

# Chastity vs. sexual license: which is true freedom?

## *Concept of chastity central to the Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*

Fourth in a series  
By CHRISTOPHER RUFF

Young people love adventure. And in a world that tempts them to settle for easy and base pleasures, they still admire and long for heroism. Witness the phenomenal success of the epic film version of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy.

Precisely this longing for adventure and heroism provides the key, I believe, to forming our youth in the virtue of chastity, which is the theme of this installment in the ongoing series on *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (hereafter *Truth and Meaning*), issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family in 1995.

What is chastity? According to *Truth and Meaning*, it is "the spiritual power which frees love from selfishness and aggression" (16).

So chastity is allied with freedom. Who doesn't long to be free, and to fight for freedom when it is threatened? But this is paradoxical, because the enemies of chastity claim that chastity is an oppressive burden and that it is they, who indulge themselves as they wish, who are free.

But what does the evidence

show? An intensive cultural experiment in sexual indulgence has been going on now for some decades. Are its fruits not falling rotten from the tree? Has it not led to misery, broken marriages, sexual addictions, and a culture of death and disease?

In contrast, true chastity, far from being boring and oppressive, is all about romance and valor. It is for the "brave hearts" of the world, who expect great victories to require courage and strength. To speak for a moment in the epic style of "Lord of the Rings," chastity is scorned by laggards and weaklings who wallow in lust, but embraced by knights and fair ladies. And even if he may not articulate it just so, I am convinced that in his heart of hearts every young man has dreamt of being a gallant knight. Likewise every young woman, in her best moments, has harbored the wish to be a gracious and noble lady.

And so *Truth and Meaning* tells us that such a life of royal freedom is nourished by the virtue of chastity: "Chastity includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions



CNS/ New Line Cinema  
The battle for the ring of power comes to life in the film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings." Modern-day knights and ladies are fighting a similar kind of battle in their heroic struggle to remain pure of heart in a world that sees sexual license as freedom and the virtue of chastity as a form of bondage.

and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy" (18).

The idea here is that we can only give to another what we ourselves possess. If someone is wounded and dominated by his own impulses of lust or other selfish cravings, he is not his own master and is therefore unable to make a true gift of himself to another. Someone so dominated by selfish impulses will be a "taker," not a "giver," though he

may succeed in hiding this reality from time to time. But his true character will show through in the long run, and he will bring unhappiness both to himself and to others unless he be converted.

It is for this reason that particular formation in chastity, which involves purity of heart and self-discipline with regard to sexuality, must be preceded in young children by general formation in the ability to be patient and disciplined, to wait, to sacrifice, to share, to temper their desires, to say no to self for a greater good. In contemporary language this is sometimes referred to as developing "impulse control." But when it is aided by the grace of God, as it must be, it is much more than a mere human accomplishment. As the child matures and enters puberty, the virtue of chastity can then be developed with greater ease upon this broader foundation of self-mastery.

But a question remains. Does chastity tend to diminish the value and importance of human sexuality, to toss it aside in shame or relegate it to some inferior status?

On the contrary, chastity exalts the true beauty of human sexuality as created by God. Sexual desire – and the joyful union of husband and wife in one flesh to which it tends – are willed by God as part of his plan for marriage and children. The virtue of chastity, which is just as necessary for married couples as for the unmarried, safeguards against lust, so that sexual desire is in the service of love and life, and never opposed to these. In marriage it ensures that one's spouse is loved and cherished, and not merely used as an object of sexual gratification.

Of course, for children, teens and unmarried adults, chastity

demands that they distance themselves, with serene confidence in God's grace, from situations, thoughts and behaviors that are likely to lead to sexual arousal. This does not mean that they should try somehow to erase their natural interest in the opposite sex. Indeed, as a parent, it is truly charming and sweet to watch the budding, innocent interest of one's children in the opposite sex, that half-bashful "glow" that begins to emerge around the time of puberty. But, once again, parents must teach their children to practice and grow in mastery over their thoughts, their impulses, what they see and listen to, and the environments they place themselves in. They should help them discover what is noble and beautiful in the covenant of marriage and discuss the delicate matter of human sexuality from the perspective of its being a precious gift from God. Perhaps their children are called to share in that gift through marriage, or perhaps they are called to find God as their beloved in the priesthood or consecrated life. In any case, they will be called to chastity, to mastery over their sexual impulses, in whatever vocation they embrace.

In the words of *Truth and Meaning*: "The objective of the parents' educational task is to pass on to their children the conviction that chastity brings joy. Joy springs from an awareness of maturation and harmony in one's emotional life, a gift of God and a gift of love that makes self-giving possible in the framework of one's vocation" (73).

The living out of that vocation is the adventure of a lifetime, requiring all the love, strength and courage we can muster – and, of course, the good graces of the King.