bible says that every sin of impurity is, in a sense, a prostituting of oneself, a selling of oneself.

The words used by St. Paul tell us, then, that there are two opposing attitudes toward one's body and one's sexuality. One is a fruit of the Spirit and the other is a work of the flesh; one is a virtue, the other is a vice. The first attitude involves maintaining control over oneself and one's body; the second instead involves selling oneself or using one's body, that is, using sexuality for one's own pleasure, for utilitarian goals that are different than those for which it was created. It makes the sexual act a venal act, even if the gain is not always monetary as in the case of true prostitution, and makes selfish pleasure an end in itself (...)

We belong to Christ

Let us now examine one of these specific teachings on purity to discover its true content and the true Christian reasons for this virtue, which come from Christ's paschal mystery. It is found in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. It seems that the Corinthians — perhaps misinterpreting a statement by the apostle — advanced the principle that "all things are lawful for me" to justify even sins of impurity. The apostle's response contains an absolutely new motive for purity that derives from the mystery of Christ. It is not permitted, he says, to give oneself to impurity (*porneia*). It is not permitted to sell oneself or to use oneself just for one's own pleasure for the simple reason that we no longer belong to ourselves; we are not our own but Christ's. We cannot decide how to use something that does not belong to us: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?... You are not your own" (1 Cor 12:15, 19)...

"The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (1 Cor 6:13). The ultimate motive for purity is, therefore, that "Jesus is Lord!" ... This Christological motive for purity is made more compelling by what St. Paul adds in the same passage: we are not just generically "of" Christ, like his property or something that belongs to him; we are the very body of Christ, his members! This makes everything immensely more subtle because it means that when I commit an impure act, I am prostituting the body of Christ; I am performing a kind of horrible sacrilege. I am committing violence against the body of the Son of God. The apostle asks, "Shall I, therefore, take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?" (1 Cor 6:15).

He quickly adds to this Christological motive the pneumatological one which concerns the Holy Spirit: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" (1 Cor 6:19). To abuse one's own body is thus to desecrate the temple of God. But if someone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him (see 1 Cor 3:17). To commit impurity is to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Ephes 4:30).

Purity of heart, lips and eyes

This kind of purity is a lifestyle more than it is an individual virtue. It has a range of manifestations that go beyond the specifically sexual sphere. There is a purity of the body, but there is also a purity of the soul that rejects not only acts but also "evil" desires and thoughts (see Mt 5:8, 27-28). There is a purity of speech that consists, negatively, in refraining from obscene language, vulgarity, and silly or suggestive talk (see Ephes 5:4; Col 3:8) and consists positively in sincere and straightforward speech, that is, in saying "yes, yes," and "no, no" in imitation of the spotless Lamb in whom "no guile was found on his lips" (1 Pet 2:22).

Finally, there is a purity or clear-sightedness of the eyes and of one's gaze. "The eye," Jesus said, "is the lamp of the body" (see Mt 6:22ff; Lk 11:34). St. Paul uses a very suggestive image to indicate the manner of this new life: he says Christians, born from the Passover of Christ, should be characterized by "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:8). The word the apostle uses here, *eilikrineia*, (from *eile*, splendor of the sun, and *krino*, to discern) contains in itself the image of a "solar transparency." In the passage we began with in Romans he speaks of purity as "the armor of light."

Purity and the love of neighbour

Every day people tend to contrast sins against purity with sins against a neighbor and to consider just the sin against a neighbor a real sin... However, we have gone to the opposite extreme, and people tend to minimize sins against purity in the interest of concern (often only verbal) for one's neighbor..

The basic error here is in putting these two virtues against each other. The word of God, far from setting purity against charity, instead links them closely together. We only have to read the continuation of the passage from the First Letter to the Thessalonians that I cited at the beginning to realize how these two virtues are interdependent according to the apostle (see 1

Thess 4:3-12). The single goal of both purity and charity is to be able to conduct a life "full of dignity," that is, integrated in all its relationships whether with oneself or with others. In our passage, the apostle summarizes all this in saying, "let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day" (Rom 13:13).

Purity and love of neighbor represent dominion over self and the gift of self to others. How can I give myself if I do not possess myself but am a slave to my passions? It is an illusion to think that we can combine genuine service to brothers and sisters, which always calls for sacrifice, altruism, forgetting ourselves, and generosity, with a life that is personally disordered, all aimed at pleasing oneself and satisfying one's passions. It inevitably ends in using brothers and sisters, just as one uses one's body. Those who cannot say "no" to themselves cannot say "yes" to brothers and sisters.

One of the "excuses" that contributes the most to justify the sin of impurity in people's minds and to relieve them of all responsibility is that it does not hurt anyone else, it does not violate the rights and freedom of anyone unless they say, it involves sexual abuse. But apart from the fact that this approach violates God's fundamental right to give his creatures a law, this "excuse" is also disingenuous in regard to neighbors. It is not true that the sin of impurity ends with the person who commits it. There is a solidarity among all sins. Every sin, wherever and whoever commits it, infects and defiles the moral atmosphere for human beings. Jesus calls this infection "scandal" and condemns it with some of the most horrific words in the whole Gospel (see Mt 18:6ff; Mk 9:42ff; Lk 17:1ff). Even evil thoughts that linger in our hearts, according to Jesus, defile a person and thus the world: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication... These are what defile a man" (Mt. 15:19-20).

Purity and renewal

In studying the history of the origins of Christianity, one can clearly see that there were two principal instruments by which the Church succeeded in transforming the pagan world of that time. The first was the proclamation of the Gospel, the *kerygma*, and the second was the testimony of Christians' lives, their witness. And one can see how, in the area of life testimony, there were again two things that most amazed and converted the pagans: brotherly love and the purity of the Christians' morals. The First Letter of Peter already mentions the amazement of the pagan world before the standard of life that was different among the Christians. He writes:

"Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you." (1 Pet 4:3-4)

The Apologists, the Christian writers who wrote in defense of the faith in the first centuries of the Church, attest that the pure and chaste manner of life of the Christians was, for the pagans, something "extraordinary and incredible." In particular, the restoration of the family had an extraordinary impact on pagan society, which the authorities at the time had wanted to reform, but they had been powerless to slow down its disintegration. One of the arguments on which St. Justin Martyr based his Apology addressed to the emperor Antoninus Pius was this: Roman emperors are concerned about improving morals and the family, and they are attempting to promulgate laws for that goal. However, these laws have been shown to be insufficient. Well, why not recognize what Christian laws have been capable of achieving for those who live by them and acknowledge the help they can also give to civil society?

This does not mean that the Christian community was completely free of sexual disorders and sins. St. Paul even had to deal with a case of incest in the Corinthian community. But such sins were clearly recognized as sins, denounced, and corrected. It was not required to be without sin in this area, as in other areas, but to fight against sin.

Now let us move from early Christianity to today. What is the situation in the world today regarding purity? It is the same if not worse than the ancient situation! We live in a society, in terms of morals, that has fallen back into full-blown paganism and full-blown idolatry of sex. The terrible denunciation that St. Paul makes of the pagan world at the beginning of the Letter to the Romans applies, point by point, to today's world, especially to the so-called affluent society (see Rom 1:26-27, 32).

Today as well, these things and other worse things are being done, but people try to justify them, to justify every moral license and every sexual perversion provided. They say, it does not harm others and does not infringe on the freedom of others. Whole families are being destroyed and people still say, where's the harm in it? (...)

If we closely examine what is being called the sexual revolution of our day, we realize with shock that it is not simply a revolution against the past but is also often a revolution against God, and at times even against human nature.

Fight for purity

But I do not want to linger for too long on describing the situation around us today that all of us already know so well. Instead, I would like to discover and transmit what God wants of us Christians in such a situation as this. God is calling us to the same task to which he called our first brothers and sisters in the faith, to "stand against this wild profligacy." He is calling us to make the "beauty" of Christian life shine again before the eyes of the whole world. He is calling us to fight for purity, to fight with persistence and humility — not necessarily to be immediately perfect.

Today the Holy Spirit is asking us to do something new: he is asking us to bear witness to the world to the original innocence of creatures and things. The world has sunk very low. Someone has written that sex has gone to our brains. We need something very strong to break this kind of narcosis and intoxication with sex. We need to reawaken in human beings a nostalgia for the innocence and simplicity that they long for in their hearts, even if those hearts are quite often covered with sludge. I am not referring to the innocence of creation that no longer exists but the innocence of redemption that Christ restored to us and offers us in the sacraments and in the word of God. This is what St. Paul has in mind when he writes to the Philippians "that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil 2:15-16). This describes what Paul calls in our passage "putting on the armor of light."

It is no longer enough to have a purity based on fear, taboos, prohibitions,.. We need to aspire, thanks to the presence of the Spirit in us, to a purity that is stronger than its opposite vice — a positive purity, not just a negative one, that is able to make us experience the truth of this word from the apostle, "To the pure all things are pure" (Tit 1:15), and of this other word from Scripture, "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4).

Blessed are the pure in heart

We need to begin with healing the root, which is the "heart," because everything that defiles a person's life comes from the heart (Mt 15:18). Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). They will truly see; they will have new eyes to see the world and God, clear-sighted eyes that know how to discern what is beautiful and what is hideous, what is truth and what is a lie, what brings life and what brings death — eyes, in brief, like Jesus' eyes. How free Jesus was to talk about everything: children, women, pregnancy, childbirth... Eyes like Mary's eyes. Purity no longer consists, then, in saying, "no" to creatures but in saying "yes" to them — insofar as they are creatures of God who have been and remain "very good."

Let us not deceive ourselves. To be able to say this "yes," we need to go through the cross because, after sin, our gaze on creatures has become clouded; concupiscence has been unleashed in us; sexuality is no longer peaceful and has become an ambiguous and threatening force that drags us away from the law of God against our will... In the first meditation for this Lent, we emphasized one aspect that is particularly relevant and necessary for mortification: the mortification of the eyes. A healthy fast from images is more important today than fasting from food and drink.

Let us conclude by recalling the experience of St. Augustine mentioned at the beginning. After that experience of deliverance, he started praying for chastity in a new way: "Lord," he said, "you command me to be chaste. Give me what you ask me for and then ask me whatever you will". A prayer we can make our own, knowing that in this, as in any other field by ourselves we can do nothing.

Source: <https://zenit.org/articles/father-cantalamessa-put-on-the-armor-of-light/>

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