

Holy Purity: On Custody of the Eyes

by Father Alphonse Valentine

The Temptation of Saint Thomas Aquinas by Diego Rodriguez de Silva Velazquez

In the chilling story of the ordeals of the North American Martyrs, those saints among savages, when a particularly deadly epidemic went sweeping through the Huron tribe one winter, the Hurons, in a state of desperation, summoned Saint John de Brebeuf to one of their elders meetings. Having exhausted most of their pagan medicine rituals in an attempt to obtain a cure from their gods, they asked Saint John what they must do in order to find mercy from his God. (Parenthetically, it is interesting to note how, no matter what era or culture, there never seems to be an atheist in a foxhole.) Having lived with the Hurons for some time already, and having baptized a good number of their sick and dying, John de Brebeuf, who suffered the most gruesome of the martyrdoms at the hands of the Iroquois, promptly and without the least shred of fear informed them: “You must believe in the true God, to keep His Commandments; abjure your faith in dreams; take but one wife and be true to her; give up your superstitious feasts; renounce your assemblies of debauchery; eat

no human flesh; never give feasts to demons, and make a vow that, if God will deliver you from this pest, you will build a chapel to offer Him thanksgiving and praise.” The Huron elders thought it over and, finding his reply difficult, asked if it was enough if they simply built the chapel. de Brebeuf was hardly in a compromising mood, so the meeting disbanded and the epidemic continued. But a comment by one of the biographers is worth notice. As the epidemic reached new heights, he goes on to say: “When we see the missionaries entering, one after another, these wretched abodes of misery and darkness, and all for one sole end, the baptism of the sick and dying, we may smile at the futility of the object, but must needs admire the self-sacrificing zeal with which it was pursued.”

Christianity’s object, eternal life

and happiness in the unending vision of God, does in some way seem futile when looked at from the superhuman moral strength that is sometimes needed to overcome ourselves in order to gain it. Our culture poses formidable challenges that require

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a great deal of self-conquest to overcome. Although we may gasp at the Hurons’ pathetic reply in the midst of an epidemic to de Brebeuf’s directive that they abandon their ways in order to obtain divine help,

we must beware, as a self-proclaimed “civilized society,” of the pot calling the kettle black. One might think, perhaps, if he had not come on so strong, if he had been more tolerant or compassionate, he may have gotten better results. But what de Brebeuf was commanding, as a priest *in persona Christi*, an ambassador of Christ (the true Medicine Man), a

missionary bringing the true Faith to ignorant masses, was a complete and total overhaul of the way of life the Hurons knew, accepted, were used to, and, as we see from their reply, was fairly well-liked, especially by the men. It is interesting to note further that most of the baptisms that were performed in the early years of those missions were upon the sick and dying, and that majority upon the women and children. And why is this? Because habituated lust and impurity carry with it a particular kind of sloth that places the soul in a deadly sleep that is difficult to rouse it from. It leads to a certain blindness that causes a person to grossly underestimate the value of eternal things and grossly underestimate the moral gravity of certain actions. The end result is an attitude of permissiveness, and it gets worse the more these things are indulged in until a point is reached where virtue is actually considered abnormal or unattainable. The fact that the Jesuits had no wives and took no part in the “free love parties” utterly baffled the Indian men; they would even send the women to seduce them and could not believe how the Jesuits successfully resisted every time. But their virtue had its appeal and intrigue and the Jesuits would enjoy some respect because of it, which enabled them to do their work.

We see in the history of the world that the fall of the great empires was always preceded by a collapse of morality within its boundaries. The internal moral rot would eventually weaken the fabric of even the strongest civilization to the point that it could no longer resist the attacks of foreign invaders. Far reaching are the effects of these sins which transform the strongest of men into the biggest of infants. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah and brought about the Great Flood on account of these sins. Such was the cause of the Baby-

lonian captivity. It was Samson’s demise, led King David to murder, and the wise Solomon to idolatry; lust started Martin Luther, Henry VIII, and Napoleon onto their respective paths of apostasy, infidelity, murder, and ruin. But on the contrary, look at what happens when Christianity is practiced within a culture and allowed to flourish: it brings true peace, order, and reform, even though the cost of its establishment (or re-establishment) can be a high one. And although our society today has now rejected the medicine for its ills, a storm which looks like we will have to ride out now, we must remember as Catholics that not every cell in a sick body has to be sick.

This third sermon in this series on holy purity, while obviously applying to all, will be directed more towards the men, as the women were in the crosshairs last time when modesty was discussed. It is hoped that this will make the women more conscious of the man’s struggle and encourage them to be the support they need to be. Because of the widespread acceptance of immodesty in our culture, it seems that many women are either clueless about this or do not want to admit that they like the power they seem

to have to control a man through it, as evidenced by the resistance that is often put up when having to make a change. With that said, because

men are generally weaker in these regards does not exempt them from the obligation to chastity; it may be more difficult and require greater vigilance, but hardly impossible, and men need to know themselves and step up to the plate.

To recap the main points over the last two weeks, the differing roles between men and women is part of our human nature and God gave each gender what it needs to fulfill that role. Each role has its own psychology, that is, the way the gender generally relates to the outside world; both are organized around life, but in different ways, as this is part of the image of God we all carry within

Dear Lord, grant me the grace to hate this and to conquer it and to have the strength to defend myself and family from it. Mother most pure, pray for me and my family. *The reason why language like this needs to be employed is because hate is an act of the will and, in this case, since it involves the rejection of vice, it involves the perfection of charity, which is also in the will.*



The Temptation of Saint Anthony by Lelio Orsi

us. A woman’s is organized around the transmission of life while a man’s is organized around the protection and preservation of life. These roles are complementary and the proper relation between the genders is established upon this ordering that is created and willed by God. Along with this, women possess an innate sense of self-protection which, when observed, enables a man to properly

value her and his own life; hence the beautiful words of Saint Paul for *husbands to love their wives as their own bodies*. Holy purity respects and strengthens this order; modesty, as discussed last week, protects purity by informing us of the proper dress, words, and actions for its cultivation and preservation at all times and in all places for the sake of ourselves and our neighbors. Lust in all its forms effectively destroys this order, causing men to turn women into objects of gratification and causing women to attempt to dominate men by exploiting themselves.

But because women can exploit themselves in order to enslave men and many a man does fall victim to it does not mean that every woman does it and every man has to be a victim. And, victims can be healed; look at Saint Augustine for instance. We are not talking about kryptonite on Superman, although, at times, the struggle may appear that way. The challenge for the Catholic man now, while confronting a culture that plays upon his weaknesses, is to psychologically distance himself from it in order to immunize himself from its effects and establish a counter-culture, if you will, within his own soul and within his own house and family. We are at a stage now of an insidious social acceptability of perversity and disgust at virtue; unchaste men will go right along with it without any thought of the consequences while those who make only a half-hearted attempt to change will never be strong enough to carry the battle arms for any length of time. For those trying to be chaste, however, there is also a generational challenge, for most of us have little or no memory of when decency, in general, had been the rule of the day within society. As was said, habituated impurity carries with it a certain moral blindness and a remarkable short-sightedness because it is the

furthest thing away from God. Every man, especially the Catholic if he wants to save his soul, has to confront within himself as to what degree he actually likes this, though albeit tacitly; what kind of reaction would it cause within him if he were to wake up tomorrow morning and find a completely chaste world? To the degree there is a certain sadness or regret about it, and it takes a lot of humility to admit this, reveals the degree he is affected by the vice and the culture.

Because men are affected more by what they see than women are (this is why pornography targets men far more than women), for the man, after this frank admission, chastity begins with what is called custody of the eyes. Custody of the eyes is simply the practice of turning away both our eyes and our imagination from something we know we should not look at while, at the same time, drawing our minds upon something we can think about it. For centuries, the saints and wise spiritual authors have recommended that the best thing to draw one's attention to in the midst of this kind of temptation is the scourging of our Lord. The reason for this is that, while Christ offered His entire Passion for the remission of all our sins, certain

parts of the Passion were offered for certain types of sins because of the relation between the nature of the sin and the punishment Christ permitted to have inflicted upon Himself. Those who struggle with chastity know the scourge it can be, *the thorn in the flesh* as Saint Paul describes it, and so

Christ offered His scourging, willingly and lovingly, for all the sins of the flesh. The quicker we can conjure up such images by the grace of God (and they should even be graphic), the easier it is to emerge victorious because we can make it habitual. At the same time, one should not be alarmed, even after a victory, of the level of attraction such temptations may continue to carry; it is simply those babies within us called the passions crying for their bottle, and it simply reveals the defects we have in our virtue. All of you who raise children know that although a baby may scream it will eventually stop once it realizes it is not going to get what it wants; even if the baby has been spoiled, this still will happen, though it may take longer and be more trying.

Left to our own strength, however, custody of the eyes is a losing battle and therefore requires two other

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components for success: prayer and Sacraments (especially frequent Confession) and the avoidance and removal of occasions of sin. If we want a culture of life for ourselves and our family we cannot call a truce with this vice, but in our weakened state it can be tempting to throw in the towel. It is most important

that regular and daily prayer be engaged by all men for the perfection of chastity and purity. In fact, knowing the power of the attraction, it is critical that petitions be made to God for an actual hatred of the vice of lust and all things associated with it. And use strong words in such

prayers: *Dear Lord, grant me the grace to hate this and to conquer it and to have the strength to defend myself and family from it. Mother most pure, pray for me and my family.* The reason why language like this needs to be employed is because hate is an act of the will and, in this case, since it involves the rejection of vice, it involves the perfection of charity, which is also in the will. Furthermore, when we hate something, we wish to avoid it because we perceive it as causing us harm. So this should be a regular part of every man's prayers and also part of one's thanksgiving after a worthy reception of Holy Communion. Wives should offer similar prayers for their husbands, and it is also laudable for the young women who desire marriage to pray already for their unknown future husband in this regard, while also remembering they must be chaste themselves if they want to find a chaste man. As we are weak and breaking the habits and attraction is hard, confession must be sought after any fall quickly and humbly. When trying to conquer the vice, despair is a regular temptation, so do not wait – come to the tribunal of life to get the life of grace restored and move forward.

But we also know prayer is not magic, and God grants us His assistance only to the degree we want to work with Him. We can say all the prayers we want to, but if we do not make resolutions to avoid occasions of sin, God will let us fall, and fall hard. Since all the sins against purity first begin with a thought, we can see why custody of the eyes is an absolute necessity. This means that we do not willingly put ourselves around places, persons, or things that will entice the imagination, even in a small way. For a man, images of these kinds have a way of making a very deep impression on the imagination. Time, vigilance, and

the grace of God effectively weaken this impression, but we may never be completely free from it in this life. Even the great Saint Jerome in his old age still complained of being taunted by memories of his youth. Nonetheless, these means are all useless if we go around reinforcing it on account of some tacit delight we take in it and refuse to admit. Know what attracts you in the wrong way and pray to God for the strength to avoid and overcome it. Preventative measures also show God that we mean business: are filters on the computer? Is the computer in a public area of the house? Where do you take recreation? What kind of movies sit on the shelf or what do you go see in the theaters? Frankly, even the least bit of innuendo should cause embarrassment and not be tolerated in a Catholic home. That may account for eighty percent of the movies but, in the end, who cares? Is it really that important? Would it be pleasing to God? What music do you listen to? Remember that “rock and roll” and MTV did not usher in an era of virtue; and although these are now as normal as the sky is blue, recall that we live in a time where virtue is considered abnormal. And do not forget also, dear men, what you permit for yourselves in these regards, you indirectly permit for your children, so make no complaint

about the anti-life culture we live in if you willingly allow anti-life things to go on in your own life or your own home, while taking no serious steps to correct them.

Why did eight Jesuits so effectively plant the seeds for the conversion

of a debauched and savage nation to the holy Catholic Faith? Where did they get the strength to take on Goliath in an act of seeming futility even though it cost them their lives? It is because, banding together for support, they had an ardent love of God that would not stand to let the moral rot they saw all around them continue. It was an ardent love, though, that could only be the fruit of holy purity. As a consequence, they knew and were most profoundly convinced of what God really desires of us and the gifts He so wants to shower upon us

if we live as we ought. Painful as it may be for us to cast off the shackles, it is a war we must wage every day and a war we can win if we rightly utilize what God provides us. Only then can we effectively take on the Goliath of the culture of death – it does not stand a chance even at the cost of our own lives. *Blessed are the pure of heart, says Jesus Christ, they shall see God.* ✠

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The Madonna of Humility after Robert Campin

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