

A Priest's Reply To A Letter Questioning "Chastity"

(From A Non-Catholic)

From "Radio Replies".

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Attitude to "Free Love".

I do not understand all this talk about chastity. Personally, I can see no harm in people seeking outside marriage the pleasures you call sensual and immoral. I am an honest searcher after truth.

In other words, immorality for you is not a vice, and chastity is not a virtue. You see no harm in unbridled lust, and think pleasure the only standard of conduct. No wonder you cannot appreciate the Catholic religion! But tell me, honest searcher after truth as you are, if later you do marry and have children, would you advise one of your own daughters to become a prostitute? Would you assure her that she would thus be entering a quite honorable profession, nobly contributing to the legitimate pleasure and happiness of mankind, and at the same time embracing a profitable career?

I can understand that stealing, murder, and such crimes must be avoided because they harm our neighbors, but sexual pleasures harm no one.

You are talking arrant nonsense. You give as a reason for avoiding stealing and murder the fact that they harm our neighbors. Do you deny that they are wrong in themselves? If you steal \$100, is the only thing wrong the fact that your victim has lost the \$100? Was there no dishonesty and moral depravity in your action considered in itself? And if you say your action was not wrong in itself, will you tell me why it is wrong in itself to harm your neighbor? What precisely is your standard of morality — if you have one? Your assertion that promiscuous sexual pleasures harm no one is, of course, merely stupid. Individually and socially, they have caused untold harm. The man who has not learned to control his passions in accordance with the purpose intended by God will end by descending to a level lower than that of the brute beast. And in no passion is this more quickly verified than in the case of sensuality and lust. The man who thinks sensual pleasures an end in themselves to be sought quite lawfully whenever desired, will himself end in a corrupt heart, an enfeebled intelligence, and a paralyzed will, his whole character ruined.

Of course, if I could get what Catholics call the "gift of faith," I would, become a Catholic tomorrow.

You say you would become a Catholic if you could get the conviction we call "Faith." But the light of Faith is as little likely to shine in a mind which entertains such views, as a candle is likely to burn in the depths of a well whose atmosphere is thoroughly foul and corrupt. Christ Himself indicated

the relation between morals and faith when He said that they who love the works of darkness come not to the light.

No one seems to be able to tell me why it is wrong to have sex relations with a woman before marriage.

I will leave you with little doubt on the subject, I hope, by the time I have finished commenting on your letter.

I have often had discussions with other men trying to find out why.

You almost make me despair of humanity when you say that. The very first man you met should have been able to tell you. We are indeed reaping the fruits of secularism and driftage from Christianity! The Victorian rationalists attacked the Christian religion, and Protestantism was not able to resist that attack. Protestant writers compromised, and watered down the Christian Creed. Then the rationalists turned their guns on the Christian Code. There exists today a vast conspiracy of modern intellectuals to destroy the very principles of sexual morality. And your letter is evidence of the extent to which their doctrines have percolated to the masses. You are one of those who have discovered that, having lost the Christian Creed, you cannot keep the Christian Moral Code. As belief in a future life becomes dim, and God, and sin, and punishment for sin, pass into the region of fairy tales, pleasure becomes the rule of conduct. At the foot of the Cross of Christ, men found strength to deny themselves, and take up their own cross. But, having lost faith in Christ, well, they are off to amuse themselves. But the state of affairs today is particularly depressing. History records that great wars were followed by loose morals for a period, after which there was a reaction to decent standards. But there are grave reasons to fear that there will be no reaction this time, in spite of the catastrophe of our twentieth century wars. In former ages, the moral law was broken; but its truth was not questioned. But now thousands like yourself have lost the moral sense. You rank the old standards as outworn conventions. And denying virtue to be virtue, you will never want to recover it.

Custom permits sexual relations only in the married state.

So that is how far you have drifted! Moral obligations are a matter of custom only. There is to be no God to Whom we owe a duty; no Christ Whose law we must acknowledge; not even reason to control our conduct. Morality is merely "custom," and men are as sheep who all follow one another through a break in the fence merely because others are doing it! Your ignorance is simply appalling. For not only are you quite unaware of Christian teaching; you do not realize that, on this matter of sex, Christian moral standards have a majestic philosophy behind them which includes the best thoughts of Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics, and the most enlightened of Jewish thinkers. But more of this later.

I think the custom arose out of the necessity of having a family unit to support children.

It is good that you should make some attempt to find out the reasons for the custom, instead of merely declaring the custom to be accepted because it is the custom. But you are wrong if you imagine that the custom arose merely by human agreement; and that it is a convention made by men, and therefore able to be abolished by them at their own sweet will. It is God Himself who forbids sex-relations outside the married state, and that both by revelation, and by the innate moral law He has stamped upon our very being, a law of which all normal people are aware. Those not

aware of it are either mentally deficient, or have distorted and warped their characters by conscious depravity.

What other reason could there be for restricting sex-relations to the married state?

In other words, why is deliberate indulgence in sexual pleasure immoral, apart from marriage? Because chastity happens to be a virtue; and the opposite of virtue is vice. God forbids vicious conduct. Christ forbids it, and says, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." Matthew 8:8. If you advocate impurity as being quite all right in itself, you fall lower than the ancient pagans. They at least were not blind to the beauty of chastity. Chastity is a virtue, which controls in the married, and altogether excludes in the unmarried, all voluntary indulgence in the sensual and passionate pleasures associated with functions ordained by God for the reproduction of the human race. God implanted in us two great bodily appetites, the one for food to preserve the individual life; the other for sex-relations to preserve the life of the race. The pleasure attached to these appetites is to induce people to do what is necessary for God's purpose. To enjoy the pleasure whilst fulfilling the duty is lawful. But the purpose, and not the pleasure, is the main thing. Take food. The virtuous man eats in order to live. The man given to the vice of gluttony lives in order to eat. He is ruled by his senses instead of controlling them; and that is immoral. Against his health, the drunkard makes use of a function, which should serve for health. The sex appetite is for social health. To seek indulgence in it without regard to its end or purpose is a crime against nature, and a degradation. And the end or purpose is lawfully sought only in the state appointed by God for that purpose, the state of marriage.

Surely, our natural inclinations give natural rights to enjoy sexual love.

That is natural to man is that which is in accordance with his complete nature. Now man consists of both body and soul. He is both animal and spiritual. He has senses, but he has reason also. And his soul, the spiritual in man, should control by reason the lower animal passions, and not be controlled by them. The soul must rule the body. The body must not rule the soul. That which accords only with the blind passions of man's lower animal self, but which is opposed to the dictates of reason and conscience, is not natural, but unnatural to man. A mere animal gratification of the appetites is not the purpose of life. It is puerile because unreasoning; and it is degrading, for, as Cicero says, "Human nobility lies in that quality by which he differs from animals — his mind." The Christian, at least, is bound to fight for virtue; he must struggle to control blind passions. Unregulated self-indulgence is to grow flabby in one's character, and impair one's will. The pleasure lover who talks of "self-expression," and laughs at the idea of "self-repression," ends in utter depravity. Chastity is the only law that has ever lifted life above the tyranny and bondage of the lusts of the flesh. It may be difficult, but to say that it is right to violate chastity because it is difficult is a complete renunciation of human dignity and nobility.

If we can avoid having children, why should we deny ourselves the union?

You are progressing! Contraceptives can be so easily obtained now that unfortunate consequences of immorality can be obviated. Therefore, the immorality itself ceases to be immoral. Is that what you mean? Do you think it the new ideal that men and women, boys and girls, should be free to secure any pleasure they can give each other without any restrictions at all — because contraceptives are procurable? Can't you see that there is much more against securing sex-pleasures from a girl to whom you are not married than against securing them by solitary vice? Or do you deny that there is any such vice as impurity at all? If one addicted to solitary acts of impurity is

corrupt and depraved, is it quite all right for him to corrupt others? Such apologies for sin are simply disgusting, and I can only hope that there are not many who take the outlook you are trying to express.

Married people perhaps cultivate the idea that sex-relations are not lawful except for them, because they are jealous that their rights should be infringed.

In other words, you imagine that the moral law in this matter is due to a kind of "dog-in-the-manger" attitude on the part of married people! But the law is not due to that at all. All single people, with a natural sense of morality, maintain the same thing. God Himself has said, "You shall not commit adultery," forbidding any indulgence outside marriage. Christ said that if a man looks after a woman in the street to lust after her, he has already committed adultery in his heart. The natural moral law itself tells us that sex is for reproductive purposes, and that its exercise is lawful only in the state nature itself ordains for those purposes. Sex is essentially a function of the family. There is a whole world of meaning and value in the family. The relation of husband and wife is the highest form of personal union. This union is sacred, not only in itself, but also in its character as the creative source of life for both individuals and society. The family is the vital foundation by which life is handed on from generation to generation; it is the nursery of all social virtues; the only safeguard of the deeper values of human life against the vulgarities of license. If your licentious theories are adopted, women will find love stripped of all romance, all decency, all reserve, and all fidelity. In declaring all indulgence outside marriage to be gravely immoral and wrong, in forbidding irregular unions because they separate sex from its proper social function, Christianity adopts standards, which are based on a true conception of human nature, and in full accordance with the genuine discoveries of biology and sociology.

If our actions have no harmful effects on ourselves or on others, how can they be wrong?

Do you mean to say that the only harmful effect you can see in what you propose is the possibility of a girl becoming an unmarried mother; and that therefore all is well, provided she be preserved from that external consequence by the use of contraceptives? But take yourself first. Is not the loss of your own virtue a harmful effect? Once commence such conduct, and how far will you go? Until you become a debauched rake, and utterly depraved? You may say no, but that you confine your suggestions only to relations before marriage with the particular girl you intend to marry. Then is it no harm to her to rob her of her greatest treasure — her virtue? An indescribably pure and clear atmosphere surrounds the chaste. If a girl has other faults, yet preserves her purity, all honor seems to remain to her. If she loses that, she joins the ranks of all other "fallen women." Would you do that in the name of love? Love seeks the good of the one loved even at the expense of self. A good man who sees the girl he loves in danger of her life will risk his to save her. But you are not talking "love," you are talking "lust" — a lust which seeks personal gratification at the expense of a deceived victim.

It is lust which lays waste all the nobler instincts of manhood, and all the special beauty and charm of womanhood. And should you not marry the particular girl after all, will you seek to ruin others, leaving her with a life-long consciousness of pre-marital infidelity, the more torturing the better the man she does marry in the end — if she does so at all? Your suggestion is that of a man who has no moral standards, and does not even see the need of them. You express the standards of those who want merely a thoroughly selfish gratification at the price of a good woman's virtue. God help all good women, if your views ever become prevalent amongst men. The only way to protect the

higher interests of all human beings, both individually and socially is to cling to or return to Christian standards. Sex has duties as well as privileges. It is an opportunity of self-sacrifice, and the serving of God as well as the best interests of the human race. The procreation of children is the explanation and justification of sex indulgence. That is lawful only in the married state. Outside marriage, therefore, all indulgence in sex pleasure deliberately sought is a perversion, immoral, and sinful before God.

If the Catholic Church condemns 'free love', what can you do to stop it?

I can but explain the moral law, and urge people to keep it. But instruction of itself does not convert people. The grace of God and their own good will are also required. Still I agree with you that the growing tide of immorality is an anxious problem. And loose ideas on the whole subject of 'petting', flirtation, and love-making are growing more and more widespread as moral restraints are abandoned. And these loose ideas have led to the wholesale breaking of God's commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." Morally, of course, 'free love' can never be justified. By 'free love', I mean free indulgence in love-making between a man and a woman for its own sake, without any honorable purpose of marriage in view, and with no sense of further obligations to one another. Many people understand by 'free love' straight-out adultery. But I go further back than that. For just as honorable love leads to marriage, so dishonorable love is the road that leads to adultery. And dishonorable love-making is already sinful, and immoral in itself.

Too many are 'losing themselves' in love for one another.

If people lose themselves, it is not from love for one another, but from selfish indulgence of their own passions regardless of the welfare of the one they pretend to love. Such conduct does not deserve the name of love at all. The only love-making that is morally justified is that of lawful courtship, with possible marriage in view, and with all the restraints of respect and modesty. Courtship begins by a man singling out a girl for special attention, and by the manifestation of affection for her. And this is justified only provided the man and the girl are free to marry, and have at least a remote intention of possible marriage. So parents have the right to ask any man who seeks to bestow his attentions upon their daughter whether he intends possible marriage. And if two young people have genuine love for one another, there is not much danger of their 'losing themselves'.

For true love is not dominated by sensuality. It is something deeper than mere emotion and flesh, passion and lust. It is a firm mutual affection based on mutual respect for each other's character. It is unselfish, thinking of the good of the other, and would rather endure any self-restraint than harm the other in any way. Certainly if love-making does not rise above the mere thrill of bodily sensations, it can be no more than indulgence in passion. And a woman makes herself very cheap who is ready to give herself to anyone, or even various and different men who happen to reach out for her. It is, of course, flattering to a girl to be singled out for special attention and demonstrations of affection. Her natural inclination may be to grasp at the joy of being loved. But she should ask herself a few questions. Is the man free to marry her? If not, he is merely one of those men who can't keep his hands off women. If he is free to marry, does he merely want her to be his plaything for the moment? If so, he does not love her at all, but wants her merely to pander to his passions, a thing any good girl will indignantly reject. Already his very attempt to break through her reserve and bestow his ardent attentions upon her is immoral; and if she accepts them, and allows them to continue, she will find that they are but a prelude to graver sins threatening complete moral wreckage.

{Some follow-up Letters needed answering:} Do you mean that the only love-making that is morally justified is that of lawful courtship with possible marriage in view?

Correct. The instinct of love between male and female is implanted by God primarily for the production of children. The mutual attraction of the sexes towards one another, and its expression by love-making, kissing, and embracing gravitate of their very nature towards that complete bodily union which terminates in the child. There is no love between persons of opposite sex which does not spontaneously and consistently aim at this design of nature, however ignorant of the fact young people may be. Any couple indulging in flirting, love-making, kissing, 'petting', and cuddling, is already inviting the prospective child, however remotely. And since parenthood is unlawful outside marriage, indulgence in 'free love' for its own sake outside marriage and apart from all intentions of marriage, is unlawful and sinful. Whoever is not in a position to meet nature's purposes in lawful wedlock is not morally free to indulge in exchanges of love primarily intended for the procreation of children and the conservation of the human race.

If this is the Catholic teaching, how can many young Catholic boys and girls of 15, 16, 17 years of age engage in boy and girl friendships with 'passionate love-making' of the cinema or magazine type, with or without their parents' knowledge?

Such 'passionate love-making' in mere boys and girls, who cannot be seriously thinking of marriage, is in itself gravely sinful conduct. Such young people are neither able to appreciate nor to fulfill the heavy responsibilities of fatherhood or motherhood. If any such young boys and girls do indulge in such 'love-making', it is either because they lack instruction, or because they lack any real character formation. They seem to think that as soon as they experience the love urge towards the opposite sex, as soon as those first dawning inclinations come to them, it must be right to indulge them merely because experienced. So they yield to their impulses, and wallow in fervent endearments and caresses which are merely the indulgence of blind sex instinct. The end is only too often both moral and social disaster. Such boys and girls have never been taught that blind inclinations and passions must be controlled in accordance with reason and conscience; or, if they have been told that, they have not been trained in self-control even in other departments of life. I need scarcely say that if boys and girls indulge in 'passionate love-making' with their parents' consent, then such parents are either criminals or lunatics. If without their parents' knowledge, then the parents have never been true parents to those children at all. They have neither exercised proper supervision, nor have they instilled into their children the right principles of obedience and confidence.

Ostensibly, these boys and girls are regular at their religious duties, but apparently, priests do not stop a boy from having his "girlfriend."

You must remember that a priest can give advice only according to such facts as are submitted to him for the purpose. It is quite possible that boys and girls indulging in 'love-making' as a pastime drown their uneasiness of conscience, persuade themselves that it is not so wrong, and fail to mention the matter in confession. They have a false conscience on the subject, to which many things contribute. Finding the topic delicate, teachers at school avoid it, and give little instruction on the matter. Parents at home are careless in the general upbringing of such children. And at the cinema, the children sit with an obviously approving audience whilst the sweetness and delights of women in men's arms are graphically depicted. It is not surprising that so many children should

deceive themselves into thinking that it is not so wrong for them also to indulge their artificially stimulated instincts.

It seems to be one thing in theory, but another in practice.

There is no difference between theory and practice, so far as the Catholic Church is concerned. The moral theology of the Catholic Church is clear on the subject, and the priest will apply it in practice by rightly assessing the guilt of conduct about which he is interrogated, and by forbidding in the name of God what is to be forbidden. Catholic theology teaches that conventional demonstrations of love by kissing and embracing between parents and children, relatives and friends, which abstract altogether from sex interest, are not sins. Such behavior between persons of opposite sex for the mere sake of the sensual thrill is venially sinful at least, provided there be no honorable intentions of courtship and possible marriage. Ardent and prolonged embracing between detached persons of the opposite sex who have no intention of marriage is ranked as mortal sin by Catholic theology almost invariably. But, whilst a priest applies these principles in practice and advises people accordingly, he has no means of making everybody live up to them any more than he can ensure the observance of any of the commandments by merely stating them. But I do admit that adolescent boys and girls should have these principles put more clearly before them than is commonly done; and that parents should exercise much more control and take much more interest in their sons and daughters during the earlier years of their development than most parents do.

{Some more Letters needed answering:} What are the duties of husband and wife as regards 'free love'?

That should be obvious. I have already said that 'free love-making' is morally wrong even for single people. It is still more gravely wrong for married people. For Christian people marriage is a state in which a man and woman, who are free in conscience to do so, give themselves to each other permanently for the sake of children, and mutual love and companionship. They vow absolute fidelity to each other, and each obtains exclusive rights to the other's love and affection. Any alienation of affection is a great sin. Any third party who would seek to bestow his attentions on a person vowed to another in an existent marriage commits grave sin. So would any married person who would either bestow his or her attentions elsewhere, or accept such attentions. Injustice is measured by the reasonable resentment of the owner. And how greatly a good man would resent the injustice did he find his wife in the arms of another man can be imagined without any great effort. The intruding party would not long be left in doubt, nor the wife. Unfaithfulness of heart is already a sin, and it is most frequently followed by straight-out adultery, and not seldom by the divorce court.

You absolutely forbid to married people indulgence in 'free love'?

The very terms are contradictory. For by the mere fact of being married, people are no longer free to accept love from others or bestow their love upon others. No wife can exchange affection, or yield to the embraces of men other than her husband without sin. Nor can a husband exchange affection with other women, or reach out to embrace them without sin. Husband and wife must reserve themselves for each other. And that reserve cannot be broken through without sin. Their persons are sacred to each other, even as every person is sacred according to civil law. If a business man places his hand affectionately on the shoulder of a typist, she can sue him at law, and get damages, if she resents the liberty he has presumed to take. Quite recently, a Judge stated in a court case that every intentional touch by one person of another against that person's will is an assault according to law,

however trivial and technical it may be. And I say that if civil law justly safeguards each individual from assault, then married people, since they have given themselves to each other, have the right to demand that each will reject and resist every intentional liberty attempted by any third party. Certainly, no man has the right to lay his hand upon the wife of another man; and no woman upon the husband of another woman. The moral sense may be so dead in some people that they will persuade themselves that there is nothing wrong with such conduct. But that does not make such conduct right. And Catholic theology definitely teaches that such liberties are sinful. 'Free love' is immoral in itself; where people are concerned who are vowed to one another, it involves the additional sin of injustice.

Why not permit companionate marriage for a time, instead of binding people to a mistaken union for life?

Firstly, I quarrel with the very expression "Companionate Marriage." Since the parties to such cohabitation are not married, why call it marriage? The expression is merely an effort to give a respectable name to a disreputable union. It is not a marriage, and the parties will soon be looking round for other companions.

Secondly, such unions could not possibly prevent unhappy marriages. They might prevent any marriage, but they cannot guarantee freedom from unhappiness, should a marriage really take place. Marriage is not a momentary thing, but a durable state. And things can go wrong despite a long companionate experiment just as they can go wrong despite an equally long and quite honorable courtship.

Thirdly, Christ declared marriage to be a permanent sacramental contract binding people until death. That is the only kind of marriage possible for Christians. If you want to substitute illicit and immoral temporary relationships, at least have the honesty not to call them marriages, or Christian, or progress.

Finally, the Church does not bind people to a mistaken union for life. The Church merely declares the Christian character of marriage as a permanent state in life. They are those who enter this state who bind themselves one to the other. And to avoid making a mistake they should give due thought and consideration to the matter. If they do contract marriage, future difficulties and trials do not mean that the marriage was a mistake. They are incidental to life in this world, and provide scope for the exercise of Christian virtue. Of course, this is the crux of the whole question. People who are not really Christians, and have no will to practice virtue, desire to abolish Christian standards. They would prefer a series of immoral companionships, hypocritically tacking on to them the title of marriage to preserve some outward appearance of respectability. It is to the credit of the Catholic Church that she condemns absolutely such retrogressive and pagan ideas of morality.
