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“Chastity and Accountability: How Blessed are the Pure of Heart”

Does the name Ashley Madison mean anything to you?

Well, it is the name of a website that helps individuals to cheat on their spouses - literally it is a site meant to help people seeking to commit adultery. Well, the site was hacked and the list of “absolutely confidential” names involved was leaked, including influential government and corporate leaders. Not just a few subscribers were exposed, but rather 37 million (and the latest number I heard this week was up to 42 million!). Our permissive society wants us to believe that what we do in private has no consequences, well in this case I can assure you that the divorce lawyers are laughing all the way to the bank (cf. *Tampa Bay Times*, 21 August 2015, p. 1: “divorce lawyers are preparing for a potential bonanza from the site’s massive breach that released the information of its subscribers”). We are reminded that nothing we do online is a secret - the World Wide Web *is* a public forum! In an article entitled “A Wake up Call: No Secret is Safe Online” we are warned that “there’s no erasing the digital past” (cf. *TBT*, 20 August 2015).

Brothers, “how blessed are the pure of heart” (Mt. 5:8). So integral to our life as priests of the Latin Rite is the charism of celibate chastity (with a few obvious exceptions). I would like us to reflect for a few minutes tonight on the words of the Angelic Doctor on chastity and purity. He writes in the *Summa*: “Chastity takes its name from the fact that reason ‘chastises’ concupiscence, which, like a child, needs curbing [...]” (*ST* II, II, q. 151, a. 1 “Of Chastity”). Thus in order to grow in this virtue, we must learn how to truly be chaste by saying “no” to the temptations of the flesh and “yes” to the deeper invitation of the Lord to divine intimacy. Lest Aquinas sound too lofty in his theological ideals, he brings it down to the basics - chastity and abstinence/temperance go together. In other words, how do we curb our appetites? Even more than fasting from food to learn temperance, St. Thomas notes: “Venereal pleasures [i.e. bodily and emotional satisfaction that accompanies any form of sexual activity] are more impetuous, and are more oppressive on the reason than the pleasures of the palate: and therefore they are in greater need of chastisement and restraint, since if one consent to them this increases the force of concupiscence and weakens the strength of the mind” (*ibid.* a. 3 ad 2).

Maybe you have never felt the compelling pull of a sexual temptation? Or maybe you can’t relate to St. Paul when he says “why do I do the things I do not want to do?” (Rom. 7:19). Well for the rest of us in humanity, we get it, and know the importance of learning to say “no” and even more importantly to saying “yes” to the higher good! That doesn’t mean that any of us do it perfectly, but the virtue is given to strengthen us if we exercise our hearts and minds in purity and thus grow in chastity.

Aquinas encourages us to grow in the virtue of purity (*pudicitia*), which takes its name from *pudor*, meaning “shame,” because the improper use of our sexuality leads to shame (cf. *ibid.* a. 4). Purity regards the affections and attractions of the heart being internally given to someone to whom they do not belong. Jesus reminds us very simply that “everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt. 5:28). Chastity and purity are needed now more than ever in our world, and the world is longing for us to model for them what this looks like.

And where does this need to be modeled in a particular way? What is the biggest window for the lack of chastity and purity in our society? Just ask the 37 million subscribers to Ashley Madison. Internet addictions, and in particular pornography, are the pandemic of our generation. If you think I exaggerate or that I am fixated on this, allow me to share a few statistics:

- First of all your generation has grown up on the internet for better and for worse, and through no fault of your own many are undisciplined regarding its use. “About 64-68% of young adult men and about 18% of women use porn at least once every week. Another 17% of men and another 30% of women use porn 1-2 times per month. Two-thirds of college-age men and half of college-age women say viewing porn is an acceptable way to express one’s sexuality” (<https://www.desertsolace.com/latest-pornography-stats/>).
- How about money? “The porn industry generates \$13 billion each year in the US alone (\$57 billion worldwide).” \$3 billion of this revenue is from the internet (up from \$1 billion in 2001). That is a lot of money especially since “9 out of 10 Internet porn users only access free material, whether it be samples of pay material, illegally copied versions of pay material, or amateur material” (Nathaniel M. Lambert, Sesen Negash, Tyler F. Stillman, Spencer B. Olmstead, Frank D. Fincham, “A Love That Doesn’t Last: Pornography Consumption and Weakened Commitment to One’s Romantic Partner.” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 31, No. 4 [2012]: 410-438).
- What about mobile devices? “1 in 5 mobile searches are for pornography... 24% of smart phone owners admit to having pornographic material on their mobile handset” (Maryam Kamvar and Shumeet Baluja, “A large scale study of wireless search behavior: Google mobile search.” CHI 06: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems [2006]: 701-709. http://www.kevinli.net/courses/mobilehci_w2012/papers/googlemobilesearch.pdf).

Studies also reveal that regular churchgoers, seminarians, and clergy are not immune from this societal issue (cf. studies by [Focus on the Family](#)). Thus, both for our own protection and that of our future ministry, online chastity and purity is an area that we are called to be both vigilant and accountable. Science is proving that pornography is highly addictive (married or celibate). Have no doubts of this reality, and know that anyone can get caught in this web. Wait until you become a confessor!

To this end, we are embarking on a counter cultural endeavor of saying “no” to the licentiousness of the World Wide Web and saying “yes” to internet accountability for both our own protection and for the good of our future ministry. I have to confess that when I spoke of Covenant Eyes last semester, in my naiveté I was surprised by the response of a few men in the house, since I see this as a win-win scenario; it is good for each of us individually and it is good for the Church and the people of God. But this is not just my opinion, but rather the bishops of Florida and Georgia are completely in support of this initiative as a way to form your hearts, who are their future presbyterates. I can honestly say that this counter cultural initiative is more about

love and our desire for your healing that any intention to “catch you” doing something you are not supposed to be doing on line. We pray that is a way of forming good habits, being accountable, and preparing for future ministry. Remember that when we are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired (HALT), or frustrated temptations increase. The seminary is a place rife with times of being tired or frustrated - and so is the parish. When a person falls into temptation, the shame (remember Aquinas), self-doubt, and accusations abound. We need to identify the lies in our life and overcome them by God’s grace. We are all in this together to build up the Kingdom!

All that being said, I *now* understand and appreciate that this kind of accountability makes some people nervous and I would like to address once again questions that have been raised by seminarians:

- Why start now? We have actually been talking for a couple of years about better solutions to our current system. While Sonic Wall monitored all of our computers to keep us safe from harmful viruses and offensive content, it also blocked various and sometimes innocuous websites. Its reporting system was woefully inadequate, antiquated, and cumbersome.
- Will this new system be even more cumbersome than Sonic Wall? Actually, we can now lower the fire wall a great deal so that we will not be blocked from innocent searches, like Theology of the Body! Of course essential virus controls will remain.
- Isn’t this an invasion of privacy? This is a valid question, and I appreciate the concern, but actually everything we do on the web is in the public forum, thus there is no privacy. Asking to read your spiritual journal, now that would be an invasion of privacy and intrusion into the internal forum. As we know from the Ashley Madison clientele, there is no privacy online, thus there is no invasion. Realistically, you *are* already being monitored by six different agencies and various other harmful organizations that could one day use your digital footprint against you – better to assist each other in-house than have someone else who doesn’t love you do it. Be not afraid, seriously!
- I understand that our computers on the seminary network need to be connected to Covenant Eyes, but why our personal devices? First of all the answer mentioned above – there is no private internet and you are a public person who represents Jesus and the Church at all times. When you are on the seminary network you are on an IP address representing not yourself, but the Church. In a recent conversation with a law enforcement professional, he mentioned that literally everything we do online is stored and could be used against us at a future point in time – that scares me. Secondly, if someone is struggling out there, now is the time to find healing, support, freedom and peace. If this is not a struggle, then we all stand in solidarity together and learn how to use tools like covenant Eyes for the future.
- When will we be signing up? As I mentioned five months ago, we will do this in phases to make sure that everything is working properly thus giving everyone a chance to prepare their hearts and minds for this shift. Covenant Eyes has graciously agreed to send a team of five from Atlanta to help install the program on our computers next week, September 8-10. I would ask everyone to make themselves available and set an appointment. There will be lots of opportunity to answer questions and figure out the mechanics throughout the course of the semester. As for loading Covenant Eyes on personal devices, we will wait and do this in late October to ensure that everything is working well and then loading the app on your device is the easy part since you will already have an account. You are welcome to start at anytime, but we will do it as a house in October.
- What if it makes my computer crash? First of all, Covenant Eyes has been around a long time and they really want to help seminaries and thus they really want this to work well for our house. If something were to happen, we will try to help you fix your computer; I think you

know by now that neither the seminary nor your dioceses are going to hang you out to dry. Yes, you had to sign a waiver, but this is actually a similar waiver you have been signing annually - nothing new regarding liability. As an institution we have to have such liability policies as you will one day as a pastor.

- Who will be my accountability partner? First of all, accountability to another person or group is key to growth in virtue and a leading deterrent if one is struggling. Sometimes, if the love of God is not enough to keep us on the right path, the fear of another person knowing what we are doing online is enough to get us through a moment of temptation. For years, my accountability partners have been a married couple to whom I am obviously very close. I have helped the husband with struggles in internet pornography (as you will too) and I know how very painful this situation was for the wife - I do not want to let them down - they very concretely represent my bride, the Church, to whom I am bound. As for us in house, you will have the option of having two partners, the first everyone will have representing the external forum and ensure there is no traffic on graphic websites, namely Fr. Remek as Vice Rector. The second, is your choice, and I want to encourage you to invite a friend, either on or off campus, to also walk with you and with whom you can dialogue regarding any challenges that arise and who can look more in depth at your weekly report - Is there a reason you are spending 8 hours a day online? You seem to be online after midnight a lot, is everything alright? Etc. And hopefully, this person can journey with you for years to come even after seminary.
- Will the Formation Team be looking at everything I do? To be honest, that is not our intent at all. In fact, I would have to assign Fr. Remek and Kip Clarke to 24 hour shifts to go through the visited websites by SVDP residents. By that, I mean if you are looking at *Whispers in the Loggia*, or *Father Z*, or *America Online* – that is your call. If you love studying the civil war, I am not going to know this from your web travels. But if you go somewhere that has content unbecoming of a Christian gentleman, that is offensive and inappropriate, then your report will be flagged and you will be approached by Fr. Remek to find out what is happening in your life. In general, the weekly email report should say in the subject line: “Report looks good for DT.” And I promise you that the vice rector will promptly dispatch it to the waste bin, as I have mentioned before, he has other work to do here!
- What if I get caught? – it already happens! I have received comments from formators and students about how gently and non-judgmentally these incidents have been handled. A man brings it to his spiritual director, possibly counseling, healthy online resources like [Reclaim Sexual Health](#), and even Friends of St. Joseph to help to get this difficulty under control. We do not want to tear you down, but build you up! If there is a serious recurring issue, then it will be addressed by me and the formation team to discern if this is an issue that needs to be addressed by the seminarian outside of seminary formation.
- Finally, will Covenant Eyes solve my problem? The answer is no! However, as Msgr. John Cippel wrote to me today in light of this conference: “THE CURE FOR ADDICTION IS CHRIST’S CHASTITY--the virtue of Chastity as a gift of the Holy Spirit, but the addictive nature of porn needs STRATEGIES which help one to cultivate the virtue. Covenant Eyes is NOT the answer, is not the source of strength to grow in virtue, it is a **strategy** to HELP the virtue to grow.” He continued: “I use the example of diabetes. Insulin is the cure, but strategies to stay away from sugar and desserts are needed for insulin to supply the cure. Christ is the cure (Steps 1 to 3 of the 12 Steps) but Covenant Eyes is one among many strategies offered to us now on line and in support groups like St Joseph’s. But the great enemy of any addictive behavior is DENIAL and here is the rub, most who view porn do not

want to admit that they are on the way to becoming addicted IF they are not already addicted.”

As you hopefully know by now, I try never to ask of you what I myself am not willing to do. As I have already expressed, I have been using Covenant Eyes for years and really appreciate its value, protection, and accountability. Many times, I have recommended this program in the confessional to people suffering and imprisoned in internet related addictions. Many parish priests sponsor active and fruitful men’s groups and offer to be accountability partners for men in the group. Our involvement, vulnerability, and accountability establish credibility with men in the parish in so far as we are willing to walk the walk with them.

Other seminaries are implementing this program, for example, Kenrick-Glennon (talk to Fr. Horn if you would like to know how it has been working there), Mt. St. Mary’s, and St. Charles Borromeo to name a few. Please trust that your bishops and formators always and only desire the good of your hearts, minds, and souls. The pruning we undergo during our time in formation can hurt as we are trimmed back (cf. John 15), but it is so we can become ever more the men we are called to be and bear abundant and lasting fruit!

The discipline of programs like Covenant Eyes and the discipleship training it teaches is invaluable and I believe it will bear fruit for decades to come. It can be viewed as an inoculation to treat the epidemic that so many in our society are currently suffering from. If we know there is a plague, then we want to make sure that our students have been immunized with the most up to date medicine available. This is not about creating a “gotcha” atmosphere or a creating a hermeneutic of suspicion here at SVDP. The seminaries that are already using Covenant Eyes mention that for men who have been struggling with their use of the internet, they are experiencing new freedom and renewed focus on their vocations.

I wish to conclude with a reflection from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on Chastity:

Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. [...]

The chaste person maintains the integrity of the powers of life and love placed in him. This integrity ensures the unity of the person; it is opposed to any behavior that would impair it. It tolerates neither a double life nor duplicity in speech.

Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy [...].

Whoever wants to remain faithful to his baptismal promises and resist temptations will want to adopt the means for doing so: self-knowledge, practice of an asceticism adapted to the situations that confront him, obedience to God’s commandments, exercise of the moral virtues, and fidelity to prayer. (CCC 2337-2340).

The desire of the faculty and your bishops is that habits are formed that will help you to maintain the discipline of accountability after your ordination for happy, healthy, and holy chaste celibacy. Brothers, “how blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). Isn’t that the deepest desire of each of our hearts! May we form habits and virtues that will keep us on the path of good discernment and formation without the poison of the secular world choking off the good fruit that the Lord Jesus so desires to see in each and every one of us!