



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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### “Chastity for A Reason”

Over the course of the past three years I have spoken on the topic of chaste celibacy in a number of ways: priest as espoused to the Church, as bridegroom, as spiritual father, on how we relate to women in the Church, on spiritual friendship, and on healthy boundaries. Tonight I want to be a little more folksy and share with you a little bit of my own journey and discernment when I was in the seminary. The title of tonight's talk is “chastity for a reason” meaning that we must make this choice real and personal – it must be reasonable and accepted for a reason if we are to be at peace with such an important surrender of our right to marry and have our own family. We must make this choice for Love and out of love; generously giving to God who has been so generous to us!

I can remember a very clear moment in my discernment of celibacy as a seminarian at St. John Vianney in Miami. I was sitting in the “brown shag chapel” on the second floor following spiritual direction during my senior year. My spiritual director told me that as I was preparing to move on to theology and that I better be getting very serious about the permanency and commitment of a priestly vocation. As we all strive to do, I was certainly trying to live a good life and be a good seminarian, but also possibly just going through the motions and approaching the next phase of formation and discernment out of reflex. There were two very important things that needed to happen in my prayer and in my heart. The first was to take ownership of my vocation. I kept telling people back home that I really felt that God was calling me to be a priest and that things were going quite well; but something was ringing hollow within. I had not yet made it my own, maybe because I felt it was presumptuous or maybe because I was afraid to do so. That night I said to God in the Chapel: “If you want me to be a priest, then *I want* to be priest; I make an act of will and unite my heart to yours.” This was a very liberating moment in which I felt a weight lifting in my heart. The second prayer was similarly liberating. I think it is very important for us to make celibacy something concrete and not just an abstraction. I was holding on in my heart to a dear friend of mine, a girl who we will call “Anne” (similar to Fr. Gaitely's *Blanche*), that I figured if it didn't work out in the seminary I would immediately pick up the phone and call her. We certainly were attracted to each other on some level, we had a great friendship since high school, and in the truest Christian sense of the word, we loved each other. That night in the chapel I surrendered Anne to the Lord. “If you are calling me to be a priest, and I am uniting my will to yours, then I also must surrender any relationships or fantasies which take me away from freely embracing my vocation. I give you Anne and I freely surrender my thoughts, feelings, and desires for her.” This painful moment made chaste celibacy something very real. I was giving up person and not just an idea. This concrete unification of our hearts and wills with Christ must happen for each of us. For at some point in our life and ministry there will be other Annes or Blanches who will come our way and we quite possibly

will “fall in love.” If we have not truly discerned and owned our chaste and celibate calling then these moments become even more difficult times of genuine temptation and vocational crisis. We are called to discern wisely and thoroughly in the seminary and thus commit ourselves for life in the Kingdom – a life of the “already and not yet.” Already living like we are in the Kingdom of Heaven, but certainly not yet without struggle or angelic perfection. This reality and balance is what can scare us. Can I do it for life? (cf. [\*Pastores Dabo Vobis\*](#), 28-29).

Fear freezes our growth and discernment for celibacy. We can become stifled with worry about being faithful to our chaste celibate commitment. While there should be a healthy concern about being faithful, there can also be an unhealthy sense of worry that can creep in. Addressing my own fears, my spiritual director at one point asked me if I had been able to be faithful thus far? I answered affirmatively. I was then asked why I thought that God’s grace wouldn’t be present in the future? In other words, if we have been faithful as seminarians, there is no need to have an unhealthy fear about unknown and unrealized future failures. While on the other hand, if you find yourself falling into relationships while in the seminary and crossing boundaries that a seminarian and certainly a priest should not cross, then that is something you should be taking to spiritual direction for your consideration and discernment. Now I am not speaking of private temptations, impure thoughts, or occasional personal struggles that will come our way as men. These we bring to confession and humbly recognize our own weaknesses and start over. However fidelity in the present is a sign of God’s grace confirming your call; infidelity in the present is a sign that this quite likely is not your vocation.

Regarding our awareness of temptations against chastity, we must be smart, accountable, and humble. As we so often pray, we must not place ourselves “in the near occasion of sin.” My seminary spiritual director would say, “Never presume on your own chastity.” When he first started saying this I wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, but with time and trial and error it all began to make sense. In other words never think that you are strong enough to fight the battle alone. That is why we must be smart, accountable, and humble. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself the question, “What would my mother say if she saw me at this moment?” Better yet, “What would the Blessed Mother say who does see me at this moment?” Keep ever in mind that we are never alone and that we are accountable to what we do in private, and in fact, everything we do *is* done in public. Be accountable to your spiritual director and your close seminarian friends - as I myself strive to do with my own *Jesus Caritas* brothers and spiritual direction on a monthly basis. Be humble enough to be honest with your peers and your confessor, and in this way we keep growing and being strengthened to be ever more faithful to how the Lord has called us to live. We can be confident that based on Matthew chapter 19 and First Corinthians chapter 7, the life we live is a genuine calling of the Lord which is not unnatural, but supernatural when lived by God’s grace. (cf. [\*Pastores Dabo Vobis\*](#), 43-44).

The biggest area that priests and seminarians find themselves getting in trouble for is boundary violations. We must have good boundaries as we interact with men and women both in our public ministry and in our private lives. We must also be aware of perceptions and what we project to others or that they project on to us (especially those with “daddy issues”). We must be conscious of not crossing boundaries or placing ourselves or others in precarious situations. We need to be aware of our heavy obligation towards others and an awareness of not leading them into sin. Something as simple as seemingly innocent flirtation can send the wrong message and lead another person into an unintended crisis. I have found in ministry that the collar itself sends a message to others that you are already taken. On the flip side, there will be people attracted to

you precisely because of the collar. Be aware of yourself and realize just how attractive you are (physically or not!) because you are a compassionate loving man. This consciousness not only places us above reproach, but it also protects us at times from ourselves and certainly protects us against the claims of others. St. Paul himself reminds us in 1 Timothy 5:2 that we are to treat older women as though they are our mothers and younger women as though they are our sisters. This rule of thumb certainly can keep us on the straight and narrow. All that being said, there will still be moments of genuine temptation and possibly even an experience of a false allegation. When they happen, stand firm as men of faith and integrity in the truth of our actions. I will never forget in the early 90's when Cardinal Joseph Bernadin was falsely accused of molesting a former seminarian. It was a powerful moment when he was able to say unconditionally at the press conference: "I have never abused anyone, at any time, in any way!" May we always be able to say the same thing! Jesus, if he has indeed called us, and He confirms that call during our time in the seminary, will give us the grace to live faithfully the calling that he has placed in our hearts. We need not live in fear, but we must always be smart, accountable, and humble. Be not afraid! As I mentioned to you last month, once we are ordained we are in a permanent commitment and the discernment of our state in life is over - we are committed for life, and this too is liberating! (cf. [\*Pastores Dabo Vobis\*](#), 70)

Chastity for a reason! We are called to a freedom *for* greater loving, not a freedom *from* a life of intimacy. I have shared this story before, but as a first theologian studying in a language program, my classmate and I were surrounded by a group of attractive young European women who could not comprehend the decisions we were making to become celibate priests. The wise old pastor with whom we shared this quandary told us to simply say: "*Ho fatto una scelta di amore*" – "I have made a decision/a choice to love." The simple line of this octogenarian has brought me great peace through the years. Indeed, we are freely making a choice – a choice to love. Rather than seeing our calling as simply a privation, as I have matured, I grow more and more to see it as a gift *of* love *to* love *from* Love Himself.

I want to invite each of you to do two things sometime in the coming days in front of the Blessed Sacrament:

1. Ask Jesus to confirm your call and then make an act of the will uniting your heart to His. Even if you have already done so, once again take personal ownership of your vocation.
2. In prayer, picture the ideal person you would hypothetically marry and have children with and take celibacy out of the abstract. Surrender to Jesus any unhealthy attachment to that person or idea that you might be holding on to or imagining.

I can almost guarantee you will feel less conflicted and experience deeper liberation and a strengthening of your calling.

I would like to now to shift gears a bit and speak of a current issue that is something that we must be able to compassionately and truthfully address as ministers of the Gospel in the 21st century. I am placing this topic in the context of tonight's talk because the world needs us to be genuine and credible witnesses of the virtue of chastity. On January 6<sup>th</sup> a Florida Circuit Court Judge reversed the decision of the citizens of the State of Florida legalizing same-sex marriage. Our bishops have asked me to help you be ever more conscious of this new reality and so I turn to their own words. Unlike those in the blogosphere who have tried to pit our bishops against one another, if you read their texts, the message is essentially the same but the tone changes according to their individual personalities. Mindful that many people in our society no longer

understand the Natural Law, Bishop Noonan of Orlando begins his approach from a biblical perspective:

In Genesis, we read God makes female and male out of love, for love. The love between a husband and wife is placed in their hearts by God to fulfill his design for each person. We respect all people with compassion and sensitivity. For the Catholic Church, marriage is more than a social contract made by two people. It is more than the benefits afforded married couples by society. The sanctity of marriage unites the entire being of spouses in love and is a sign of God's love for humanity. It is the joining of a man and a woman to be co-creators with God to bring children into the world. The love of the spouses requires, of its very nature, the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of people, which embraces their entire life: "so they are no longer two, but one flesh." ("[The Front Burner: Court decisions a call to defend marriage sacrament](#)", *Orlando Sentinel*, 5 July 2013, reprinted January 2015).

Under the leadership of Archbishop Wenski, the Florida Catholic Conference issued the following statement:

The conjugal nature of a marriage between a man and a woman has provided for millennia the basis for norms of marital exclusivity and permanence that made possible stable families necessary for human flourishing. In redefining marriage to include same sex couples, the judge has in effect overturned a state constitutional amendment approved by nearly 62% of the electorate in a 2008 ballot initiative.

How society understands marriage has great public significance. Because of this, redefining civil "marriage" to include two persons of the same sex will have far-reaching consequences in society. Such a change advances the notion that marriage is only about the affective gratification of consenting adults. Such a redefinition of marriage does nothing to safeguard a child's right to a mother and father and to be raised in a stable family where his or her development and well-being is served to the greatest extent possible ([Statement in Response to the Redefinition of Marriage in Florida](#), *Florida Catholic Conference*, 5 January 2015).

My own bishop lamented on "how courts can overrule a decision of the citizenry passed as a state constitutional amendment" ("[Challenging the Tradition Teaching on Marriage](#)", *Bishop Lynch's Blog*, 7 January 2015). While this question is likewise beyond my own comprehension, it is nonetheless our new reality. You will now be asked by persons "legally married" to "bless their rings" or to "bless their marriage." You will have to wrestle with the reality of children in your school having two mommies or two daddies, as well as the questions of godparents and participation in parish ministries, and the list will continue to grow. The deacons just took the *Cura Animarum* and were presented with these very situations that up until a very short time ago in our society could not have been imagined. But now, imaginable they are ... we must be prepared to give loving, compassionate, and truthful responses to the people entrusted to our care. Our mission is to call all people of our parishes, including those on the peripheries, to greater union with Christ and a call to chaste Christian living. Our lives are to be exemplary and credible in our manner of chaste celibacy as a witness and encouragement to all of the freedom in living in the manner Christ calls us.

The issue of same sex marriages is a neuralgic one in our society and many of the faithful do not understand or believe the Church's position. We must be prepared to do the following:

1. Live our own lives with great integrity so that we can speak the truth with the conviction of our own lives.
2. Courageously answer questions as they arise in our parishes. Do not be afraid to stand in the truth of the issues with conviction and know that Christ is with you in these moments.
3. Teach the truth of human sexuality and the complementarity of the sexes. Teach the biblical and natural law truths regarding marriage and family as the core of human society. We must spend our lives working for the renewal of marriage and family!
4. Compassionately and lovingly care for those men and women in our parish with same sex attraction and draw them closer to Christ through the principle of graduality. With respect and sensitivity steadily call same sex couples to chastity and freedom – convinced in our own hearts that it is reasonable and right.
5. Pray to the Holy Spirit to guide the Church and the upcoming October Synod on the Family, that we might reflect and learn how to more effectively minister to all peoples, especially those who feel themselves ostracized from the Church.

This issue is not going to get any easier to address in the coming years, but address it we must. And we do it *with love for* Love Himself who has called us to do so. Chastity for a reason – both in our own lives and in the lives everyone around us. Once again, be not afraid!