

Landry: In a fallen world, there's a battle to live out the Christian vision of purity

When my girlfriend read Joshua Harris' book *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, she took the title to heart and broke up with me. In my teenage years, this book and its sequel, *Boy Meets Girl: Say Hello to Courtship*, were cornerstones of what is now often referred to as "purity culture"; a movement which sprung up in both evangelical and Catholic circles in response to the sexual revolution.

The goal of purity culture has generally been the promotion of a specific standard of purity (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8), using things like abstinence pledges and purity rings to challenge young people to abstain from premarital sex. Harris' books fit right in here.

If you've heard purity culture discussed today, you've likely heard it discussed with some level of derision. This movement had some successes, but also seems to have brought with it two negative fruits. The first is that people who were unable to live up to the standard of purity being presented felt (or still feel) shamed and unlovable by God. The second is that young people heard stories of people who lived by this standard and were rewarded by God with a good-looking spouse and a happy marriage.

In a sense, it's the purity version of what's often termed the 'Gospel of prosperity': do the right thing and God will reward you in this life. (Biblical figures like Job and St. Paul would have an argument with this concept, but that's another column entirely.)

The fact is that in a fallen world, there is a battle to live out the Christian vision of purity. Young people in particular struggle because, along with the concupiscence we all share, they have raging hormones and social influences that suggest they act on whatever it is they are feeling.

The purity message they've heard from the Church has often simply been "don't do it." It's possible that we've delivered the message in this way because either a) we ourselves don't actually understand the Church's vision for love, marriage, and sexuality; or b) in some way we aren't living up to that vision, and it feels a little hypocritical to try and tell others to live differently. And so what several generations of Christians – Catholic and evangelical alike – have taken to be the Church's position on all of sexuality is one great big 'no.'

The thing is the entire purity culture movement was a response to a crisis every Christian denomination – including our own – has faced since the sexual revolution: how do we pass on our values about love, marriage, and sexuality to

young people growing up in a culture that has gone in the opposite direction, separating sex from marriage, pleasure from procreation, and love from commitment? And while in practice, our strategies and results may often mirror those of our evangelical brothers and sisters – bringing some of the same shame and disappointment – the Holy Spirit was not so quietly crafting a specific and beautiful response to this challenge, one which offers a third option other than repression or indulgence. This response is found loudly in the writings of Pope St. John Paul II; notably in what's known as the *Theology of the Body*, which he shared during Wednesday audiences from 1979-1984.

If you read the *Theology of the Body*, or any of the numerous summaries that have been published over the last 35 years, you'll see that the picture the Holy Spirit used John Paul II to paint for us is a healthier response to the limitless indulgences of the sexual revolution: a call to chastity.

Properly understood, chastity is much more than just abstaining from premarital sex. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that "Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (CCC 2337).

One of the things John Paul II recognized was the fact that it wasn't the sexual revolution that broke our understanding of love, marriage, and sexuality. That had happened much earlier, in the rebellion of humanity against God described in Genesis 3.

Spend any amount of time studying the *Theology of the Body*, and you'll notice that JPII spends a good deal of time explaining what's going on in those first few chapters of Genesis and what changed after Adam and Eve's eyes were opened as a result of sin (Genesis 3:7). Simply put, we lost our ability to integrate sexuality within and among ourselves. This is why Jesus appeals to the beginning when the Pharisees asked for his views on marriage and divorce (Matthew 19:3-8), and why the catechism speaks about chastity as "integrity" and "unity" – abilities that have been severely hampered because of the fall.

Part of the struggle many have to understand and to live chastity is that we don't even recognize that something's wrong. To borrow an image from one of the *Theology of the Body's* most famous teachers, Christopher West – it's like we've been driving our whole lives on a car with flat tires. The ride would be rough, the steering and handling wouldn't function as they were designed to until someone inflates the tires on the car to the manufacturer's specifications. The experience of driving your car would be completely transformed. It's the same way with the vision for chastity promoted by the Church and explained by St. John Paul II. From the fall, through the sexual revolution, and even today, the reason why passing on a biblical vision of purity is so difficult is because we are driving on flat tires.

In any situation where you find your car isn't working properly, the long-term answer isn't just to stop driving it: you have to get it fixed. Those who

promoted and taught “purity culture” noticed that our culture’s approach to love, marriage, and sexuality was broken (and they are right). The answer, though, is just to kiss the whole thing good-bye.

A proper integration of our sexuality according to our Creator’s specifications helps us to discover the wholeness God created us for and calls us to. Coming to understand this “reinflates” our tires. Chastity ultimately points us towards God, who is a permanent, life-giving communion of persons (which is what we understand to be the purpose of marriage), and which also points us towards heaven ... where every hope and need will finally find their fulfilment.

What this means is ultimately that chaste living is something that every human person in every state of life is called to. We are meant to live beyond our urges and attractions, integrating our desires and attractions with what we come to know as the greatest good for ourselves and for others.

This can be hard, for the young person in a new relationship, for the couple whose marriage has hit a rocky patch, for those who yearn to give themselves to someone else but who haven’t found anyone, and for those who embrace the call to serve the Church in celibacy. But this heavy cross also brings with it a great freedom – freedom to live and to love as God intended us to.

Search up Joshua Harris today and you’d learn that over the past few weeks he’s announced that his own marriage has ended and that he has left Christianity behind. There is obviously much more to his story than has been shared publicly, but if you’re reading this say a prayer for him and for his family.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops released a letter in 2011 addressed to young people entitled Living Chastity Today, that dives into the Catholic teachings on chastity in greater details.

If you want to study the Theology of the Body for yourself, I might suggest one of many good introductions to the TOB. I’ve found Leah Perrault’s Theology of the Body for Everybody, These Beautiful Bones by Emily Stimpson, and Christopher West’s Theology of the Body for Beginners all to be helpful.

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