

CHASTITY AND FRIENDSHIP

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THIS PAPER on Chastity and Friendship, although written for the Symposium on Ignatian Spirituality and Reform, does not explicitly mention Ignatius and the spirituality of the Society of Jesus. But I do believe that it is inspired by the conception of friendship Ignatius proposed to all companions of Jesus, whether men or women.

Ignatius knew from personal experience what excessive freedom in relations with women could mean. But during the crisis of his conversion, at Loyola, he received such a great grace in a vision of the virgin Mary and the child Jesus, that the immense consolation swept away all images of the flesh and any further tendency to yield to them.

This grace liberated him in mind and heart. During the first years after his conversion, he was surrounded by women admirers, whom he guided toward a very deep encounter with Christ. When in Rome he took care of prostitutes, and at the same time was the spiritual director of many women of all classes of society.

He knew from experience that he needed to be prudent and fully master of himself. He was not looking for intimacy with the persons to whom he was so devoted. Extremely sober in his words and signs of affection, he proposed his own experience as a light toward the intimacy with God which he himself enjoyed.

Times have changed since Ignatius proposed his Contemplation for obtaining Love, but the principles remain the same. The deepening of friendship between celibates, which is one of the characteristics of our times, can be seen in the light of the ignatian ideal of perfect companionship. With a total devotion to the persons loved, forgetting ourselves, we should try to take them with us into the very heart of God.

Introduction

For some years now the number of men and women consecrated to God who enter into deep friendships has been steadily growing. These celibates for the Kingdom have found out they are still men and women and cannot live without friendship and without love.

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This can be put down to the rediscovery of human values and interpersonal relationships.

Not merely every now and then but quite often, you meet a sister who can say to a priest and he to her what Jeanne de Chantal said to Francis de Sales: 'Our love has no name in any language'. This explains why the question of chastity in friendship is more than ever debated, because it touches on a vital nerve-centre of christian perfection. And the more so, the more people go on repeating that it is impossible to love God if one is incapable of human friendship and love.

Naturally, there are great differences of opinion on the subject. Some people see no problem at all. For them, what used to be called 'the concupiscence of the flesh' is an out-dated myth. Others, on the contrary, look on every liberty taken as harmful to perfect chastity which is the very condition of consecrated celibacy.

It is certainly true that even the most spiritual of intimacies and the purest of affections stir us so deeply that they can make our whole being vibrate and exult. This is where chastity could be endangered. Quite obviously, too, many people have lost their vocation through excessive liberty in friendship. But it is equally true that very wonderful, strong and pure friendships can develop between celibates.

There are a number of people who live their celibacy unwillingly and allow themselves occasional lapses. Probably many, too, have chosen what they call the 'third way', a quasi-conjugal life that is neither the way of total chastity nor yet that of marriage.

Then there are the ones whose celibacy is intact, but whose hearts are closed and incapable of loving. Others, finally, live out their consecrated life in joy. Chastity is not something that simply keeps them from any sexual indiscretion, but it is a positive thing that turns them into real men and women, in a life given totally to the Lord and to their fellow-men. Some among these have gradually developed friendships with persons of their own or the other sex. Far from impeding chastity, these friendships are its very expression and the cause of a growth in the love of God that would have been impossible, otherwise.

Chastity and human relationships

All our human relationships are marked by the fact that we are men and women. Sex does not exist simply for purposes of procreation. Our modes of acting and being are profoundly conditioned by

it. To the very marrow of our bones and the deepest fibres of our person we are man or woman.

Of all relationships, those that unite human beings to each other the most intimately are friendship and love. In friendship just as in love, but in a different way, the whole person, body and soul, is involved. Even the most spiritual friendship brings into play the totality of the human being.

Friendship itself admits of an infinite number of degrees; I do not intend here to deal with the relationships of good fellowship: those ordinary friendships which one meets with everywhere among celibates vowed to the Lord, or between celibates and married people. Such relationships scarcely pose any problems for chastity. The problem arises when a deeper feeling manifests itself which begins to create a bond of affection.

From then on friendship is truly an 'affection' for the person loved. This affection calls for a mutual knowledge that is more and more deep and gives birth to the desire for the other's presence. Such a friendship may be entirely free of what is sensual, but it may also demand manifestations of affection which make it less free. It is here that chastity must intervene.

Love, whether it be maternal, paternal, filial or conjugal, is a much deeper 'affection'. It is a stronger and more intimate bond than friendship, since it affects the human being in his totality, demanding as it does an unconditional sharing in his spirit, his heart and his whole life. It originates from blood-ties when it is paternal, maternal, filial or fraternal. It tends to create such a tie if it is conjugal love or the love of friendship. If ordinary friendship creates a relationship of closeness and intimacy, which unites those who are friends in a total community of feelings and affections, conjugal love and the love of friendship go a step further and seek to build up between those who love each other a total intimacy and shared inwardness, the ideal of which remains man's union with God.

Now neither friendship nor love tend towards a disembodied relationship which would end up by disregarding the fact that we are men and women.

When St Paul said: 'There is neither male nor female',¹ what he meant was that the redemption is offered in exactly the same way to all human beings. But we each receive this redemption with the resonances of our own personality. Virginity is a sign in this world of

¹ Gal 3, 28.

our future condition, where there will be no taking of husband or wife. Yet it is impossible to imagine such human relationships that would have nothing to do with our man-woman condition.

Moreover, the attraction of the two sexes for each other is so deeply ingrained in our flesh and irrational instincts, that it can lead to a falsification of human relationships. As St Paul understands it, such over-all attraction tends to snatch the relationship from the control of the spirit.

This is where chastity comes into the picture. In the strict sense, chastity is defined as moderation, or better, rectitude, in all that touches on the sexual instinct. But if this instinct is a profound impulse that in one way or another affects our whole psychic and bodily behaviour, it is chastity that takes control of it in all that concerns our relations. Chastity enters into the way that marriage is lived; chastity comes into friendship and all human encounters; and finally, there can be what is called perfect chastity – the hallmark of consecrated celibacy.

Thus chastity intervenes in all inter-personal relationships, between the same or different sexes, not like a code of laws laying down lists of prohibitions or permissions, but expressing a certain modality that affects all our actions.

I may walk down the street and be aroused to desire a woman I see; or a friend can awaken the craving for homosexual satisfaction. In every meeting it is for me to find the chaste way of acting towards others and how to control my own desires and impulses.

Between unmarried persons there are acts that are never chaste, because they are directly ordered towards procreation, or lead to intimacies that are the very actualization of marriage. But other acts, whose meaning is always ambivalent, may be motivated either by a chaste or an unchaste heart. This is the area where real love of chastity is shown. The more chaste a person is the more is he freed from those instinctive movements that are fighting against the spirit.

A glance loaded with desire may already be impure. Claspings hands can express craving for possession on the part of a man or surrender in a woman, manifesting a hidden impurity of heart. A kiss given in order to awaken in oneself or someone else a forbidden bodily pleasure would be impure, while at the same time the glance, the claspings of hands and the kiss may also be the signs of very pure friendship.

Chastity expresses respect of oneself and others. It is blemished if I look for sensual pleasure in another person for my own selfish ends.

But for husband and wife to throw themselves totally into human and corporal relationship with absolute love can be the expression of the most outstanding conjugal chastity.

Chastity is a force that measures and a strength that masters and spiritualizes all acts of relationship between human beings. It assures the victory of the spirit over carnal attraction in our more intimate relationships, particularly those involving persons of a different sex. Thus it must be clear from all this that society has an absolute need of chastity and could not survive without it.

To say exactly what is chaste and what is not is very difficult. Moralists have given us any number of material rules that may quiet people's consciences, yet still do not do justice to the splendours of chastity.

It would, however, be an error to suppose that all acts done because one loves are chaste. The relationship with the person in question has also to be considered. Adulterous love cannot be chaste. In our own eyes we may justify our every action because, we say, we are urged on by love and this seems to us sincerity. But sincerity and truth are not always synonyms. An impulse that carries us instinctively to seek for physical contact with a person we love cannot be justified simply on the grounds of its spontaneity. This spontaneity has to be controlled unless we want to make human relationships impossible. There are also various cultural norms we have to be aware of. In China people never embrace in public as they do in the west. It is only recently that we have begun to see boys and girls putting their arms around each other in the streets of Taiwan. All gestures expressing relationships are a language to be learnt, because the practice of chastity is to a great extent bound up in them.

Too often looked on as a defence or limitation, chastity should become rather the positive quality of all acts of relationship. Not only should it carry us beyond the sensual cravings of the flesh, but by weaning us from selfish desires, it should become the source of a communion not of body nor of sentiment but of persons.

Chastity in friendship and celibate love

Sometimes we imagine we can be angels and love like them . . . It is an idle dream. When we love, our whole being is moved. In divine as in human love it is the same. Even in our love of God there can be a problem, for when we look for deep sensual satisfactions in the manifestations of his love we may be lacking in total chastity. And

yet we cannot help throwing our whole being, flesh and spirit, into the search for God.

Perhaps that is why many people fall into the other extreme and think they can cultivate friendships that are far from being chaste. They allow themselves acts only suitable for married people. Even without going so far, they behave like lovers in search of felt manifestations of love. So there are touches, fondling and kisses, which they think are very innocent, but in reality are impure in the friendship they are trying to manifest.

If so many priests, religious men and women have given up celibacy for marriage, it is too often because they have gone in for this type of relationship with only a hazy notion of chastity. They were looking for a friendship they really needed. But it became mutual self-seeking, and, as it developed, an attachment began that was out of place because it was at the expense of the love they owed the Lord. More and more liberties were taken until the only possible solution was to get married. And yet it is possible to live great friendships in celibacy. The history of the Church has given us outstanding examples, some well known, others less in the public eye. So we should not think it an impossibility to love a man or woman when our heart is given to God. In fact, not only are these friendships not contrary to chastity but they can develop into a marvellous love of God.

Exclusive special friendships may arise which will divide a community; and there is also the danger of homosexuality. Between persons of different sexes almost anything can happen, from love-seeking disguised under pretence of spiritual help or communion in the love of God, to habitual faults that are totally contrary to chastity.

To avoid all this we have to be complete masters of our desires and passions and be led by the law of the Spirit. Now no one can live without love; yet it is impossible to love without awakening the sexual instincts. Chastity intervenes here to restrain the affective powers and force them towards the deeper levels of the personality. It teaches us to express ourselves in unambiguous words and gestures that reveal depths of affection without ever allowing them to be overloaded by sensuality.

How do you think the Lord loved? We know he loved his apostles and particularly St John, and the gospel tells us he loved Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Although it was the love of God lived in a human life it was none the less a human love, a perfect love of friendship. Christ loved deeply and chastely. It is difficult for us to

understand how we can love with all our heart and feel the strength of love invade our whole being, yet remain totally free from inordinate sensual love. A mother's love is absolute; she is possessed by it entirely and it is a chaste love. The love of a man for his wife can also express his whole self and move him to the last fibre of his flesh, and yet in total chastity. So we need not imagine some kind of living of a love outside the flesh, but in such a way that the flesh does not seduce the spirit. Our sensibility is chaste when it becomes nothing but a sign and the dwelling-place of the Spirit.

In celibacy, also, it is possible to love persons, whether men or women, with a deep affection. What can this friendship be? We have been told over and over again that if we are to love God we must empty our hearts of all other love. But what is an empty heart? Some people think their heart empty when it is brimming over with self. Chaste they may be, but with a sterile chastity. A heart wide open to friendship such as I have described, is so emptied of self and freed from senses and flesh, that this friendship is the seed and fruit of perfect chastity. Incapacity to love does not make a man chaste, but the fact that his love is totally liberated from the flesh, sensual attachment and self-centredness. In other words, that man is chaste who loves his friend as a person, not as an object to be possessed, dominated or to take selfish pleasure in.

All I have said so far will be best understood if we scrutinize this kind of friendship a little more closely. Friendship is an attitude that unites two persons of the same or different sex in mutual feelings of admiration, respect, affection and deep tenderness. Its development follows in the wake of a growing intimate knowledge, and the continuous, quiet sharing of all the two friends have and are.

Although the affective element is already very strong, it is not the dominating factor. Friendship and the love of friendship do not develop in the sexual zone that ends in bodily embraces. Yet it is always this same impulse that carries beings towards each other so that they live in and by one another. The love of friendship is free from genital forms of love and also from those corporal manifestations that tend more immediately to the multiform expressions of the conjugal relationship. From the outset, friendship and love of friendship are free from the sensible, and this freedom is already a flowering of chastity.

In this spiritual friendship the end does not wholly justify the means. Some people make use of touches and loving caresses because they say these are the way to reach the soul of the person loved. But

the road to conjugal love may prove an obstacle in this particular relationship. They then defend themselves by saying it is the first stage in the exploration of spiritual affection. In certain cases this may be true, but it is difficult to justify in those who have vowed their chastity to God. In such a vocation, presence supposes a distance and intimacy requires separation. A friendship of this kind can be true love, as real and strong as that of husband and wife who are extremely close to each other. And yet it is a totally liberated love that develops as much in absence as in presence. In fact it is even characteristic of such love that absence and separation may become a wonderful occasion for its complete expansion.

It is impossible to insist too much on the importance of separation, distance and even absence for the discovery of the true meaning of friendship between persons vowed to God. Chastity itself separates and puts distances between those who love each other. But through this very separation and the realization of intimacy without physical contact, a new dimension of friendship at once emerges that will go on deepening through the privation itself. It seems that this is one of the aspects of friendship between celibates vowed to the Lord that is the most painful for women precisely because, when they love, their whole being is invaded by their affection to a degree unknown to men.

This separation and the absence of fleshly contacts are needed for profound friendship to be possible with more than one person. One of the great discoveries of celibacy is to be able to love and truly love several people with an equal love but which possesses the uniqueness of each of the persons loved. Love expressed in the flesh, where every relationship is exclusive, is incapable of this liberty.

In the friendship of which I speak, the two are present to each other in so great an intimacy that it is a total shared inwardness. Each one rests in the other in such peace and certainty that this union is transparent and wholly chaste. From the outset such friends may enjoy an intimacy that married people only reach after long years of purification.

Conjugal love is not the only love that tends to such union, for the very essence of perfect friendship is already the deep desire of intimate oneness that makes us want to live in the other and the other in us. Every act of loving is a mysterious presence by which the loved one becomes for the lover an intimate pole of affection and life. Indeed, the mystery of conjugal union can receive great light from this experience of friendship. While in its early stages its path

differs from that of chastity and celibacy, the two ways end by meeting, for all true love is chaste.

The long road of liberation through love, and the experience of God

Many are the roads of friendship. Sometimes the beginning is physical attraction, from which we have to be gradually freed. An apparently casual encounter may kindle an immense fire in the heart, hard to put out. But why should it be put out when it can be led gently beyond the zone of sensibility to burn in the depths of the person, there where it can be united to the love of God? Fire will always be fire, but at that level it will burn freely and expand still more, its only limit being the depths of the human heart that can love with all the strength of a God-given love.

To reach this point we have to fight quietly and tenaciously to free ourselves from the pull of the sensual and carnal. Need for bodily contact may become so violent at times that it leads to actions that are frankly wrong. This can come about between persons of the same or different sexes. But should this happen all is not lost. The important thing is to keep the will fixed on our goal: a love of friendship that, far from taking from the love that we owe to God, becomes one with it. This can only be where there is unshakeable determination to pierce through the bodily and sensual to reach true love in perfect chastity.

Large numbers of problems and dangers in the development of a friendship come from the fact that men and women have so little idea of each other's psychology. We have to know how a man loves. How for him love is an intense concentration, whereas, for a woman it means total immersion and slow diffusion. Men find it difficult to realize how total and concrete the love of a woman for a man can be. Even the wholly spiritual love of a religious woman for a man takes possession of her entire being. She may be absorbed in this way yet wholly free from anything sensual or contrary to chastity.

Through ignorance of the reactions of the other sex we can become a danger for each other. So it is that in spiritual friendship knowledge is absolutely necessary. Because it is only too easy to think up fine motives for feelings, attitudes, desires and actions that are in reality sensual or positively carnal. On this point we should note that total abandonment to love produces a deceptive impression of purity to those who do not know themselves well enough.

Sometimes it happens that persons who want to remain perfectly pure and faithful are afraid to set out on the road of friendship for

fear of impurity. The danger is not imaginary; but when we are spiritually certain that a real friendship is offered us by the Lord, we should set our eyes on the aim and pass courageously through all imaginings that could stand in our way. Here once again, what counts is the determination to follow the path of chastity. Passions and desires may deafen us, but they cannot make us deviate if our eyes are on the Lord and if we have a guide to whom we can entrust ourselves. This guide should be the one of the two who is most experienced in these matters. In a good number of cases the advice of another friend will be necessary, since he will be able to judge this intimacy more objectively.

If our heart is so captivated that we cannot think of the person loved without finding his absence unbearable, then it becomes difficult to love God with total love. But such an attraction is not necessarily an obstacle to this love. In fact, it may even help to clarify our option for God and make it more definitive. It can happen too, that our will wavers and our heart is divided. We may still be bound by what St Paul calls the flesh that is in us fighting against the spirit. Once again we have to make a distinction between connivance with the flesh and what are commonly known as temptations. These last can assault us and obsess us yet without in any way tarnishing our chastity. Indeed, it is precisely in our refusal to accept what the imagination or the senses propose that we are chaste. Perfect chastity, therefore, can quite well be present at the same time as the most severe temptations.

By concentrating on the ideal friendship I have spoken of, there will be a gradual purification of heart and spirit. And experience goes to show that our capacities for love expand in proportion to our freedom from sensual and selfish attachments. Most men tend to measure the strength of love by their perception of it in the senses, and its total possession in the conjugal embrace. Now this embrace may express love, but it does not create it by itself, for love is a deeper thing. By detaching our love endlessly from the signs that manifest it, we enter into its profoundest reality. We discover love just as we find God in contemplation; little by little we perceive the reality of this love beyond anything we may up to now have learnt of it through experience.

In this way people consecrated to God may one day find out that their growing friendship is nothing but an immense love. This can be perfectly chaste though so intensely felt. These two friends, without needing to be always together, are aware of a very intimate

union. This is a love that is knowledge, openness, transparency, reciprocal respect and deep attention, limitless affection, and a presence so inward that each one lives in the other in what he is in the depths of his own being.

So close a union each one recognizes as God's gift and not man's creation. Each receives the other from God's hands who unites them together in him; there, where he also unites them to himself. This is the love Christ spoke of when he wished us to be 'one', as he is one with the Father. Such a love may appear platonic to those who cannot conceive of any such thing outside the conjugal bond. In the love I speak of there is no denial of the body: only a renouncement of certain modes of loving so as to find love at greater depth.

However, it cannot be stressed too much that no one should attempt this experience on his own initiative. Good friendships we can all try to develop. But, being consecrated to God, we have to travel this road with eyes fixed on him, not on ourselves. He alone can give us those with whom we can share such extraordinary friendships. These are special gifts of God and have to be received as such. Every human being has to love, and those whose hearts are vowed to God must and should love as much as anyone. Everyone needs friends to share what touches them most closely. They need people whom they can love by giving them everything they have. These are friendships that can carry them far towards the discovery of God. But if he gives them a friend they can love in the way I have described, they will travel the road to God with a wide-open heart, full of the joy of loving and of being loved.

Those who love in this way will say to each other: 'How is it possible to love so much?' And this is so deep and so total a love that it takes possession of everything. The body is not left aside but it takes on its full value, docile as it is to the love it shelters. Completely transformed, it carries the signs of total self-possession in its activity and on its face the light of a surrendered life. The gaze loaded with desire is no longer there, nor the restlessness of someone seeking reassurance by trying to read love in the heart of another. Beyond all desire, all cravings and all anxiety, these two friends are in total harmony. They rest in each other in utter trust. They no longer say 'I need you', but they find greater joy in this unlimited sharing and union than in any fulfilled desire. And yet this friendship and love are not possessions to rest in. They are life, for love is life. Lassitude has gone and there is no real fear, for in this zone of certitude all fear

is banished. What gives love its strength is not the bond of the flesh, which ultimately separates, but utter reciprocal trust. Many beginners look to the senses for a certitude they cannot give. Flirting is always a disappointment, for it skims merely the outer surface of heart and the sensibility. But the way of true friendship leads to absoluteness of love; and when this quality is reached, then God's absolute love reveals itself.

At this point it is still possible to find illusions in friendship and love; for fleshly desires are never totally absent, and they can be awakened even in this love. But a man vowed in chastity to God, knowing himself to be loved to such an extent, need have no fear. This is a love which unites without being bound, and is all transparent with the spirit. So absolute a love may seem folly. But it is a folly that is pure wisdom: the wisdom of a love lived in a human life as like as possible to the love of God. Its madness is to be absolutely pure and at the same time wholly incarnate: a folly so great, so holy, so true, so final and so absolute, that it can only flower in the sunlight of God.

In a very real sense the face of the friend becomes the revelation of the divine glance. God shows himself in this way in the heart and life of a man with as much evidence as in the highest contemplation. 'When I see you', the friend will say, 'I see Christ. In you, God has taken on a human face for me'. It is one of the finest fruits of celibacy when the presence of the friend becomes the presence of God. And still we have to remain prudent; for the one who disguises himself as an angel of light may bring us to think that the flesh has no more dangers for us. In the end, we have to say as we did at the beginning, that by awakening in us extraordinary powers of loving, this way of friendship can also arouse our lower instincts. So we have to be alert to see that our friendship develops in total chastity . . . But it should be noted that even friendships that are not yet perfectly chaste can help us on our way to God as long as we persist in the effort to reach true love.

So in celibacy, friendships can develop that are not concessions to human weakness but true ways to the Lord. God is there in them as the mysterious third person, always present but ever discreet, so that it is a really human love with which the friends love each other. They are not loving an abstraction but a very concrete person of flesh and blood. But this someone is seen and loved for what he is in himself, what we seize on when we call him by his name. Human and concrete as it may be, it is a love all transfigured in the divine

light. It finds its growth in God; and it is God, beneath a human face, who stands revealed.

Then the two friends discover a new depth in their love. They look at each other with an open gaze that reaches the very core of heart and spirit. But it is no longer each other they are looking at now but, intimately united, they look towards the Lord. Peacefully their love is directed to its source. For them all is pure light. Their love lived in perfect chastity reveals itself as an intimate union with God.

When two beings love each other like this in God in perfect chastity, he can make them reach such intimate union that it is a true image of his love. Having renounced conjugal love, they will not be excluded from revealing the mystery of divine life and divine love in their lives as they rediscover them in friendship. In the mutual discovery of their life they grasp, beyond the difference of sex and the distinction of persons, the unique current of life which springs from God.

So it is that by a marvellous grace, the primordial unity of the human couple is restored in chastity and virginity. I know that this is a mystery; only those who have experienced it can begin to understand. But this experience will be the more readily admitted if we realise how by this union, two beings whose whole love is given to God are, in fact, brought back to the first union of creation by God's Spirit. It is in him that these persons love each other and are united; in him they find each other; and their friendship, as it manifests their deep love, reveals this 'third one' who is God himself. That this love is a mystical experience is undeniable, but the 'mystic' is, ultimately, the only one who has reached the full stature of man. If they are so chastely united the one with the other, it is because they are attached to God in a total solitude that is a pure act of virginity. Each one is alone now before this God who gives them their being, leads them to his love and calls them by their name. In the complete freedom of their gift to one another, God unites them in a love which is the image of his own life in the Trinity.²

² Translated from the french by Sister Kathleen England O.S.U.