Reasons to be Chaste

by Mary Beth Bonacci

It's not about avoiding teen pregnancy. It's not about avoiding sexually transmitted diseases. It's not even about preventing AIDS. All of those goals are good, mind you. But the concept of chastity is about so much more. Chastity is, quite simply, about finding and living real love. It is about living our human sexuality the way it was designed to be lived, and in the process putting that sexuality at the service of real, authentic love.

Chastity is the radical notion that sex has a meaning. It speaks a language – the language of self-gift. Everything about sex is about permanence. It says, "I give myself to you. And I give to you my potential offspring, knowing that if a child is conceived, you and I will always be together to raise and form this product of our love." Sex brings new life into the world. New souls, destined to live forever, come into the world through the love of a man and a woman, through their sexual union. And that fact alone makes it a sacred, holy act.

Our bodies conspire in a myriad of ways to make sex a permanent, self-giving act. Hormonally, sexual arousal and intercourse set off a chain reaction designed to keep married couples bound together. Women experience a flood of oxytocin – the same hormone which they produce in labor and in nursing a baby. Oxytocin causes a woman to be forgetful, decreases her ability to think rationally – and causes an incredibly strong emotional attachment to form with the man she is with. Men also produce some oxytocin during sexual intercourse. But their bodies also produce a hormone called vasopressin. Vasopressin, called "the monogamy molecule," kicks in after sexual activity, and its impact is to heighten a man's sense of responsibility. It encourages that part of him which says, "My gosh, she may be carrying my child! I'd better get serious about life! I've got to get to work, to provide for this family!"

Sex flourishes in the context of permanence. It speaks the language of marriage. Within a marriage, it's an incredibly powerful expression of self-giving love. It helps to bind a couple together, for better or for worse. It's an instrument of the grace of matrimony. It helps a husband and a wife live out their commitment to each other.

But what about sex outside of marriage? Simply put, it's speaking the language of the body in a lie. It's physically saying, "I give myself to you forever" when that is not in fact the case. It is putting the other person at physical risk – of pregnancy and of disease. It is, more importantly, putting the other person at emotional and spiritual risk – allowing a bond to form with no commitment to back it up. It puts relationships at risk, by creating uneven and inconsistent levels of communication. The body is saying one thing, but the relationship says something else. Love means wanting what is best for the other person. Real Love would never put the other at any kind of risk. But sex outside marriage does just that – it puts one's "beloved" at significant risk. And that, my friends, is not real love.

Chastity – respecting the language of sex and saving sexual expression for marriage – frees us to find real love. It helps to insure that our dates care about us for ourselves, and not just as a way for them to find sexual satisfaction for themselves. It weeds out those who would use us. And it helps to insure that we treat our dates as the images and likenesses of God that they are! Chastity is the way – the only way – to find and live real love. And isn't that what we're all looking for, anyway?

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