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Jesus Caritas
Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted

'Thou Shalt Not Covet': Purity of Heart

Part Two

The Ninth Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife," in addition to telling us what not to do in order to avoid unhappiness and sin, also points us towards what we need to do in order to see God. In my previous article, I looked at the prevalence of coveting in society today and its harmful effects; in other words, I considered what not to do. Now, let us consider what we need to do in order to live as Jesus taught us in one of the Beatitudes, (Mt 5:8), "**Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.**"

The heart's battles

Our habits of the heart shape our lives. What we store up in the heart, what we set our heart on, and what we desire and long for help to define the whole activity of our innermost self. The heart, however, contrary to its Valentine's Day image, is not easily tranquil. In fact, it is a field of battle.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church warns us about these battles. It teaches (#2520), "*Baptism confers on its recipient the grace of purification from all sins. But the baptized must continue to struggle against concupiscence of the flesh and disordered desires.*" Returning now to the Ninth Commandment, three things are necessary to avoid

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coveting illicit sexual pleasures (i.e. lust) and to maintain purity of heart; we must live according to the Spirit, practice the virtue of chastity and mature beyond "eros" to "agape" love. Let's look at each of these more carefully.

Live according to the Spirit

St. Paul urges us to live in the Spirit and to follow the Spirit's lead (Cf. Gal 5:25). The humbling experiences of our own failures to love can aid us in heeding St. Paul. After repeated failures, we can more readily recognize that we cannot achieve purity of heart on our own. We need the help of the Holy Spirit, whom Christ promised to send to His disciples.

Our bodies are created to be a dwelling place where the Spirit lives and reigns as Lord. This glorious high calling to us as body-persons has a corresponding grave warning against the misuse of the body, especially in the sexual arena. As the Apostle Paul writes (I Cor 6:18f), "**Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?**"

The gift of masculinity or femininity, the gift of human sexuality, is intended for love and life. Who better than the Holy Spirit, then, can aid us in directing our sexual drive and guiding our desire to love? After all, the Spirit is, as we profess in the Nicene Creed, "*the Lord and Giver of Life.*" The Spirit is also the infinite and all pure love between the Father and the Son within the inner life of the Blessed Trinity.

Practice the virtue of chastity

A virtue is a habit of the heart. It is, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches (#1803), "*an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.*"

The virtue of chastity comes from repeated efforts to attune our intellect to God's voice and to direct sexual activity in keeping with our

state in life. Thus, the practice of chastity by married persons differs from that of virgins. But all are striving for an undivided heart that refrains from using another person as an object for one's own ends.

An important part of the virtue of chastity is the practice of modesty. Since we live in an age known for outlandish immoral permissiveness, as evidenced in the catastrophic spread of pornography that is ruining the lives of many, the virtue of modesty is needed more than ever to keep us from treating persons as objects of pleasure and from exploiting them for selfish ends instead of treating them as persons worthy of respect and love.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church points out the need for modesty to direct both our feelings and our actions. To live a modest life, it states, (#2521f), *"means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden... [Modesty] inspires one's choice of clothing. It keeps silence or reserve where there is evident risk of unhealthy curiosity. It is discreet."*

Some might argue that the clothes one wears, or doesn't wear, are not what matters. They might say that what matters is the condition of one's heart. But what we wear has a great deal to do with our intentions and with how we are perceived by others. The degree of our modesty is an indication of the condition of our heart.

The practice of modesty sharpens our awareness of what we must avoid in our permissive society in order to preserve a heart that is pure. It also strengthens our ability to see ourselves and every other person as Christ does, namely as made in the very image of God.

Parents take heart

I realize how difficult it is for parents today to instill the virtue of modesty in their children. Parents tell me that the most popular styles pushed by the clothing industry are often revealing to the point of indignity, especially for girls. But take heart because a counter-cultural movement is underway in this area. I am thankful for creative people like Melanie Welsch in our own diocese who are producing styles of clothing that are both attractive and modest. The work of these artists is a great aid to parents in their efforts of raising their children in virtue.

Dear Mothers and Fathers of our children and youth, do not be discouraged. Even if the challenges are great, know that Christ has given you the grace through the Sacrament of Marriage to guide your children in the way of holiness. I urge you to stand in the gap for your children who need you to insist on modesty and chastity. They need you to be stronger than the dark side of our culture. They need you to speak the truth in love. With the Holy Spirit you can do this. Be not afraid.

From 'Eros' to 'Agape'

In his recent Encyclical on the love of God, Pope Benedict XVI offers a hope-filled vision of the human capacity for love. With God's help, we can rise above a "me-centered" culture that distorts love through over-emphasis on eroticism, and we can arrive at an "agape-love" like that of Christ. The Holy Father shows how the over-exaltation of the body that is occurring today comes at the expense of the soul with which it is joined, and ends up destroying the body, too. He writes (#4), *"Yet the contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. Eros, reduced to pure 'sex', has become a commodity. This is hardly man's great 'yes' to the body. On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will... Here we are actually dealing with a debasement of the human body... no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere."*

Eros, understood properly, the Holy Father says, actually tends to rise toward God. It is intended for leading us beyond ourselves, beyond our inward-looking selfishness, towards an "agape love," i.e. a love that makes a gift of itself for the good of the other.

When the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to discover how "eros" was intended for the sake of "agape" and how love finds its highest expression in Jesus' gift of Himself on the Cross, then we have arrived at true wisdom. Then, we have begun to understand Jesus' words (Mt 5:8), **"Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God."**

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