

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., *DIRECTOR*

Vol. 67, No. 6 - A WESTERN DOMINICAN PUBLICATION

## THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION & ADVENT

*Reflections from Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.*

Our faith tells us Jesus was like us in all things but sin. This means he was unlike us in one very important way. Our faith also tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was like us in all things – not in sin, of course, but by sharing humankind’s common need to be delivered from it, she by a special act of God’s grace before her conception, we by God’s grace at Baptism.

The Immaculate Conception is an event of immense importance in Mary’s life, and it is one that gives us immense hope, as well. For what God has done for Mary, He does for us all – for her before her conception, for us, after. And for the same reason. So that we, like Mary, might give flesh and blood to God’s word and present the Incarnate Christ to the world.

In their gospel narratives, the evangelists relate many accounts of Jesus’ healing individuals who are ill. Those illnesses that beset individuals in the gospel are symptoms of a deeper illness that besets the world as a result of sin. Our First Parents closed their eyes for just a moment in the Garden, and the world has been blind ever since; they disobeyed God’s commandment with their bodies, so our bodies disobey and disappoint us every day. Finally they die, and the victory of sin is complete.

But this material kingdom of illness and death receives a great setback in our Blessed Mother. Our first parents said “no,” but God’s grace – which we celebrate in Mary’s Immaculate Conception – enables Mary to say “yes,” and with that “yes,” the remedy has begun.

Our bodies are no less material by Jesus’ taking on our mortality from the Virgin Mary, but the Incarnation that begins remotely with Mary’s Immaculate Conception, gives our bodies a new vocation. We are no less mortal, but grace enables us to say “yes,” too, and that same grace charges us to present the human face of God’s Word to the world, and to touch the world with Christ’s just, loving and healing hands.

God prepared Mary by a unique grace to say “yes” to the Incarnation. That same grace enables us to say



**THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION**

“yes”— to a special invitation to refine within us the image of the Incarnate Christ.

St. Francis of Assisi composed a “Salutation to the Blessed Virgin,” in which he addresses Mary as “the virgin made church.” What a remarkable tribute! Especially when we consider that, in the early days of our faith, church buildings we called, “the house of the Church.” For Mary to be “made church” means she is the vessel that harbors all of us, beginning with Her Son. St. Francis’ greeting continues, “Hail, His Palace, Hail His Tabernacle, Hail His Home!” And hail the vocation we have received with our Baptism, to follow Mary’s example, especially in this Advent season, when our liturgy invites us in a very special way to identify with Mary as she journeys to Bethlehem. May we listen to God’s Word during these days, and may we allow it – as Mary did – to take flesh within us, so that, like Mary, we may give birth to God’s Word and touch the world with the healing hands of Her Son.

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# THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

## The Ten Commandments: VII

### The Sixth Commandment

#### "You Shall Not Commit Adultery"

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

#### NOT ENTIRELY NEGATIVE

The Sixth Commandment, like most of the others of the Second Tablet, is presented as a negative precept: "You shall not commit adultery." But our *Catechism* turns to an Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II and invites us to look at God's word in a more positive light.

*God is love and in himself he lives in a mystery of personal living communion. Creating the human race in his own image.... God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion. (Familiaris Consortio, 11)*

#### LAYING A FOUNDATION

Placing our First Parents in the Garden, and giving them the commission to be fruitful and multiply, God laid the foundation for marriage, the family, and what eventually would become the complex network of social relations we call human society.

If we consider almost any advertisement we see today, read horrific newspaper accounts of sexual assaults, reflect that the United States is the world's largest exporter of pornography, or even think about some of the random thoughts that cross our minds from time to time, we may be tempted to ask why God would lay the immense responsibility for the destiny of the human race at the door of human sexuality, but God's Providence is mysterious, and the *Catechism* observes, "The harmony ...of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs and human support between the sexes are lived out." (CCC, #2333)

#### CLEARLY RESPONSIBLE BUILDING

Our human sexuality, then, is an immense blessing, one that comes with a correspondingly high price, which is our human responsibility. The first act of this responsibility is to remember that man and woman are equally created in God's image. Thus, the *Catechism* observes, quoting Pope Saint John Paul II, "God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity." (CCC, # 2334)

This dignity is, perhaps, realized most visibly and completely in Christian marriage. The old admonition read to couples at their wedding ceremony reminded them that in the Sacrament of Matrimony, God

*...gave to man a share in the greatest work of creation, the work of the continuation of the human race. And in this way he sanctified human love and enabled man and woman to help each other live as children of God, by sharing a common life under his fatherly care.*

This is echoed in one form of the Nuptial Blessing, which relates that marriage joins woman to man

*...and the companionship they had in the beginning is endowed with the one blessing not forfeited by original sin nor washed away by the flood.*

#### A DEMAND IN LOVE

A Dominican preacher once observed the soldiers at Calvary, casting lots for Jesus' tunic, learned the same lesson Adam and Eve learned in the Garden: sin never got us anything but clothes. Yet even when our poorly-clad First Parents were cast out of Eden, they had one another. From this we conclude that human sexuality, ennobled by human love, remains a constant sign of God's love and care for His people.

When St. Paul tells the Ephesians how husbands and wives ought to relate to one another, he describes marriage as the same relation that binds Christ to the Church.

*Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her...Even so, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church...."For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:25-30)*

#### AN INFALLIBLE SIGN

This mystery is so profound were we to lose every other sign of God's love, we would have the right to look at the married couples in our midst and say, "Ah, that mysterious something that keeps them in love with one another is the same mysterious grace that keeps Christ in love with us." And the result, the *Catechism* teaches, is, indeed, the same: "The union of man and woman in marriage is a way of imitating in the flesh the Creator's generosity and fecundity...." (CCC, #2335)

## A UNIVERSAL CALL

We miss the point of the Sixth Commandment, of course, if we imagine it applies only to those who are married. The chastity that must characterize, govern and guard a marriage is the same virtue calling each of us to a wholesome life. It provides the encouragement and protection we need as we progress along the way of perfection. Our *Catechism* teaches,

*Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being. Sexuality, in which man's belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another....* (CCC, #2337)

## A SIGN OF THE KINGDOM

In the present, this may realize its perfection in marriage, but the unselfish friendship modeled by Jesus is also an example here on earth of the eternal companionship we look forward to sharing with God's elect in heaven. Chastity teaches us to give what is most God-like in us to others, so it forms the basis for the true, disinterested (which is altogether different from uninterested) friendship that seeks only the good of the other.

## CHASTITY & DISCIPLINE

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the word Chastity is derived from the word "chastise," and another writer echoes this when he observes that chastity, "*the first means for attaining perfection...is the domination of the flesh and its appetites by the spirit.*" Chastity chastises the will, teaching it to seek moderation in sexual behavior. Purity is a part of Chastity, moderating the pleasure we take from looking at or touching another person.

Priests and members of religious communities who take vows, promise to give up their use of some of life's legitimate pleasures. On the surface, such renunciation may resemble Insensibility, but we must distinguish between Insensibility's scorn for what it pleasant and useful, and the commands of Chastity, by which an individual foregoes use of a legitimate good in an effort to keep her or his mind focused on another good. In an often-quoted passage from St. Paul, we read,

*The unmarried woman and the virgin think on the things of the Lord: that she may be holy in both body and in spirit. But she that is married thinks on the things of the world, how she may please her husband.* (1 Cor. 7:34)

## A WEALTH OF OPTIONS

The point is not that the choice of a celibate life is better than the decision to marry, but that the good things that accompany one choice necessarily preclude one's choosing the other. Regardless of our choice to marry or embrace celibacy, chastity calls us to self-

mastery and integrity. Our *Catechism* is seldom stern in its admonitions, but here it sounds almost threatening.

*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...the alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy.* (CCC, #2338, #2339)

## THE ASSISTANCE OF TEMPERANCE

Chastity is assisted and governed by the Virtue of Temperance, which, we have seen, helps us govern our appetites with reason. (CCC, #1809, #2341) This is not an overnight process; acquiring virtue is a life-long journey. And some virtues are more easily acquired than others. Temperance and Chastity, because they are so closely linked to taste and touch, may seem nearly impossible goals, and the *Catechism* remarks,

*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.* (CCC, #2342)

## THE AID OF PRAYER

Prayer is essential in this task. So, too, is our effort to share with the world whatever personal progress we may have made in our spiritual growth. This might seem an odd consequence of Chastity, but here we must remember that Chastity requires us to respect the dignity of our fellow men and women. Our *Catechism* reminds us that because human sexuality is, ultimately, the foundation of human society, Chastity

*...also involves a cultural effort, for there is an "interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society." Chastity presupposes the rights of the person, in particular the right to receive information and an education that respects the moral and spiritual dimensions of human life.* (CCC, #2344)

## THE CALL TO COMMUNITY

This reflects the sometimes overlooked (or undervalued) communal effect of Baptism, which not only cleanses us of Original Sin, but unites us to one another as members of Christ's Body. Our *Catechism* devotes considerable space to its discussion of Baptism. It tells us that through Baptism, "*we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.*" (#1213) The text continues, "*The whole ecclesial community bears some responsibility for the development and safeguarding of the grace given at Baptism.*" (CCC, #1255) Furthermore,

*[as] Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: "Therefore, we are members of one another," Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal font is born the one People of*

*God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes.... (CCC, #1267)*

## **A REMEDY FOR SIN**

Chastity may seem an odd virtue to call upon as we consider our vocation as members of Christ's Church, but St. Augustine reminds us, "...it is through chastity that we are gathered together and led back to the unity from which we were fragmented into multiplicity" by our choosing to sin. Through chastity, our *Catechism* teaches, the Holy Spirit enables those who have been baptized to imitate the purity of Christ. This purity manifests itself in diverse ways, as we shall note further on, but we see it reflected most generally in the non-threatening relations that characterize true friendships.

## **MARRIAGE REVISITED**

"People should cultivate [chastity] in the way that is suited to their state of life." Thus the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clearly states the universal obligation for each of us to embrace the chaste example of Our Savior. We have considered already some aspects of the sacrament of Matrimony. Let us now say a word about the sexual activity proper to the sacrament, which the *Catechism* observes

*...is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such. It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and woman commit themselves totally to one another until death. (#2361)*

From this we should understand that the sexual pleasure spouses share with one another is an immense gift, intended to be a source of joy. Our theology teaches that a gift is never given simply to benefit the individual who receives it; rather gifts are given to enrich the entire community. This is the case with human sexuality. It unites husbands and wives to increase their fidelity to one another, and to enable them to carry out God's command to our First Parents, "Be fruitful."

## **THE EXAMPLE OF MARY**

Before his election as Pope, Joseph Ratzinger remarked the importance of memory, and identified Mary as "the embodiment of the Church's memory." This memory, he said, is "more than the kind of memory that stores telephone numbers: [it is] a memory of the heart, in which I invest something of myself."

St. Luke's is a particularly rich picture of Mary; he tells us three times she "kept" things in her heart, allowing them to shed light on the events of her life. In Mary we see a practical illustration of the community we share with one another, for in her we see our vocation as preachers. Once we say "yes" to God's Word, we have no choice but to share it. The negative prohibition of

the Sixth Commandment is quite daunting, but once we look beyond "you shall not," we realize the command is an invitation to offer God something uniquely our own.

And the result? God's Word functions in our life much as the Eucharist. Everything else we eat becomes part of us, but in the Eucharist we are transformed into what we eat, and we become what we believe: the Body of Christ. Our encounter with God's Word likewise transforms us. And that, Cardinal Ratzinger assures us, is how intellectual life and spiritual growth are handed on. "In other words, it is the only way to progress."

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The next issue of *Light and Life* will continue the discussion of the Sixth Commandment, and link its call to virtue to some reflections on Pope Francis' heroic (and challenging) example of leadership of Church leadership in our time. ■

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## **CHRISTMAS SHOPPING**

The Rosary Center always tries to offer something new and inspiring for Christmas, and this year we are pleased to share a charming children's book, *The Little Star*. The story relates the heavenly hosts' gathering to celebrate the birth of the King of Kings. But when they discover he is to be born in a stable, they conclude a mistake has been made and return to their original places in the sky. All but one, the smallest and least noticed of the stars.

We believe you might also be interested in the *Scriptural Desk Calendar*. The calendar's witty title, "No Bible, No Breakfast! No Bible, No Bed!" belies its beautiful design and its serious purpose, which is to give the faithful Catholic two apt Scriptural passages with which to begin and end each day.

And don't forget *The Christmas Mouse*, which has been a favorite among friends of the Rosary Center for a number of years. This is another children's book, telling the story of a little mouse who is being chased by a cat finds himself inside a home, gazing at a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. He comes upon a book and falls into it. To his surprise, he is in a stable, and Jesus has just been born. 30 pages, 8" x 8".

You will find these items, as well as many other inspirational options on the enclosed order form. The Rosary Center is proud to offer a wide variety of devotional material dedicated to the Rosary, Mary, spiritual devotion, and the Church's teaching.

