

March 14, 2020

Dear Archbishop Vigneron, Gerry, Arturo, Bob, Don, Tom, Frank, and Brothers and Sisters in Ministry:

I am responding to Gerry's letter of March 9. I have investigated *Courage*, and I have read *Living the Truth in Love*, edited by Smith and Check. We can all agree that all Catholics are called to imitate *Christ's Charity and Chastity*. This phrase leads me to examine four virtues that relate to human sexuality: abstinence, continence, celibacy and chastity. All four help us manage sexual desires and impulses, but they have different meanings.

*Abstinence* is refraining from indulging any pleasure or craving, such as from meat, alcoholic beverage, or sexual intercourse. In the commonsense realm, sexual abstinence is a strategy to prevent pregnancy and to avoid venereal disease. In the theoretical realm, abstinence among single people enhances the good order of society. In the interpersonal realm, abstinence before marriage allows intended spouses to appreciate and dramatize their total gift to each other, anticipating their life-long vows. In the transcendent realm, abstinence before or during marriage can help transform bodily craving into the spiritual dimension of Divine Charity.

*Continence* means control of bodily functions – bladder, bowels, or sexual activity. In the theoretical realm it means a lifestyle of self-control. (Self-control can involve total abstinence, as when an alcoholic abstains completely to maintain continence; but continence itself means *moderation*.) In the interpersonal realm, sexual continence means integrating your sexual desires and expressions with those of your lover, in a respectful balance, which involves moderation; at times it may involve abstinence. In the transcendent realm, sexual continence is a graceful surrender in love that reflects the unconditional, love of God – a total gift of self.

*Celibacy*, in commonsense, means unmarried. In the theoretical realm, certain occupations, such as airline stewardesses, were expected not to be married during their tenure. In the interpersonal realm, living alone is not natural (*contra naturam*) for humans, although some individuals living alone, such as widows, are able to form fruitful friendships in their social lives. *Celibacy* was not taught by Christ. There is no evidence that his roaming band of disciples remained unmarried all their lives, and we know about Peter's mother-in-law. In the Apostolic Church "bishops should be married only once" – they managed their Church the way they managed their family. In the transcendent realm, celibacy is an explicit affirmation of trust in God's love in this passing world, until Christ comes. This was Paul's motive (I Cor. 7:8,17-31). It is promoted as an ego strategy to sublimate sexual energy in monastic prayer and community, and to live in a service of love and care, as among Latin Rite priests.

*Chaste* means *clean* in commonsense; in the theoretical realm it defines a person who is *uncompromised or undefiled*. In the interpersonal realm, it "promotes the integration of sexuality within the whole person, leading to inner unity of body and heart" (CC 2337). *Chaste* is mentioned only four times in the Bible, implying a demure and obedient wife: Sirach 7:24, Sirach 26:15, Titus 2:5 and I Peter 3:2. Nowhere in the Four Gospels do we find Jesus teaching about chastity. The most likely place to find *chastity* would be Galatians 5:22 along with other Fruits of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* – some texts add *chastity*, most do not. Nevertheless, in Christian tradition, chastity has taken on a transcendent identification with the Spirit of God. Followers of Christ live chastely as a sign of God's Reign (CC 1832).

Several qualities make love chaste: respect for the sacredness of the person, free consent, equal and mutual esteem, commitment, fruitfulness, and resolve to do no harm. These Christ-like qualities flow from the person's integrity and they involve our physical body, but transcend the merely physical realm. Two examples: a mutual commitment of affection transcends the instinctive sexual attraction; an intense, joyful person-to-person gift of self in the act of sex transforms copulation into intercourse. Chastity is not the same as abstinence. Abstinence may or may not be chaste. One can abstain from sexual acts, yet be consumed by unchaste salacious desires. Nor is it the same as continence. Married people are both continent and chaste when they relate to each other with sensitivity and respect, in every personal encounter, including during sexual intercourse.

Some love involves genital sexual expression; other loving experiences do not – friendship, professional care such as nursing, teaching, ministry, etc. Nevertheless, we are sexual persons; our sexuality is a part of our identity, and sexual overtones are a dynamic in every relationship. We need to be aware of emotional and erotic impulses to avoid getting entangled in imprudent, unethical, even illegal liaisons. Moreover, if we repress our sexuality, trying to be *asexual*, we risk breaching sexual boundaries, as happened in many sex-abuse cases.

The most common genital sexual love is husband and wife. The question at hand is this: Can same-sex couples engage in supportive, loving, self-giving, fulfilling interactions, growing in love, as married persons do, in mutual care, being vulnerable in the context of promise, trust, fidelity and commitment? Can they experience God's transcendent love by engaging in faithful, intimate, genital expression? Can they form a permanent, self-sacrificing bond of love in the image of Christ? LGBTQ persons ask us to consider these questions with them.

In Greco-Roman cultures, we simply have not considered these questions, because in the commonsense realm, animals and humans share the same *nature* of propagation – a male inseminates a female of the same species. But this discussion considers *human persons loving one another*, not animals copulating. We are a different nature. It naturally occurs, in all cultures, that a small but significant number of human persons have same-sex attraction. It is not a disease or a freak of nature. Same-sex love is their natural way for intimate sexual embrace. Catholic groups like Courage or Dignity have arisen because homosexual persons have been overtly rejected and persecuted by mainstream secular and religious culture for centuries – and they still are.

However, LGBTQ Catholics are not the only ones rejected by Catholic parishes. When I was first ordained many bishops (although, significantly, not John Dearden) held that African American Catholics belonged in segregated parishes “with their own kind.” Most White Catholics believed this. The letter banning Dignity is concerned that we do not *confuse the faithful*. Sometimes the faithful are already confused and we are called to clarify their confusion. When priests and nuns would demonstrate at an all-white parish, members of “the faithful” would taunt: “Hey father, get back in church where you belong!” We would maintain our peace and respond, “Be cool. I *am* where I belong! You belong here with us!” After a century of persistent struggle, we are officially beginning to change that confusion about race – although African American Catholics still feel unwelcome in many parishes.

We are in a similar struggle of confusion over the LGBTQ issue. Most Catholics believe that homophobia is endorsed by Catholic teaching (CC 2357). Synod 16, Action Step 3.3B2 calls for developing a culture of empathy and understanding to support people in the LGBTQ communities as they seek to grow as human persons in Christ-like chastity. But this letter that publically forbids any parish church, chapel, or diocesan facility to be used for prayer with Dignity members does *not* develop a culture of empathy; rather, it reinforces the prejudice and discrimination against them. Ironically, this instruction itself is *unchaste* – it denies respect for the sacredness of the person, free consent, equal and mutual esteem, and resolve to do no harm. It does do harm.

I propose an alternate solution. I ask Archbishop Vigneron to write to every pastor and pastoral minister to institute and implement a missionary strategy to make it known to all that when any individual or pair of individuals may approach the parish to become members, they will be met with a warm and enthusiastic welcome – without a quizzical look, without suspicion, without being challenged to testify that they are not living in intrinsic disorder. The presumption of the Gospel is always on the side of love – that people are trying to grow in human flourishing, sacredness of the person, and in the joy of the Gospel, here and now, in this parish.

The archdiocesan missionary strategic plan should be to certify that in every archdiocesan parish, LGBTQ Catholics can engage freely in full, active, conscious participation in all aspects of parish life – beginning with Sunday Eucharist, and flowing into all parish activities of prayer, study and service, which might include a specialized support group like Courage or Fortunate Families. At that point in history it may no longer be necessary for Dignity or any other such group to celebrate Sunday Eucharist separately.

But until that halcyon dream comes true, gay, lesbian, bi, and transgender Catholics may practically need the comfort and mutual support of celebrating Mass together, rather than furtively slinking into a “straight” Catholic church, hoping no one looks strangely at them, or moves away from them in the pew. And there is no question that if such a group asks me to celebrate Sunday Eucharist with them, I will simply check my calendar and tell them when I am available – that is who I am and what I do.

A final comment about Courage. The witness we heard at the Sacred Heart Seminary meeting was very moving, but he was clearly a sex addict. Addicts do need specialized treatment; the most effective one is the Twelve-Step Program of AA. The 12-step program is mentioned by some of the personal testimonies on the Courage website; and if you search hard enough, you do come across a reworded version of the 12 steps. But it appears that Courage does not systematically work the program in the regular meetings. Rather, people I have consulted who have gone to a Courage meeting claim that the motivating spirit is a *better-than-thou* self-congratulating social group, and if you refuse to agree with the mantra of intrinsic disorder, you are not welcome. I wonder what will happen if one of them falls in love. Will he or she be excommunicated by Courage?

The important point, however, is that same-sex attraction is not an addiction, and most individuals simply want to live chaste lives with someone they love – free consent, equal and mutual esteem, commitment, fruitfulness, and resolve to do no harm. They should be free to benefit from the Sacraments, all the wisdom of the spiritual masters, and participate in all the programs of growth and development offered by the Church.

I have spent 54 years of ordained ministry defending against discrimination. I cannot stand by silently.

Victor Clore, STL, PhD