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The Wisdom of St Benedict

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*Monastic Spirituality and
the Life of the Church*

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N O R W I C H

CHAPTER VI

Chastity

“Before the 60s, celibates were presumed to have no sexuality” [said one study participant]. . . . [E]ven priests who know “hundreds and hundreds of priests” often do not know the sexual/celibate adjustment of even their closest friends, as we found time and time again in our search. This adjustment is mostly a secret one.

Richard Sipe¹

If we want to understand chastity, we can begin by seeing it simply as “life.” We want to live. A monk used to pray thus, “Lord, let me be still alive when I will die.”

Many consider a monastic’s existence to be a negation of life. Why set limits to our freedom by choosing to obey? Why turn away from the possession of material goods and the use of money? And why, above all, renounce sexual relationships? Many would say that this is not life, and they might not be entirely wrong.

1. Richard Sipe, *A Secret World: Sexuality and the Search for Celibacy* (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 1990), 4–5.

Life

And yet we become monastics because we want to live. "As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Mark 10:17). "Eternal life" means a full life, fullness of life, fullness of meaning. The young man asks, "Master, what must I do to feel truly alive, in order to be alive when I die?" This question initiates a dialogue between the young man and Jesus:

Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.'" He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. (Mark 10:18-22)

Before we even open our mouths, the Lord knows us. He knows our inconsistencies, our ambitions, the weaknesses of our will. He does not yield to the young man's flattery ("good teacher"). The young man is one of those people who covers others with compliments in order to subdue them and subtly manipulate them. They want approval, not relationship. To succumb to them is to permit them to use us, to support them in their conviction of being able to obtain everything through seduction and leaving them prisoners of their cynicism. Maybe we reassure ourselves by telling ourselves that we are not the seducers. True or not, we certainly have one thing in common with the young man: we don't really know ourselves. We say things to ourselves, to others, to God, but we don't really think about them or measure their meaning. We are like Peter, who said to Jesus, "Master, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). He believes he really wants what he says, but Jesus reveals that he doesn't know himself,

doesn't know his own weakness: "Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times" (John 13:38).

Jesus reveals to us the truth about ourselves. He shows us our dark side, the part that resists life, happiness, and the realization of ourselves. There is an idolatrous aspect in our personality, a lack of freedom, and Jesus has his own way of making us aware of it—not a pitiless unmasking, but an invitation to step out of ourselves, to dare to open our eyes to the light of day. In our interpretation of Jesus' call to the young man, let us not stop at "Go and sell," at renunciation, but let us go to the real invitation: "Come, follow me!"

Jesus does not ask the young man to *abandon something*, but to *embrace someone*. He tells him, "Follow me." That is, he calls him to choose love, to choose relationship rather than possession. And there is a bitter irony in the evangelist's comment at the end of this passage: "At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions" (Mark 10:22). Possessions are good in themselves, but when we let ourselves be possessed by them, they stifle every other desire. They cause our hearts to shrivel. Instead of giving us joy, they leave us sad, with fallen faces.

This applies not only to goods and possessions. Any gift or talent can be distorted and become a prison. Even sexuality, physical attraction, our bodies, our need to love and be loved—all of these can be corrupted in this way. They exist to connect us, to unite us with another person, to give us joy, to make us live. But they can lead us to use others as if they were things, to seek fulfillment at the expense of other people, and in giving us pleasure they leave bitterness in our mouths, they enclose us in ourselves. The young man turns his back on the offer of a relationship, and he goes away sad and alone.

But this story does not condemn us to pessimism because it is *gospel*—that is, "good news." The good news is that there is a remedy for idolatry, for this inadequate way of relating to ourselves and others, for this attitude that turns gifts and talents into a prison. The remedy is in Jesus' invitation, "Follow me." The remedy to idolatry is authentic relationship, the relationship that sets us free, the "chaste" relationship. In fact, we can define chastity as a type of

relationship with myself and with others that frees love, preserves freedom, and allows me to realize myself, to live fully. Chastity is a gift. Chastity is freedom. Chastity is the free relationship.

But there is more “news” in this story that does not immediately appear as “good” (as “gospel”) and that becomes a source of consolation only if it is understood correctly. This other good news is that left to ourselves, we are incapable of free and authentic relationships. Maybe we will not be slaves of possessions and goods like this young man, but we all must deal with an intrinsic egoism, a visceral fear of losing control of our lives, of not realizing ourselves, with the fear of—to use Jesus’ words—“losing our life” (cf. Mark 8:35), even if it were for love, for God. This egoism and fear are inevitable, and when they take hold of us, they threaten chastity; that is, they compromise healthy relationships with ourselves, with others, and with God.

Yet right here, right in the heart of what seems to be our most humiliating limitation, our most crushing failure, right here we are met with good news. Yes, it is true, as far as it depends on us it is a lost battle, it is impossible. But “all things are possible for God” (Mark 10:27), love is stronger than death (cf. Song 8:6), and we have a promise: Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, nor our own incompetence, nor our weakness, nor the tumult of our passions, nor our unruly instincts will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. Rom 8:38-39).

Celibate but not chaste²

In speaking, then, of this chastity, this relationship, this life, we must distinguish it from celibacy. It is possible, in fact, to be celibate but not chaste.

2. “Celibacy” here means renouncing all kind of sexual acts, while “chastity” means “loving attention to the other person” in all relationships, including sexual intercourse.

Why do monastics embrace celibacy? Why do they choose not to marry? There comes a moment of truth in life when we must admit to ourselves that we have perhaps embraced celibacy for the wrong reasons—fear of our own sexuality; nonacceptance of our body; a refuge where one hopes to sublimate or suppress a homosexual tendency; escape from relationships; and so on. In short, we may have to admit that we have not embraced celibacy in order to live, but to avoid facing a rebellious or unmanageable part of ourselves, using it in fact as a kind of armor or shield.

Celibacy according to the Gospel is exactly the opposite. It is not denial of one's body, one's impulses, or one's tendencies, but a way to take them seriously, welcome them, and honor them. Accepting one's body, impulses, and tendencies does not mean simply satisfying them, like scratching an itch. These impulses are a language; they have a profound meaning, tell us something, yearn for something. However messy or clumsy, they are expressions of our need to love and be loved, to receive and give life. In order to be understood and honored, these impulses need to be integrated into relationships that are free and faithful, relationships that give us joy and through which we can give joy to other people.

Only in this way does celibacy become chaste. And it is the same way that all other kinds of relationships—whether friendship, married life, or community life—become chaste. Chastity is the secret to healthy relationships in every lifestyle—for the priest, the monastic, married people, those who have chosen cohabitation (the majority today) and same-sex couples. In each of these life choices, relationships thrive only if they are chaste, only if the other person is not an object I possess through sex or power (and often more through power than sex), but someone I love for himself or herself.

Sexuality permeates all our relationships, because each of them involves emotions. Sexuality is the emotional aspect in each of our relationships. It is the strength, the energy generated when in contact with another person. I need other people. I can't live without other people. I cannot grow without affection given and

received, without exchanges that give me joy and recognition. The relationships in which I am reduced to my function or idealized alienate me. They reduce me to the status of object.

And so chastity is a *space* in which I am respected, I become more and more the subject or agent of my own life, and I allow the other to exist for him- or herself. I love the other for him- or herself. It is the opposite of unhealthy attachment, which eliminates the distance and in which the two, both I and the other, cease to exist.

A chaste relationship is built, preserved, and consecrated through words, the right words. For our affective life we certainly need to touch and be touched, to see and be seen, but even more do we need words. Even more than touching and seeing, words unite, preserving the difference, respecting the right distance, allowing reciprocity.

Turmoil

But sexuality is also turmoil!

I was sleeping, but my heart was awake.

The sound of my lover knocking!

“Open to me, my sister, my friend,
my dove, my perfect one!

For my head is wet with dew,
my hair, with the moisture of the night.”

.....

My lover put his hand in through the opening:

my innermost being trembled because of him. (Song 5:2-4)

In the Song of Songs, when the beloved is in sight, his lover's insides tingle. In the same way, every so often—more often at some times, less often at others—our whole being tingles in the presence of an external stimulus. Sometimes it is a stimulus that we seek, like when we look at pornographic images. But then the turmoil is limited and soon gives way to boredom. We quiver more when

the stimulus is unexpected, when it catches us off guard—a look, an advertising image, the page of a novel, a memory. Then we are unarmed and even a little humiliated. We are not sure if we are accomplices or not. We are tempted to blame ourselves and may even feel threatened.

The challenge then is not to give in to fear, but to welcome this disturbance as a gift, a blessing, a positive symptom. If I am upset, in fact, it is because I remain open and do not deny my dependence on things and people external to me and over which I have no power. *The turmoil is the antidote to thinking we're omnipotent.* The great lesson that our sexuality gives us every day is that we need other people. Who I am is, in a sense, what all my encounters with other people in my life have made me. And while I depend on those around me to live and to grow, this also makes me vulnerable to the disturbances they bring—it is normal and necessary.

Chastity is not the absence of turmoil; it is a covenant between love and turmoil. Chastity does not fear turmoil but welcomes it as a blessing, as a call to a greater integration of my personality, to a more mature awareness of my abilities and my limitations, to more courage in accepting the animal side of my personality, to learn to love the beast in me. Of course, it's true that turmoil scares us and must be taken seriously because it can lead us to sadness and alienation. But the road from turmoil to alienation is long, and there is ample space to negotiate with my sexual instinct without becoming an accomplice, without yielding to it superficially, but to grant it what it genuinely desires.

Negotiation

The secret is in *negotiation*. The sexual instinct cannot be simply controlled; it must be approached with diplomatic expertise. But to master this skill, a conversion is needed first. We must overcome the confusion between chastity and perfection. Perfection is inhuman; it is a form of omnipotence, and it comes at a cost since it cuts us off from reality. Chastity, on the other hand, is porous,

open, flexible, full of imagination, and, above all, bold. Perfection can't bend, so it breaks; in fact, it always ends up in shatters. Among the most emblematic of the sex scandals in the church in recent decades was the one involving the founder of the Legionaries of Christ. In this order, absolute discipline—immaculate cassocks, perfectly starched clerical collars, flawless rituals—was the curtain that allowed decades of abuse to thrive undisturbed.¹

Chastity makes sense only if we renounce perfection, accept our humanity to the full, stop aspiring to live in an idealized world and accept our history, body, passions, instincts, desires, hesitations, and failures as integral and unavoidable parts of our identity.

It is certainly legitimate to have an ideal and to try to guide our impulses, passions, and sexuality according to it. But ideal and sexuality can only join forces by avoiding slipping into the blind alley of an idealized vision of chastity that would claim abstract, static control of living matter, of the energy of which we are made, in the logic of all or nothing. In this dynamic I am either chaste or not, and if I am not, then I must become chaste simply by deciding to.

A story

Instead, each of us is a story. The ideal is not some kind of armor that we wear to restrain and protect ourselves. The ideal is a breath, an impulse, a spirit that flows from within, from the depths of ourselves. It grows, and this growth requires time and patience. The idealized image of chastity is impersonal and abstract; it makes everything depend on reason and will. In Christian logic, on the other hand, chastity is an invitation: "Follow me!" It means entering a covenant, a story. It is relationship; it is allowing the Lord, others, and ourselves to love each other as we are, where we are. It means silencing guilt. If we are an ongoing story, then where we are now is not as important as where we are going and where we want to go, or rather where we are being led, accompanied, and awaited. We must always resist the temptation to see only

where we are now, frozen in place. In twelfth-century Paris, if the hundreds of men standing up to their knees in the mud and slime, busy digging a massive hole, had been asked, "What are you doing?" they would have responded, "Building a cathedral!"

We conclude, then, by recognizing that, certainly, if I am now comfortable in all my relationships, if my body and my heart are at peace, if I fully perceive the meaning of my life, if I do not feel troubled by any frustration or exposed to any temptation, then I am living my chastity honestly. But if I am troubled, if I am not so sure about my feelings for a person to whom I am attracted, if I am aware of ambiguity in the feelings I have for someone, if I find it hard to manage my sexual instinct and sometimes resort to masturbation or find it hard to resist pornography; if the profound meaning of my celibacy is no longer clear to me and I live it more as a struggle than in peace, then even in all these cases it is entirely possible that I am living my chastity honestly. It is accepting that I am a story, that what defines me is not where I am now but where I want to go, where I choose to go. It is trusting in the power of the invitation, "Follow me." It is my acceptance of the gaze and the love of Jesus: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him" (Mark 10:21).

In the end, chastity is a *story*—we need to go to the end to understand the plot. The moments of struggle, failure, fatigue, and confusion are part of this story as much as the moments of light and peace, and they make the plot compelling and authentic. Both the moments of struggle and the moments of light make me more human, more supportive, more compassionate. And in the end, at the moment of death, they make me able to exult and feel alive. "Lord, let me be still alive when I will die."