

# Exercising the truth and meaning of human sexuality

*Seventh in a Series*  
By VICTORIA SAVVA

What does chastity have in common with trumpet lessons, marathons and the Atkins Diet? Virtue! Allow me to explain...

In our society, chastity is often seen as something oppressive, a restriction placed on people from the outside. Thankfully, our Catholic faith has always shown that chastity is a virtue – a good habit or disposition that is acquired over time and allows us to be free on the inside. It allows us to become true masters of ourselves.

The document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* has reemphasized that formation in chastity is not an educational appendage of 'sex education', but rather an exercise in doing good and avoiding evil, i.e., learning to say 'yes' to God and 'no' to selfishness in any circumstance. In other words, chastity involves saying 'yes' to the dignity of each person and saying 'no' to reducing a person to an object of sexual pleasure. The authors stress throughout that chastity is part of the same root system for the moral life of all Christians: the life of virtue.

So, what is the life of virtue? According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC): "A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but also to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and

chooses it in concrete actions" (CCC, no. 1803).

Given that chastity belongs in context with all the other virtues, it may be helpful to keep in mind several basic principles that stand out in this definition:

1) Personhood: From the moment of our conception, our bodily existence is expressed as either male or female: "a unified totality of body and spirit; a soul which expresses itself in a body and a body informed by an immortal spirit" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 22). Body and spirit each come equipped with "muscles" of their own! The physical/sensory muscles are more readily apparent; our "spiritual muscles" have to do with our ability to reason and to choose. These sets of muscles are meant to work together in harmony and integrity, which makes for unity within the person. What we do with one affects the other.

Virtue pertains to the whole person and requires "exercising" sensory and spiritual muscles, affecting us in the present and the future. A simple equation illustrates this facet of our personhood:

**ACT ↔ HABIT (+virtue/-vice) ↔ CHARACTER = DESTINY**

This equation can be read forwards or backwards, and is never set in stone in this life. For example, our character will influence the types of habits we have, as is seen in the acts that spring from them.

By these innate God-given powers, we can *act*, or choose to do something. By these *acts*, if

repeated, we come to form *habits*, which if good are *virtues* and if evil are *vices*. The habitual state of doing good or evil forms our *character*, our being, which in turn we carry over into eternity, our *destiny*. The old saying "you can't take it with you" is true, except when it comes to our character – that follows us wherever we go.

2) The Necessity of Self-Knowledge and Formation: Enter the reality of Original Sin, and, voilà! We have a conflict between knowing the good and choosing to do it! We all are familiar with this inner struggle, especially when it comes to resolutions, early morning alarms, deadlines, and saying 'no' to a second helping of Aunt Mae's SuperDeluxExtraStrengthDoubleChocolate fudge... Call it the St. Paul Syndrome (see Romans 7:15-23 on the tendency to give in to weakness and sin even when we know we shouldn't). Should we be surprised then that neither our children nor we are automatically good, docile, obedient, cheerful, sharing our toys?

There is the expression "saints

are not born; they're made." The wisdom here is quite simple: we cannot attain goodness or holiness without effort and practice. It's part of the human condition. Our nature requires it, and constantly too. That is why it is not so strange to speak about virtue formation with terms like "apprenticeship in self-mastery"

*Growth in virtue is going to be lifelong, and the sooner it begins, the easier it is for the roots of goodness to settle in deeply and firmly in the soil of life. The optimal place for this formation is in the context of the family, in the day-to-day teachable moments and lessons of daily living.*

or "school of virtue."

Take the analogy of a musician. Anyone who has ever attempted to become proficient on an instrument discovers it takes practice, sacrifice, discipline, perseverance and sometimes determinedly "turning a deaf ear!" No matter the level of natural talent, it must be honed with repetitive exercises in order to improve (I think back on my own experiences: how on earth my mother ever survived five children taking music lessons simultaneously I'll never know...).

Still more, growth in virtue is going to be lifelong, and the sooner it begins, the easier it is for the roots of goodness to settle in deeply and firmly in the soil of life. The optimal place for this formation is in the context

of the family, in the day-to-day teachable moments and lessons of daily living.

Therefore, it is good that children learn, at a very early age, that they cannot have everything they want. A proper understanding of the difference between selfishness and selflessness, early on, will help a young person to see and treat others with respect, especially in guarding the gift of sexuality.

Through family discussions at the proper age, young people will be helped to seek friendships with persons of the opposite sex while avoiding situations of physical temptation in order to preserve the total gift of themselves for a lifelong commitment to their spouse in the sacrament of marriage.

3) Giving the Best of Ourselves: "Man is called to love and self-giving in the unity of body and spirit." (TM, no. 10). All the virtues are directed toward one thing: love, which is doing what is best for another. We can therefore call whatever is truly loving and self-giving, "the good." How can we respond to God's call?

First, we must learn during our lifetime to know the good: informing our minds and consciences in matters of faith and morals by studying God's laws as found in Scripture and the Church's teachings. Second, we must adopt the means to achieve this goal, through practice, through exercising our sensory and spiritual muscles in doing good and avoiding evil, in the circumstances of daily living. Third, we need to depend on the reality of grace as a real power, found through the sacraments – especially reconciliation and the Eucharist.

Grace is a gift, never forced on us, a gift that awaits our freely given consent and cooperation. In short, we are never left without the real assistance that makes the impossible possible, and the difficult "doable."

So the next time your child wants to take up the trumpet, take a deep breath, thank God for the opportunity to practice virtue yourself, and then get a good set of earplugs!

Editor's note: A parishioner at St. James, La Crosse, Victoria Savva is a wife and mother to be. She received her Master of Arts in Catechetics from Christendom College, Front Royal, Va. and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of California at Santa Clara.

The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality may be purchased by mailing a check for \$2.60 (payable to the Diocese of La Crosse) to the Office of Catechetics and Evangelization, PO Box 4004, La Crosse, WI 54602-4004, or call (608) 791-2658 or e-mail [alankford@dioceseoflacrosse.org](mailto:alankford@dioceseoflacrosse.org).