

Practical Ways of Practicing Chastity

Refreshed and rejuvenated by the summer holidays, we are once again ready to launch into another academic year. Month of June, in our houses, will be filled with newness everywhere. For some of us, it will be a new community, new Rector, new confreres, new portfolio, new responsibility, new school, new students, new parish, new social experience, new people and so on and so forth. Let the newness that we are experiencing help us for our own growth and for the growth of others, especially growth in our mission. Let us take this newness as a gift coming from the Sacred Heart of Jesus, whom we commemorate during this month of June. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was important to St. John Bosco, because it focused on Jesus as our loving friend. He would tell his boys that the Heart of Jesus was filled with acceptance, mercy and love. He would encourage them to open their own hearts to that love, feel the embrace of Jesus, and grow in friendship with him.

At the age of four, Margaret Mary Alacoque made a promise to the Lord. She felt inspired to compose this prayer: "Oh my Lord, I consecrate to you my purity and I make a vow of perpetual chastity." Although she herself later confessed that she did not quite understand the meaning of the words: "vow" or "chastity." On one occasion Jesus said to her: "I have chosen thee to be My spouse, and we pledged each other fidelity when thou didst make thy vow of chastity. It was I who urged thee to make it, before the world had any share in thy heart, because I wished to have it quite pure... And then I confided thee to the care of my Holy Mother, that she might fashion thee according to My designs." I think that the same words were probably repeated to us by Jesus our Lord on the day of our consecration. I thought it best to reflect with you, in this circular, on our fidelity from the perspective of chastity that embraces both innocence and decency.

Chastity

Chastity refers specifically to the virtue of refraining from sexual impurity or indulgence outside of the bounds of marriage. It involves self-discipline, moderation, and respect for the sacredness of human sexuality. Chastity does not necessarily mean abstaining from sexuality altogether but rather engaging in it within the moral framework provided by one's faith or convictions. It goes without saying that for us religious and priests whatever threatens the sacredness of the body or whatsoever goes against the temple of the Holy Spirit (the body) has to be avoided. However, the idea of chastity, particularly in the context of sexual restraint, is often met with scepticism or ridicule. The prevalent cultural attitude advocates sexual liberation and experimentation, often divorcing intimacy from commitment and emotional connection. Upholding chastity requires courage and discipline in a culture that often equates sexual activity with unbridled freedom and bodily satisfaction. Those who choose chastity recognize that true intimacy is grounded in mutual respect, trust, and commitment.

Our father and founder dedicated his life to the welfare of young people, particularly those at risk. His commitment to chastity was evident in his celibate lifestyle, which he embraced wholeheartedly in service to his mission. His example highlights the transformative power of chastity in channeling one's energies towards noble pursuits. He tells us his sons, "what should distinguish from all others, what must be the special characteristic of our Congregation, is the virtue of chastity. It has to become the pivot of all our actions... we need an invincible modesty and great chastity... this will be the triumph of our Congregation." Furthermore, he exhorts us: "Would you like to know the ones who are really burdens to the Congregation? They are those who are gifted, but disobedient, whose superior is obliged to pick his words carefully when he gives them an order, knowing that if he does

not, they will either disobey or obey him begrudgingly; those who want no love of poverty, who complain about the food and drink that is served, or about their room; those who do not treasure the virtue of chastity scrupulously, because without it, one single person may bring ruin upon the whole Congregation. If you are good and do the best you can, you will never be a burden to the Congregation.”

Another aspect that can downplay chastity is the lack of the purity of intention. St. Alphonsus de Liguori emphasizes the paramount importance of the purity of intention, stating that our actions are judged by the intentions behind them. He warns against seeking personal gratification in our endeavours, asserting that true fulfilment comes from seeking to please God alone. Whether in spiritual or physical tasks, seeking approval or recognition from others undermines the purity of our intentions. Rather, our focus should be on glorifying God and benefiting others, without expectation of praise or success. Ultimately, every action, no matter how mundane, can be elevated to an act of divine love when done with the sole intention of pleasing God.

The deliberations of the General Chapter of 1965 state that “both as a congregation and as individuals, Salesians must be acutely conscious of the fact that they have a special message of purity to transmit to the modern world. They have a special mission towards the young whom they must train to be vigorous in their practice of purity. For such a mission, they themselves must in a special way be invincible in their own purity.”

Fr. Boenzi studying critically on “Chastity in the Salesian Constitutions” concludes his reflections as follows: “The Constitutions treatment of chastity, as they treat every other aspect of Salesian community, ministerial, and religious life, has changed tremendously since the close of Vatican II. This change has been part of a global ecclesial effort to return to the sources - the Gospel and the spirit of the founder - mandated by the Council and necessitated by the enormous changes transforming the world. Yet, the leadership of the Salesian Society in both eras assure the members that the rule ‘is faithful to the spirit’ of Don Bosco and ‘ensures continuity with our origins.’ In the case of chastity, texts before and after the reform quote Don Bosco, highlight the relationship between religious consecration and the Salesians’ educational mission, and offer practical measures to ‘preserve,’ ‘develop,’ or ‘grow in’ chastity. Besides offering norms, the reformed text places chastity in a new context. It shows the interdependence of members who are committed to grow as persons and as Christians, stressing that the community may help or hinder one’s commitment to chaste, celibate love. On the other hand, by highlighting the following of ‘the chaste Christ,’ celibacy is lifted out of the realm of discipline and put into the context of relationships - a relationship with Jesus, relationships with ‘the brothers,’ and relationships with the young. Thus, religious motivation is expressed in terms that are both social and spiritual. Finally, the cautionary whispers have disappeared.

Chastity is presented as a liberating witness and sign to all people. Celibacy encourages friendship, endorses the family, and stimulates authentic love that enables human growth and “the coming of the Kingdom.” Chastity as I indicated in the beginning embraces both innocence and decency and one cannot think of chastity without these two elements.

Innocence: Innocence refers to the state of being free from guilt, sin, or moral wrongdoing. It involves a lack of malice or corruption, often associated with purity of heart and mind. Innocence is closely linked to a childlike simplicity and trust in the goodness of others. Innocence, characterized by a sense of purity and simplicity, is seen as a liability in a world that values cynicism and worldliness. The pressure to grow up quickly and engage in adult experiences can erode the innocence of youth. While innocence may be perceived as vulnerability, it is also a source of purity

and wonder. Those who preserve their innocence amidst the challenges of the modern world safeguard a precious aspect of their humanity, allowing them to approach life with openness and trust. St. Dominic Savio, known for his childlike innocence, once remarked, “Death rather than sin.” This statement encapsulates his unwavering commitment to maintaining his innocence and purity of heart, even in the face of temptation or adversity. His innocence served as a guiding light in his spiritual journey, inspiring others to strive for purity of heart and intention.

Decency: In a world filled with chaos and uncertainty, decency serves as a guiding light, illuminating the path towards a better society. It is the moral compass that directs our actions and shapes our character. Decency transcends boundaries of race, religion, and nationality, uniting us in our shared humanity. It is the cornerstone of harmonious relationships, fostering empathy, respect, and kindness towards one another. Decency can be defined as the quality or state of being morally upright, modest, honourable, and respectful in behaviour and appearance. It encompasses traits such as kindness, honesty, integrity, and consideration for others. Decency is often reflected in one’s actions, speech, and interactions with others, as well as in how one carries himself in various situations. It forms the basis of civilized society, promoting harmony, fairness, and compassion among individuals. Decency is not merely a virtue; it is a way of life—a commitment to moral excellence and compassionate living. As individuals, we have the power to uphold decency in our thoughts, words, and actions, thereby creating a ripple effect of positivity and goodwill in the world. Let us strive to be beacons of decency, shining brightly in the darkness and inspiring others to join us on the journey towards a more just, compassionate, and harmonious world. Decency, in Salesian context, is deeply rooted in our mission to promote human dignity and respect for all individuals. Our educational approach emphasizes moral values, character development, and a sense of responsibility towards others. Decency, encompasses treating others with kindness, compassion, and integrity, fostering a sense of community and belonging among students and educators alike. In summary, decency underscores the importance of moral integrity, compassion, and respect for others in the context of education and youth ministry. Their holistic approach to education seeks not only to impart knowledge but also to nurture the character and well-being of young people, instilling in them the values of decency and empathy that are essential for a just and compassionate society. St. Maria Mazzarello, whose feast we celebrated on 13th May, exhorts the religious to have “‘total detachment from all that is not God,’ ‘to crush one’s self-love at all costs,’ and promote the virtues of patient suffering, sacrifice, obedience and humility” in order to follow the Lord.

Conclusion

Having reflected about chastity, innocence and decency in this circular, I am mentioning a few guidelines that we can put into practice in our life; the dangers that we need to overcome and finally three questions for our reflection.

Practical Ways of Practicing Chastity

1. **Cultivate Mindfulness and Prayer:** Incorporate regular prayer and mindfulness practices into your daily routine. By nurturing a deeper spiritual connection, individuals can strengthen their resolve to uphold chastity. Engage in prayer, meditation, or reflection to align your thoughts and actions with your commitment to purity.
2. **Foster Accountability and Community Support:** Establish accountability partnerships or small support groups within the religious community. Encourage open dialogue and mutual support in navigating challenges related to chastity. By fostering a culture of accountability

and camaraderie, individuals can draw strength from one another and stay committed to their vows.

3. **Engage in Holistic Self-Care:** Prioritize holistic self-care practices that promote physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Maintain a healthy lifestyle through regular exercise, adequate rest, and nourishing meals. Additionally, seek out activities that bring joy and fulfillment, such as hobbies, creative pursuits, or acts of service, which can channel energy positively and reinforce the commitment to chastity.

Dangers to Overcome

1. **Temptation and Impulsive Behaviour:** Be vigilant against temptation and impulsive behaviour that may compromise chastity. Identify triggers and situations that pose a risk to your commitment, and develop strategies to avoid or navigate them effectively. Practice self-awareness and self-control in moments of temptation, relying on prayer and support from the community for strength.
2. **Isolation and Loneliness:** Guard against feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can undermine chastity. Stay connected with supportive relationships within the religious community and seek companionship and fellowship when needed. Engage in activities and social interactions that foster a sense of belonging and connection, reducing the risk of succumbing to temptation out of emotional vulnerability.
3. **Complacency and Spiritual Drift:** Avoid complacency and spiritual drift by maintaining a proactive approach to spiritual growth and renewal. Regularly assess your commitment to chastity and seek opportunities for ongoing formation and development. Stay connected to spiritual mentors, engage in regular sacramental practices, and participate in retreats or spiritual exercises to nurture a vibrant and resilient faith life.