

The Sixth Commandment

PRACTICE MARITAL FIDELITY

God created human beings as male and female. In so doing, he gave equal dignity to both man and woman. In his plan, men and women should respect and accept their sexual identity. God created both the body and sex as good. Hence, we do not approach sexuality with fear or with hostility to the flesh. It is a gift of God by which men and women participate in his saving plan and respond to his call to grow in holiness.

The Catechism states that sexuality involves the whole person. “Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others” (CCC, no. 2332).

The Sixth Commandment summons spouses to practice permanent and exclusive fidelity to one another. Emotional and sexual fidelity are essential to the commitment made in the marriage covenant. God established marriage as a reflection of his fidelity to us. The vows made by the spouses at their wedding to be faithful to one another forever should witness the very covenant God has made with us.

CHASTITY

All people—married, single, religious, and ordained—need to acquire the virtue of chastity. “Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being” (CCC, no. 2337). Chastity unites our sexuality with our entire human nature. It approaches sexuality as related to our spiritual natures so that sex is seen as more than a physical act. Sexuality affects the whole person because of the unity of body and soul. Jesus is the model of chastity. “Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom” (CCC, no. 2339). The acquisition of chastity depends on self-discipline and leads to an internal freedom, which enables human beings to temper sexual desires according to God’s plan for the appropriate expression of love in the marital relationship of a man and a woman.

The Catechism describes the acquisition of chastity in the following way:

Self-mastery is a long and exacting work. One can never consider it acquired once and for all. It presupposes renewed effort at all stages of life. The effort required can be more intense in certain periods, such as when the personality is being formed during childhood and adolescence. (CCC, no. 2342; cf. Ti 2:1-6)

Chastity has laws of growth which progress through stages marked by imperfection and too often by sin. (CCC, no. 2343)

Chastity presupposes respect for the rights of the person, in particular the right to receive information and an education that respect the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life. (CCC, no. 2344)

Chastity is a moral virtue. It is also a gift from God, a grace, a fruit of spiritual effort. The Holy Spirit enables one whom the water of Baptism has regenerated to imitate the purity of Christ. (CCC, no. 2345; cf. Gal 5:22, 1 Jn 3:3)

The virtue of chastity blossoms in friendship. . . . Chastity is expressed notably in friendship with one's neighbor. Whether it develops between persons of the same or opposite sex, friendship represents a great good for all. It leads to spiritual communion. (CCC, no. 2347)

There are a number of acts that are sins against chastity:

- Lust is a “disordered desire for or an inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure,” especially when sought for itself (CCC, no. 2351).
- Masturbation is sinful because it misuses the gift of sexuality in an inherently selfish act, devoid of love. It is a problem for which a counselor, spiritual director, or a confessor can be of considerable help. A person often needs assistance to understand the causes of this behavior, which are often habitual or in response to emotional stress or unexamined underlying attitudes.
- Fornication (sexual intercourse between unmarried persons) is sinful because it violates the dignity of persons and the nuptial meaning and purpose of sexuality, which is ordered only to the unitive and procreative goals of married people.
- Incest (sexual relationships between close relatives) is always wrong, harming both the individuals involved as well as the family itself.
- Sexual abuse of any kind harms the victim on many more levels than only the physical. Forcing sexual intimacy of any type on a child or minor is an even graver evil (cf. CCC, no. 2356), which often scars the victim for life (cf. CCC, no. 2389).
- Pornography (sexually explicit material) has become even more available through the Internet. This presents real difficulties for both individuals and society, as viewing pornography is not only sinful in itself but can also become an addiction and lead to dangerous sexual behaviors. It has also led to a greater exploitation of children as sexual objects.
- Prostitution reduces the person “to an instrument of sexual pleasure,” an object to be used. It increases the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. To protect innocent members of society, prostitution can legitimately be forbidden by civil authority. It is more prevalent where a culture exploits the physical and social vulnerability of women (CCC, no. 2355).

- Rape is an act of violence in which a person forces a sexual act on an unwilling partner. “Rape deeply wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. . . . It is always an intrinsically evil act” (CCC, no. 2356).

- “Homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” and immoral. “They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity” (CCC, no. 2357). Having homosexual inclinations is not immoral. It is homosexual acts that are immoral.

“The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord’s Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition” (CCC, no. 2358).

THE LOVE OF HUSBAND AND WIFE

The spouses’ union achieves the twofold end of marriage: the good of the spouses themselves and the transmission of life. —CCC, no. 2363

The bond between husband and wife is both conjugal and procreative. Conjugal mutual love and fidelity is the unitive aspect of marriage. The procreative aspect of marriage concerns the conception, birth, and education of children. The bond between the unitive and procreative may not be broken.

Unitive Faithful Love

The unitive aspect of marriage involves the full personhood of the spouses, a love that encompasses the minds, hearts, emotions, bodies, souls, and aspirations of husband and wife. They are called to grow continually in unitive love and fidelity so that they are no longer two but one flesh. Their mutual self-giving is strengthened and blessed by Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of Matrimony. God seals the consent that the bride and groom give to each other in this Sacrament.

The acts in marriage by which the intimate and chaste union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude. (CCC, no. 2362, citing GS, no. 49)

Acceptance of a spouse’s faults and failures as well as of one’s own is a recognition that the call to holiness in marriage is a lifelong process of conversion and growth.

Procreative Love

God calls the married couple to be open to children, remembering always that having a child is not a right, but rather a gift from God (cf. CCC, no. 2378). In this way, they share the creative power and fatherhood of God. In giving birth to children and educating and forming them, they cooperate with the love of God as Creator. Marital love by its nature is fruitful. The marriage act, while deepening spousal love, is meant to overflow into new life. Families are images of the ever-creative power and life of the Holy Trinity and the fruitfulness of the relationship between Christ and his Church.

Respecting the Link of Fertility and Love

“A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, but springs from the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment. So the Church, which is ‘on the side of life’ teaches that ‘it is necessary that each and every marriage act remain ordered per se to the procreation of human life’” (CCC, no. 2366, citing FC, no. 30, and HV, no. 11, respectively).

This passage underlines the Church’s teaching that God established an inseparable bond between the unitive and procreative aspects of marriage. Each and every sexual act in a marriage needs to be open to the possibility of conceiving a child. Thus, artificial contraception is contrary to God’s will for marriage because it separates the act of conception from sexual union. Efforts to achieve pregnancy outside of the act of sexual intercourse (e.g., in vitro fertilization) are morally wrong for the same reason—they separate conception from sexual intercourse.

Contemporary methods of natural family planning are making it possible for couples, in cases of legitimate need, to space the births of their children while remaining faithful to God’s plan for marriage. These methods allow a couple to have a more precise knowledge of the time of ovulation to enable them to either avoid or achieve a pregnancy. “The regulation of births represents one of the aspects of responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Legitimate intentions on the part of the spouses do not justify recourse to morally unacceptable means (for example, direct sterilization or contraception)” (CCC, no. 2399).

In the course of their marriage, couples may, for serious reasons, decide to avoid a new birth for the time being or even for an indeterminate period, but they must not use immoral means to prevent conception. Couples should also be mindful of the fact that their love is expressed in more ways than just the conjugal act. Abstaining from intercourse at certain times can be an act of sacrifice which gives rise to a deeper relationship.

In relation to physical, economic, psychological and social conditions, responsible parenthood is exercised either by the thoughtfully made and generous decision to raise a large family, or by the decision, made for grave motives and with respect for the moral law, to avoid a new birth for the time being or even for an indeterminate period. (HV, no. 10)

THREATS TO MARRIAGE

The Catechism lists the following behaviors as acts that undermine the purpose and dignity of marriage.

Adultery is gravely sinful because it violates God's call to a loving covenant of fidelity between a married man and woman. The act of adultery is an injustice to the wounded spouse. It weakens the institution of marriage and the stability of the family.

Divorce is contrary to the natural law for it breaks the promise "to which the spouses freely consented to live with each other till death" (CCC, no. 2384). Jesus clearly taught that God's original plan for marriage excluded divorce (cf. Mt 5:31-32, 9:3-9; Mk 10:9; Lk 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10-11). Marriage is an indissoluble union. Jesus removed the accommodations for divorce that had been tolerated under the Old Law.

The couple may be allowed a separation in certain cases, such as when adultery is occurring or some type of abuse is present. A separation can be, at times, a prudent action to take. "If civil divorce remains the only possible way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of the children, or the protection of inheritance, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense" (CCC, no. 2383). In such cases, a Catholic can still receive the Sacraments.

Cohabitation (an unmarried couple living together) involves the serious sin of fornication. It does not conform to God's plan for marriage and is always wrong and objectively sinful. Cohabitation does not guarantee successful married life, as has been revealed in the painful experience of many, and is detrimental to future commitment.

Polygamy (having more than one spouse at a time) violates the understanding of the equal dignity that a man and woman bring to marriage and contradicts the unitive purpose of marriage.

Attempts to justify same-sex unions or relationships or to give them matrimonial status also contradict God's plan—as revealed from the beginning both in nature and in Revelation—for marriage to be a lifelong union of a man and a woman.