



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"To love chastity" (Holy Rule ch 4; "The tools of good works" v. 64)

"Let the Abbot be chaste, sober and merciful" (HR 64:9)

"Let all the brothers show chaste love for one another" (HR 72:8)

"(Monastic life) replies to the hedonism of modern culture above all through the joyful living of perfect chastity, as a witness to the power of God's love manifested in the weakness of the human condition. This proves that what many people believed impossible becomes, with the Lord's grace, possible and truly liberating.

Consecrated chastity expresses the yearning of a heart unsatisfied by any finite love. It manifests dedication to God with undivided heart (1 Cor 7:32-4) and reflects the infinite love that links the three Divine Persons of the Trinity."

(Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata, 1996)

Monastic Voices

"True chastity cannot be maintained simply with the help of strict discipline. It does not subsist thanks to rigorous defence, but rather by love of itself and by delight in its own purity. Harmful desires for present things cannot be simply repressed or plucked out: salutary dispositions have to be introduced to replace them. Rather than attempt to uproot all feelings of desire or fear, joy or sadness, we should strive to turn them to good use. Therefore if we want to cast carnal desires from our hearts, we must at once plant spiritual pleasures in their place, so that our mind may abide in them constantly and spurn the allurements of present and temporal joys. Then eventually the flesh will stop lusting against the spirit (Gal 5:17) and will give in to spiritual desires and to virtue. Then the two begin to be mutually joined in a most stable peace, and they dwell as 'brothers in unity' according to the words of the psalmist (Ps 132/133:1). We can therefore distinguish perfect chastity from mere abstinence by the perpetual tranquillity of soul it brings about.

Such a state cannot be gained unless a person has made great progress in mildness and patience. The further he has driven away the passion of anger, the more tightly will he hold on to chastity. The beatitude commended by the Saviour declares this very plainly: 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth' (Mt 5:5). We shall not possess our own earth - or in other words: the earth of this rebellious body will not be placed under our sway - unless our mind has first been fixed in patient mildness. But when this earth has been gained, then the words of the psalmist will also be fulfilled: 'The gentle shall possess the earth, and delight in an abundance of peace' (Ps 36/37:11). Then, the more the chaste and patient soul advances to purity of heart, the more sublimely it will see God (Mt 5:8). It will continually grow in wonder within itself, but will never be able to explain this to those who have no experience of it. It is as if someone wished to describe in words the flavour of honey to a person who had never tasted anything sweet. Only personal knowledge of this delightful sweetness can make someone understand and appreciate how wonderful it is."

(From the Conferences of John Cassian, c.360-430, Twelfth Conference: On Chastity)

"It was related of Amma Sarah that for thirteen years she waged warfare against the demon of unchastity. She never prayed that the warfare should cease but she said, 'O God, give me strength'. Once this demon came to attack her more insistently than ever. But she gave herself up to the fear of God and to asceticism and went up onto her little terrace to pray. Then the demon appeared to her corporeally and said, 'Sarah, you have overcome me.' But she said, 'It is not I who have overcome you, but my master, Christ'."

"It happened that Abba Moses was struggling with temptations against chastity. Unable to remain any longer in his cell, he went and told Abba Isidore. The old man took Moses out onto the terrace and said to him, 'Look towards the west.' He looked and saw hordes of demons flying about and making a noise before launching an attack. Then Abba Isidore said to him, 'Look towards the east.' He turned and saw an innumerable multitude of holy angels shining with glory. Abba Isidore said, 'See, these are sent by the Lord to the saints to bring them help, while those in the West fight against them. Those who are with us are more in number than they are'. Then Abba Moses gave thanks to God, plucked up courage and returned to his cell."

(From The Sayings of the Desert Fathers (3rd-5th centuries): The Alphabetical Collection)

Dear Oblates and friends,

The first and most essential mark of the monk is that he has embraced a state of dedicated chastity for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven. The ability to live in this way is a great gift of grace for the person concerned. A monk takes a vow of life long chastity, whose purpose is not to weigh him down, but to set him free. It is to enable him to love God and all his fellow men with undivided heart; to devote his whole life and energy to the single-minded task of following Christ. From the earliest times, consecrated chastity has been valued as a blessing also for the whole Church. Perhaps no modern writer has spoken more powerfully of the value and beauty of this than John Paul II in his 1996 Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*. Fixing his gaze on Christ transfigured on the mountain, the Pope echoes the words of St. Peter: "It is good for us to be here" (Mt 17:4). "How good it is", he says, "for us to be with you, to devote ourselves to you, to make you the one focus of our lives! Truly those who have been given the grace of this special communion of love with Christ feel as it were caught up in his splendour: the splendour before which every light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart" (VC 15-16).

I am prompted to write about chastity in this letter since I feel there is urgent need for its value to be re-affirmed in our day. We have all been disturbed and dismayed in recent months by the wave of scandals across the world involving Catholic clergy and religious. The common feature of them seems to have been disastrous failures in chastity, sometimes leading to behaviour unworthy of any human being, and even to criminal offenses committed against innocent persons, with gravely damaging consequences. If this were not enough to shake people's confidence, influential parts of the secular media have used these cases as fuel for a more or less open campaign against the Catholic Church. The object of their attack is not ultimately the failures of representatives of the Church in matters of chastity. On the contrary, it is the Christian ideal of celibacy, or of exclusively faithful marriage, that is perceived as the enemy. For these media are committed to a hedonistic culture they in part create: a culture which relentlessly and obtrusively proclaims its faith that sexual gratification is essential for any normal and happy life. Wherever we turn, we are confronted by strongly suggestive, if not actually pornographic images, inciting us to sensuality, and to a fantasy world where recreational sex is easy and value-free. We know that this is nonsense, of course, and we do reject it. But we are also aware of our weakness, and the subtle influence on us of what we see and read. Fidelity to the Gospel is difficult enough at the best of times: surely our modern environment makes it much more so.

As in ancient times, to be a Christian in the West nowadays is to stand out quite radically against the stream. There is a real sense of oppression, not now by a tyrannical King or Emperor, but by popular opinion and custom. In the midst of all this, we have to be the face of Christ, revealing somehow His beauty, and the nobility of the vocation to which He calls us. We have to be faithful, come what may. The martyrs of Uganda are inspiring examples of people ready even to lay down their lives in defence of their chastity.

Does St. Benedict offer any help to us struggling sinners who nevertheless long for holiness? He does indeed: and it is the best help possible. By setting up communities of consecrated life, he holds up for all of us living

examples, from which we can draw encouragement, strength, support, inspiration. And the Church of today, no less than the Church of the sixth century, understands these communities as pointers towards the heavenly goal we all share; as signs of the indissoluble marriage bond Christ established with His Church; as concrete manifestations of the desire of all Christians to prefer nothing whatever to Christ.

St. Benedict takes all this so much for granted that he scarcely feels the need to mention it. He doesn't even require an explicit vow of chastity: simply including that in the vow "conversatio morum", (best translated as "fidelity to monastic life"; HR 58:17). Apart from passing references in chapters 64 and 72, really all he has to say about chastity is summed up in two words in chapter 4: "Castitatem amare" - "to love chastity." Yet what vistas open up before us with these words! They indicate a positive approach that turns upside down all notions of repression or mere obligation. They represent a refreshing attitude of mind that is not denying but affirming; that does not crush but raises up. And the reason I am recommending them here is because they apply to people living outside monasteries every bit as much as they do to monks.

Let me then state the obvious. Everyone without exception is called to live chastely. Single people are required to practise sexual abstinence. The married have the task, surely in many ways more demanding, of living their marriage in accordance with the teaching of the Church: always unselfishly; in generous love, patient consideration and unfailing respect for their spouse. This is certainly a high ideal, and could scarcely be proposed if we did not believe firmly in the ever-present possibility of repentance, conversion and forgiveness. But it is emphatically not bad for us; not denying of our humanity; not frustrating for our deepest desires. Self mastery, particularly in respect of our passions, enhances our freedom and dignity, and is the condition for entering into communion with others. Chastity means the ability to relate to other people for themselves, and not as means of satisfying my physical or emotional needs. This is the virtue through which love for ourselves, for others and for God becomes possible. How badly our world needs it today!

The monastery certainly helps a person to live chastely. Two things there especially conspire to strengthen his resolve: the life of prayer, and the fraternal battle line. But even externals like the physical enclosure help. As Dom Michael Casey famously remarked, we sometimes feel the only reason we haven't made a complete mess of our lives is because we lacked the opportunity... Oblates have to manage without this particular support. All the more reason, then, to follow St. Benedict's advice, and strive to practise chastity not half-heartedly, not with grumbling or resentment (HR 5:14) but as something we long for, desire, love. The motive for this is not the Stoic's quest for perfection, but the Christian's burning love for Jesus Christ.

Commenting on the parable of the treasure found in the field (Mt 13:44), St. Gregory the Great remarks that renunciation is not a means of finding God, but its consequence. Anyone would gladly, joyfully give up something of lesser value, when they realise they can have something of infinitely greater value instead. And we have already been given that supreme gift, which is the indwelling Spirit we received at our baptism. This is St. Paul's emphasis, when he exhorts the Corinthians to flee unchastity. "Do you not realise" he says, "that your bodies are members of Christ's body? ... The unchaste person sins against his own body. Do you not realise that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit... Use it then for the glory of God" (1 Cor 6:15-20). This is the Spirit also of power: precisely the One who enables us to imitate the purity of Christ (1 Jn 3:3).

Dom Maurus often used to say that every failure is a failure of prayer. If we cleave resolutely to the Lord, we will not fall: like Peter walking on the sea (Mt 14:31). Our supreme means for union with Christ is the Eucharist, so it is there above all that we find a sure safeguard for our chastity. Then with St. Thomas Aquinas we can pray after Communion: "May this Holy Communion be my armour of faith and shield of good will. Let it be the emptying out of all my vices; the destruction of my concupiscence and lust, and the cause of increase in me of charity and patience, humility and obedience, and all the virtues. Let it be a firm defence against all my enemies, both visible and invisible; the perfect rest of all my desires, both spiritual and physical; my firm bond with You the one true God, and the happy consummation of my end."

Dom Maurus would also constantly remind us that Our Lady and St. Joseph are perfect models of purity: we should turn to them very frequently, especially when in temptation, and they will help us. Other means, like a certain restraint in food and drink should not be neglected. St. Paul considers our speech important too: "Among you there must not be even a mention of sexual vice or impurity in any of its forms, or greed: this would scarcely become the holy people of God! There must be no foul or salacious talk or coarse jokes - all this is wrong for you; there should rather be thanksgiving" (Eph 5:3-4).

So let me end with one more story from the Egyptian desert.

"One day the anchorite Abba Macarius saw Satan drawing near in the likeness of a man. He was wearing a cotton garment with many small flasks hanging at it. The old man said, 'Where are you off to?' He said, 'The monastery at the bottom of the mountain: I am going there to stir up the memories of the brethren.' The old man said, 'And what is the purpose of all those flasks?' He replied, 'I am taking food for them to taste. If a brother does not like one sort of food, I offer him another, so that of all these varieties he will like one at least.' With these words he departed. The old man remained watching the road until he saw him coming back again. He asked him how he'd got on. 'Badly' was the reply. 'They all curtly refused to receive me - all, that is, except my friend Theompemptus. He always listens to anything I suggest.' With these words he went away. Abba Macarius got up at once, walked to the monastery, and called on Theompemptus, who received him with joy. The old man asked him 'How are you getting on?' 'Very well' he said. The old man asked: 'Do not your thoughts war against you?' But he was afraid to admit anything. So the old man said to him, 'See how many years I have lived as an ascetic, and am praised by all, yet though I am old, the spirit of unchastity frequently troubles me.' Theompemptus said, 'Believe me, Abba, it is the same with me.' The old man went on admitting that other thoughts also warred against him, until he had brought him to admit them all about himself. Then he said, 'Practise fasting a little more strictly than you have been doing. Meditate on the Gospel and the other scriptures, and if an alien thought arises within you, never look at it but always look upwards, and the Lord will at once come to your help.' When he had given the brother this rule, the old man returned to his solitude. Some time later, he happened to see the devil again, passing by on his way back from the monastery. The saint asked him, 'How did you get on this time?' 'Terrible' said the devil. 'They are all obdurate, and the worst is my old friend who used to be so obedient. I don't know what's changed him, but frankly there is no point going there any more, so for the time being at least I'm going to leave them all alone.' When he had said this, he went away, and the saint returned to his cell, praising God."