

## CHASTITY

### An Ancient Concept Applied to Today's Culture

A SERMON BY THE REV. PETER BUSS, JR.

*“It happened in the spring of the year, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David...remained at Jerusalem.” (2 Samuel 11:1)*

*“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28)*

#### **The ideal**

The work for the New Church on marriage called *Married Love*, and often known by its Latin name, *Conjugal Love*, makes the following statement: “There is a truly conjugal love [a most genuine love in marriage], which today is so rare that people do not know what it is like, and scarcely that it exists” (57). This love is described as “holy, pure and clean, more so than any other love,” and “into this love have been gathered all joys and all delights.”

#### **A decline**

While this love was “the greatest of loves among the ancients...it gradually disappeared” (*Ibid.*). The chapter describes what that love was like among the ancients, then chronicles its decline through the ages—from the golden, to silver, copper, iron, and finally to the age of iron mixed with clay. From that high ideal, we end up with some people expressing the following attitude with regard to marriage: “What concern do you have here with marriage? Marriages are marriages.... Illicit affairs are illicit affairs. He who is without guilt, let him throw the first stone” (*Conjugal Love* 79:7).

Friends, we live in an age where this attitude toward marriage is alive and well. The world today includes true marriage, no

doubt, but many forces act against it; many attitudes essentially scorn marriage, seeing it as a peripheral thing and, in light of the license that society allows today, even as imprisonment.

Into this sometimes dark and mixed up world, the Lord offers beams of light. One of those beams of light has to do with relationships between the sexes, specifically with regard to sexual intimacy. He holds out for us something that we all need to hear: that His teachings, His rules in this large arena of life, are the path to the true and lasting happiness in the marriage that He wants for every one of us. Challenging though it may be, it is imperative that a church, which seeks to serve people in the walk of life, and be true to the charge the Lord has given it, have the courage to address this topic.

### **Chastity**

Our subject today is chastity, an ancient concept applied to today's culture. Chastity is the term the Lord's Word uses to describe the proper sexual relationship between two married partners, devoid of lust and impurity and, more broadly, to describe the attitude with which the Lord calls us to view the opposite sex.

I want to acknowledge that for many people the word "chastity" has the connotation of "old-fashioned," speaking to abstinence and suppression of all things sexual, even to the point of thinking of sexual expression as something unclean. On the contrary, the Writings for the New Church use this word to describe a good kind of attitude and a proper kind of sexual expression that is healthy and encouraged. They use the word "non-chaste" to encapsulate everything else that stands in contrast to what is chaste.

We learn that, "Chastity and a lack of chastity are terms that apply to states of marriage and things that have to do with marriage" (*Conjugal Love* 139). I believe we could equally say, "Chastity and lack of chastity are terms that apply to sexual

intimacy and things that have to do with sexual intimacy.” We read further, “The essence of chastity is true love *in marriage*,” indicating that chaste expression of sexual intimacy is not possible outside of the bonds of marriage (*Conjugal Love* 139, emphasis added). We also learn that “Chastity is simply the removal of unchasteness from that which is chaste,” describing a journey from what is not chaste toward what is chaste for all of us, no matter what our marital status (*Conjugal Love* 138). Finally, I believe chastity is related to innocence. Chastity *is* innocence in the context of marriage. Innocence is a striving for purity, a desire to be led by the Lord, a wish to stand before Him with nothing to hide. Chastity is this same striving for purity, the same desire to be led by the Lord in the context of our attitudes and behavior with regard to the opposite sex, the same wish to stand before the Lord with nothing shameful to hide.

### **Does the Lord know the culture we live in?**

With these definitions in mind, I ask you to consider this question: Does the Lord know the culture in which we live? Think about the high ideal that is being addressed in this call to chastity and then consider the forces acting against that vision in our world. How many of us might be thinking, or resonating with the following complaints: “The Word was written well before the Internet came on the scene, well before the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, before the world-wide push toward acceptance and tolerance of all forms of sexuality, before it was much more common for people to enter marriage having experienced sexual intimacy than not”? Seen from this perspective, the Word can easily seem out of touch, teaching an ideal about relationships between the sexes which is so far removed from reality as to be unattainable.

In answer, consider the story of David and Bathsheba: A man sees a woman bathing, and is fired by desire for her. Because he can, he commits adultery with her. Not only that, but he seeks to

cover his tracks when she gets pregnant. Then come the consequences—far-reaching effects in David’s life from this series of sins. How many thousands of times has the David and Bathsheba story been repeated in the sad choices of people today?

Consider also the Lord’s saying about adultery in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28). How many of us men could say that we are impervious to lust, to impure thoughts and longings? How many women could say the same?

Consider next the story [read in the lesson for this sermon] of adolescent men entering the next life who were fueled by their hormonal longings. How many parents have lamented at how hard it is to raise respectful, clean-hearted teenagers, given the promiscuous culture we live in? Does it not help, context aside, to hear the Lord calling us to hold onto an eternal perspective? He reminds us that there is a life after death, that men are men and women are women, that people are married, and that clean and loving sexual intimacy is a healthy part of married relationships there. Can we not resonate with the message that this relegation of intimacy to the bonds of marriage is seen by many young people as dry, boring, and unappealing when compared with the tantalizing expression of unrestricted passion? Don’t these teachings give us some understanding that the Lord knows the longings of youth and has some wise advice for them and those of us charged with raising them?

Finally, consider again the book, *Conjugal Love*. Look at the chapter headings in the second part of this book relating to “The Pleasures of Insanity with regard to Licentious Love,” and consider the Lord of love reaching out to address these topics:

- Fornication (or unrestrained sexual activity before marriage)

- Adultery in its kinds and degrees
- The lust to deflower
- The lust for variety
- The lust to rape
- The lust to seduce states of innocence (dealing with the causes of child sexual abuse)

This book was written over two hundred years ago. Does it not speak to some of the dark parts of our culture today? Add to this the chapter on “Chastity and Its Absence” and put these ideas together with the Biblical stories we’ve looked at. Ask yourself, “Does the Lord know the world today? Does He address what all of us face as we walk through this life, at whatever age and marital state?”

### **Contrasting pictures**

One of the ways the Lord teaches is by contrast. I ask you to consider the story of David and Bathsheba again, seen from the perspective of a merciful God asking us to consider the reality of where adultery leads. The story begins with David’s staying home in Jerusalem, during the time “when kings went out to battle” (2 Samuel 11:1). Symbolically, David stands for the part of us that wants the Lord and His ways to reign in our lives. The battles against the enemies of the land are a picture of the work we do together with the Lord to rid ourselves of selfishness, justification, worldliness, the desire to dominate over others: all symbolized by the Moabites, Syrians, Amalekites, and so on. David’s staying home, then, represents the person who lets down his or her spiritual guard and opens the door for temptation. We don’t go out to fight. We’re not strong in our desire to let the Lord reign in our lives.

Next we hear, “Then it happened one evening that David arose from his bed.... And from his roof he saw a woman bathing” (2 Samuel 11:2). An “evening state” in the Word is a symbol for a

time when our desire to be good, and our clarity about the truth, is blunted and obscured (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2323). It is not difficult to see that a lustful passion could invade a person's life in times of spiritual weakness. It is interesting that David inquired who this woman was and discovered that she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, demonstrating that he knew she was married. What we have here, then, is someone who knowingly and intentionally committed a sin, and then compounded that original error with deception and destructiveness.

But the most telling part of this story is in the consequences to David's life which result from this series of sins. First, the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David to let him know for sure and certain that He knew what David had done. Nathan told David a story of a rich man who took a poor man's only lamb instead of one of his own to serve as a meal to a traveler who came to visit him. In response to David's anger at this injustice, Nathan said those famous words, "You are the man!" This indicates how the Lord brings to our realization, through conscience, that He is aware of our failings.

Nathan predicted that three things would happen: First, sadly, the child born to David and Bathsheba would die. While we can obviously acknowledge that the child had nothing to do with the sin of his parents, and may very well have succumbed to one of the many childhood maladies of the day, on a symbolic level what's being addressed here is a reality: that disobedience to the Lord's commandments doesn't lead to new life, rather it leads to loss and the sadness it creates. Secondly, Nathan predicts that "the sword shall never depart from [David's] house" (2 Samuel 12:10). He would be at war with his enemies for the rest of his life. Symbolically again, isn't it true that our opening of the hells, by giving in to temptation and our spiritual enemies, invites far-reaching struggles and temptations with those hells who now have a stronger foothold in our lives? Finally, Nathan predicted that "there would be adversity against [David] from

[his] own family” (2 Samuel 12:11). Indeed Amnon and Absalom, two of his sons, caused all kinds of problems for him, demonstrating a broad truth, that adulterous relationships often destroy families.

### **A positive vision**

Another line of teaching, borne out of many passages in *Conjugal Love*, points to the opposite vision the Lord holds before us. A man and a woman meet and form a friendship which turns into love. They develop a mutual respect, trust, and honesty, in their relationship. They both have a desire to be good, spiritually motivated people. They perceive a calling from the Lord to share their lives together, and so commit to marry. Then, in the context of that solid and growing marriage relationship, they embark on the journey of sexual intimacy. It sounds, to many, like a fairytale in today’s world, but for everyone, even those who have not followed that path themselves, the truth of the vision is sound and available. The sexual act is supposed to be surrounded by the relationship of marriage, and that marriage relationship should have, in growing measure, commitment, respect, friendship, innocence or striving for purity, spiritual growth, effort, love, trust, honesty and peace as its qualities. Think of the safety and appropriate vulnerability that can be expressed in this context. Think of the free enjoyment of physical delight together, with unashamed openness, and the knowledge that the other person is in this relationship for the long haul. This is the context in which true chastity can thrive. It is the context for what the Writings for the New Church call love truly conjugal, or true love in marriage, that can grow in strength and richness to eternity.

Contrast that vision with what happens when there is no commitment around the sexual act, because there is no marriage. What else goes? Trust, peace, innocence, following a spiritual path? And take it further: what about when the sexual act is the

primary end, and angling, even deception rather than honesty, is the means to that end? Think about that act in the absence of love or friendship. Wouldn't we agree, as has been proven thousands of times over, that to the extent that the relationship around the act of sexual intimacy is compromised, someone is going to get hurt? Sexual intimacy outside of marriage simply doesn't lead to the happiness the Lord wants for us.

### **The Lord's mercy and love**

In all these ways, do we not see a merciful and loving God reaching out to us with an ardent plea, saying,

Come now, and let us reason together... Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 1:18-20)

The Lord explains to us in many ways in His Word that temporary happiness in the heat of passion is not worth the human suffering that our world doesn't want to acknowledge exists, but which is a reality. In contrast, lasting happiness, including sexual intimacy within the context of a strong and growing marriage relationship, is worth the effort and spiritual battle. To the extent that we can look *within* ourselves at the ways the hells capture our minds and our physical longings, and look *outside* of ourselves at the unchaste world we live in; to the extent also that we look *to* the Lord's Word with the acknowledgment that it does indeed speak to the culture in which we live; and to the extent that we look *upward* to the Lord our God for strength and enlightenment in this vital arena of life—to the same extent He can help us, even in today's world, to walk the path of chastity.

We close today with a passage that has come to be one of my favorites in all of the Writings for the New Church:

If conjugal love [or a love for marriage] is received from its Author, who is the Lord, it is accompanied by holiness from Him, which continually purges and purifies the love. If, then, a person has a desire and striving for it in his or her will, that love daily becomes more clean and pure to eternity. (*Conjugal Love* 64)

Amen.

Readings from the Lord's Word: 2 Samuel 11:1-5; Matthew 5:27-30; *Conjugal Love* 44 (parts).



*The Rev. Peter Buss, Jr. has been serving the Immanuel Church in Glenview, Illinois for ten years: six years as assistant pastor, and as pastor since 2002. He and his wife, Teresa (Farrington), have four children.*

### **Spiritual Equilibrium**

[S]piritual equilibrium...produces a state of freedom in those who live in it. The Lord draws all people out of this equilibrium to Him[self], and the person who follows in freedom is led by Him out of evil into good, and thus into heaven.

It is the same with love, especially in the case of conjugal love and licentious love. Conjugal love is good, while licentious love is evil. Every person who hears the voice of the Lord and follows Him in freedom is introduced by the Lord into conjugal love with all its delights and joys.

*(Conjugal Love 444: 3)*