



JESUITS

Euro-Mediterranean Province of the Society of Jesus
Albania - Italy - Malta - Romania

To the Jesuits of the EUM Province

Prot. Prov. EUM 18/410

Rome, 30 December 2018

CAN WE STILL TALK ABOUT CHASTITY?

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

In the Constitutions our Founder makes a very brief statement regarding the vow and the practice of chastity. He wrote:

What pertains to the vow of chastity, requires no interpretation, since it is evident how perfectly it should be preserved by endeavoring to imitate therein the purity of the angels in cleanness of body and mind. (Const. VI, I, 547).

Today, many, and perhaps also we, would read this text with a cynical smile, just as we do when we look at revered "antiquities", which are admired, praised and contextualized, but no longer have an effect on us.

In an age such as ours, in which, for some time, an unconditional sexual freedom has already been accepted, such a text runs the risk of being interpreted as an expression of a sexophobic mentality that generates pathologies, a mentality contrary to human nature, which is not, precisely, "angelic."

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Like any other charism, chastity belongs to the order of the joys of *gratis datae* and is granted by the Holy Spirit, for the good of the Church.

Chastity is also the expression of a relationship of love to Christ and to his Kingdom, a love which is lived with a high degree of totality and interior freedom. It enables us to develop our own Christian life in a serene way, offering to all the witness of a fulfilled Christian life.

However, this charism presupposes a life of faith lived intensely through the participation in the liturgy and through prayer.

The centuries-old exhortation of the Church to religious to live chastity along this double track, does not depend so much on precepts, however wise, but on the dialogical and relational nature of chastity. In fact, for a religious, chastity is founded on the acceptance of the repeated inner appeals of grace and the love of Christ.

Chastity has a particular meaning for us religious who are either already ordained or are preparing to be ordained priests.

The Eastern Christian tradition witnesses to the great fruits of holiness and pastoral service rendered to the people of God by the priesthood conferred on married men. But the millennial tradition of the Latin Church, which chooses its priests only from those who also have received the charism (gift) of celibacy, has provided the Church with a patrimony which is deeply rooted in the theological and ecclesial awareness of the whole Catholic Church. This patrimony, far from having exhausted its richness, can, in our context, still offer its strength and relevance.



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For the religious, the vows are the way to which the Lord calls them to live and bear witness to their Baptism. Hence the charism of chastity belongs to them in a very special way.

A reading of ancient Byzantine Euchologia shows us how the Lord continues to support our lives mainly through the sacraments. Baptism and Confirmation insert us into his Body enabling us to live the true Life. The Eucharist nourishes his Life in us and transforms us more and more, among ourselves and with him, into one body and one spirit. The sacrament of Reconciliation restores our spirit if it were wounded by sin. Then, when we are sick, we receive the Anointing of the Sick which is the sign of healing by the Divine Healer. Furthermore, our life in the Spirit has to grow and be multiplied, according to our vocation: physically, for those called to married life and spiritually, in particular through the ordained ministry, by giving birth at the baptismal font – the tomb and womb of the Church. But there is a mysterious fecundity that is given to those who choose celibacy or consecrated chastity, conforming to an important dimension chosen and lived by the Lord Jesus himself.

By uniting the two dimensions of the priestly ministry and of the call to chastity in religious life, the Church (both the priests and religious of the Latin Church as well as in the Eastern Church, in its hieromonks) inserts the call to chastity in the ministry, as a service to the Church – through a service of total self-giving, as an exclusive offering that makes the religious priest to be a person in a state of permanent service, identified with his office, a servant and sign of the Kingdom of God. It is a project of life which presupposes the will and readiness to divest oneself of any self-interest, in order to become an absolute property of the Lord, to look at him and at the interests of his Kingdom, in an exclusive way.

Chastity makes it possible to channel all personal energies towards apostolic interest, without any time limit and enables a person to assume, if necessary, any condition of life in order to provide better service and make the proclamation of the Gospel his main concern. Thus, consecrated chastity reveals itself as a great gift to the priesthood and at the same time a great love for the Divine Master as well as a service to the faithful and sign of a higher reality where the Lord is the Sovereign.

It is only grace that can attract a religious to celibacy and enable him to live and love it without regrets, aware of having received a gift and not a burden. The call to consecrated chastity is fundamentally a mystery that is rooted in the mystery itself of a person's vocation. However, these two mysteries do not become clearer by being transformed into problems, as is often done in our time,

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In the text quoted above, St Ignatius says that chastity asks the Jesuit to make an "*endeavour*" to attain it.

A realistic article or talk on chastity must also mention the difficulties it involves, which are neither brief nor easy, but at the same time it is not to be considered as a way of life opposed to marriage or that it intends to repress affectivity.

Through a renunciation motivated by gospel values, chastity can be, has been and is for many men, disciples of Jesus, a form which enables a person's affectivity to develop in a real and good relationship with God and neighbour.

We must not deny the fact that many were and still are the problems for those religious who have been formed to have a defensive attitude regarding the affections and, as a result,



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have not always been able to deal with the questions and difficulties which arose, either because of the new style prevailing today about the man-woman relationship or because of the social promotion of women, even in the Church.

Authentic chastity is not an alibi to foster a distrust regarding women or, worse, an immature condescension. Instead, the religious is called to show the positivity of the free choice of a way to express his sexuality, a way that, following the example of Jesus, opens the relational energies of the religious, especially if he is a priest, in an apostolic dialogue. The Jesuit religious is called to become a person, an authentic person, ever more "free" "for" and like Christ, "for" His Kingdom, and "for" others.

And it may also happen that the love of Christ, which has motivated the chastity of a religious, will transmit to others a nostalgia of purity.

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It is also useful to reflect on two typical phenomena of our time which affect the quality of our chastity.

In our time, many understand the moral law differently from the past. To have recourse to the principles or references of a law seems suspect to a person today who, in the norm, sees either the desire to disguise the reality, or the need to compensate, through this way, the lack of experience. Therefore, both the culture of law and the proposal to live fully the anthropological and social implications of the confession of faith in the Lord, in the strict adherence to Gospel values, are continually questioned. As a result, it follows that the chastity of the religious is subjected to demanding challenges such as loneliness and marginalization. Deprived of the rule that once protected him, without the social esteem surrounding him, it is no wonder that today the religious may seek an affective equivalent of his ancient social role.

The contemporary cultural context has the merit of encouraging the religious to ask himself what meaning he wants to give to his human and spiritual experience, and where he wants to invest his life and his affectivity. Therefore, the religious is challenged to renew his personal conviction of faith which will enable him to live chastity as an experience of love, as a relationship of love to the Lord and to the Christian community.

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Finally, I want to develop what, by its own evidence, is the most important aspect of the spirituality supporting nature and purpose of consecrated chastity. It is so obvious that it is rarely mentioned explicitly. Let me recall it to myself and to you. I take it a bit from afar.

In our day, the chastity of the religious does not enjoy a good reputation. Specialized studies, sociological investigations, the reports of the highest officials of the Church, the reports about scandals, have uncovered a reality of weaknesses and corruption that was not thought to be so widespread in so many countries. The press, movies and some media had a field day and greatly benefitted to foment anti-clericalism and unmask, as they say, the presumed masquerade of the vow of chastity. Maliciously they advise the Church, that if it really wants to remove the risk of so many scandals, it needs to allow the priests and religious to enter into a regular marriage. Thus, in the first case, they forget the millennial richness of the Latin tradition, and in the second, they contradict themselves because, in the profession of the vows, the religious finds the expression of his identity.



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The number of religious who have seriously sinned is not small. This is very sad and painful.

With them, we must all humble ourselves; perhaps we too, to some extent, are guilty for not having known or understood the discomfort and distress of some of our brothers, or not having been able to cure them with the remedies of charity and the firmness of government. We must accept the mockery and shame that have fallen like a shadow on all of us, often reproached even by the faithful and by some of our regular acquaintances.

As a major superior, I question myself. Could it be perhaps that the sense of God, the holiness of the Church, even the holiness of our Institute is lacking among us? Or has this sense lost its awareness of a duty to expand itself into a communitarian responsibility which is the witness of our common faith?

Certainly, even today, in our houses, we believe in the Lord, we love him and we serve him. Each one of us has known and knows, some excellent men of God. But I ask again: is it possible that the sense of God has lost its "passion", its vigor and its influence in our choices?

To really know a person means not only to know him and in some way love him, but also to esteem and love what the person loves, and to follow his example. This means that the true love of the person who is attracted by the beauty of his object will bring him to the point of concentrating all his existence on it. But, on the contrary, it can happen, unfortunately, that this sense of God and of Jesus starts to get weaker, sometimes to the point of tragically extinguishing itself, even though the person will continue to speak about God, even, pray to him.

At times, one gets the impression that, as Jesuits, we expect our accomplishment as consecrated persons, mainly from our apostolic work. It is a legitimate desire that can betray, however, a possible pastoral "Pelagianism", a professionalism that tends to reduce the Lord to the "means" to enable us to exercise our prestige over men. This Pelagianism leads us not to appreciate, as we should, the so-called passive virtues (and chastity is among them), about which our contemporaries seem to have no interest and which, instead, can change the religious from the inside and give a mysterious effectiveness to his word. Because we are focused on human problems, have we by chance forgotten that our vocation is to be "witnesses of the invisible"?

Chastity cannot be loved and practiced except by those who have the sense of God and of his action in us and through us. To have this sense of God means to have a sense of the mystery of Christ and, above all, to purify all that in our intelligence, will and habits does not conform with the life and teaching of Jesus.

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As conclusion, I wish to remind you of the excellent text of our Constitutions which does not refer directly to chastity and to its apostolic value but, if we read it carefully, implies it.

St. Ignatius says that

the means which unites the human instrument with God and so dispose it that it may be wielded well by his divine hand are more effective than those which equip it in relation to human things." (Const. X, 2-3, n. 813).

It seems clear to me that chastity is one of these means and therefore for our Founder it is "evident how perfectly it should be preserved" and observed by a Jesuit.



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This is the basis of the Society's project and program: *en todas las cosas amar y servir a su divina majestad.*

In this year dedicated to St. Aloysius Gonzaga, while we rediscover the many aspects of his rich spiritual life among which we often mention his closeness to the poor and his social sensitivity, let us not impoverish the long and rich tradition which highlights that, at a very young age, he chose to live the way of chastity, not as sacrifice, but as an expression of his total self-giving to the Lord.

Let us entrust to his intercession our lives and our journeys together as Companions of Jesus.

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