

Cultivating Chastity: Advice for Young Catholics Living in a Sex-Obsessed Culture

by Kelly Marcum

“Kelly knows she isn’t going to get a guy if she sticks with that, right?” Those were the words spoken by the boyfriend of one of my friends in college. He had just learned that I was one of those religious “oddities” who not only went to Mass, but also believed the Church’s teachings that sex was intended only for within the confines of marriage, and then with an openness to life.

Fortunately, I knew enough young couples who had also chosen to follow this apparently unthinkable path, so I was unconcerned by his incredulous proclamation. However, I was struck by the sincerity with which he declared it. There was no doubt in his mind — nor in the minds of many of my girlfriends, though they halfheartedly assured me otherwise — that the Church was condemning me to a life alone by forcing this antiquated worldview upon me. The irony, of course, was that in the name of my freedom, they thought I should compromise my principles in order to snag myself a man who would not have wanted me had I stayed true to my faith. I was unconvinced by this logic, but my heart broke for them for believing it.

Like so much in our culture, sex has become entirely self-focused. No longer aimed toward the higher goods of bonding within marriage and bringing about new life, it has been reduced in importance, such that women — and men — are mocked for reserving it for after the wedding. But in a perverse twist, it has been simultaneously magnified in necessity, such that a dating relationship without it is nearly unheard of in most circles.

Kate Bryan, the author of *Living the Feminist Dream* and the founder of 1 Girl Revolution, was committed to the virtue of chastity in high school, but her view of it at the time was more one-dimensional. She saw it as a good thing, but, to her, it was a system built upon the notion of what not to do. Over time, this evolved as her understanding of the theology behind chastity further developed during her college and young professional years. “I’ve learned that chastity is a perfection of love. It’s not just a list of dos and don’ts,” she told the Register.

Threaded throughout all of Church teachings is the truth that every man and woman is created in the image and likeness of God, and thus imbued with a dignity that is meant to be protected and valued, not degraded. Therefore, every element of the Catechism is designed not to be a ledger of rules to get us to heaven, but as a holistic and divinely revealed set of teachings grounded in the natural law and intended to uphold and defend the dignity of every man, woman, and child, born and unborn. Church teachings on chastity are no different. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines chastity as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (2331-2334).

In her years working in both Washington, D.C., and Detroit, Bryan has seen how the desire for love often leads to lowered expectations in relationships, especially for the young women she knows. “[Women] want love so desperately, and we lower our expectations, and, honestly, we often put up with bad behavior. We have a responsibility to stand up and demand better.”

For a generation of young men and women, coming of age in the “hook-up culture,” the highest standard for sex in this view is that it be “consensual.” But it’s difficult to demand fidelity and love from a girl you just met or from the guy that refuses to commit to a relationship, and it’s often even impossible to know that is what you are owed if you live immersed in a world where sex is depicted as an act intended merely for pleasure, not as an unconditional gift of self, to say nothing of the creation of a child.

Yet despite the incessant cultural messaging that both trivializes sex and makes it the pinnacle of the human experience, Bryan notes that the message of chastity, as taught by the Church, will always resonate with young men and women seeking true relationship. “No matter who you are, everyone is looking for love. We’re made to love and be loved.”

Kathryn Bodenhamer, a leader in Love and Responsibility LA and co-star of the crowdfunded Catholic production *Eucharistic Miracles*, has witnessed firsthand this search for authentic connection.

“[Love and Responsibility] held an event near UCLA to attract more college students, and it was heartbreaking,” Bodenhamer recalled. “We got girls sharing in Q&A about their struggles with unhealthy relationships, and we want to help women to see their own value and worth and know they do not need to seek it out in a man and instead should find it in God.”

These discussions were a driving force behind Love and Responsibility, named after the great work by Karol Wojtyla (St. John Paul II). The mission is to spread the message of dignity and cherishing of the other that is enshrined within the Church’s teachings on sexuality and chastity. And it’s a message that men and women are responding to. Bodenhamer recalled one young man who was thrilled by the primacy of relationship and communication in chaste relationships. He shared that he loved having wonderful conversations with the women he went on dates with and how he enjoyed making them laugh. When asked if she could pick one takeaway for the men and women who participate in the group’s events, Bodenhamer responded: “All people are created with value, and we’re not meant to be used. There is so much utilitarianism in this culture, and we want to make sure both men and women know that they are meant to be cherished and valued on a deeper level in a relationship, where they are hopefully led closer to God. as well.”

For Tasha Tormey, a young woman living in Los Angeles, her faith and a strong community have been sources of strength in her commitment to chastity while dating. She encourages other young men and women on the same path. “Get as involved in Catholic community as soon as you can, and make friends with other Catholics and Christians who are striving to live chastely,” she advised.

Tormey also recognizes that far from being an optional guideline to follow, as too many young men and women raised in Catholicism have come to think, chastity is a prerequisite both for true love and for full communion with the Church.

“Because I am Catholic, I strive to accept all the Church teachings. I also know that God wants us to love, and only the chaste can love truly, without confusing lust or sentimentality with real love. It is definitely a hard teaching to accept, but if I were to live without chastity, I would not be able to receive the greatest gift there is: the Eucharist. When we have God present with us on earth, we must do all we can to be in a state of grace to receive him.”

In my own work with young women and high-school girls, the questions I am most frequently asked circle around how to enjoy dating and pursue good relationships while remaining confident in their principles (and these struggles are shared by young men, as well). They are bombarded on all sides by a culture that encourages “sex positivity” and tells them that any messages of chastity and sexual restraint they hear are from nefarious forces determined to hamper their freedom, not nurture their souls. The answer lies not just in explaining the Church’s teaching to them. Though that is a critical step, it is not sufficient. They must be taught not merely the “what” of the rules, but the why behind them. To quote St. Paul, that most bold author of epistles, “... the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:7). Young men and women must be taught not just what not to do, but also to whom they belong and how they are called to honor and defend the dignity of everyone they encounter.

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