

LOVE 101: BACK TO BASICS

Remembering Who We Are

Like many other American children, I couldn't wait to buy *The Lion King** when it was first released on video. Now, years later, there's a particular message in that movie that takes on deeper meaning as I think back on it.

I clearly remember the scene when the spirit of Mufasa tells Simba, his self-exiled son, to remember his identity. (As the deceased king's son, Simba is the rightful king.) This reminder motivates Simba to give up his life of leisure and, like the king he is, walk the more challenging road to which he is called.

Sometimes, we also need reminders of who we are and what we are made for. As baptized Christians, we are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. God, who *is* Love and who loves us beyond comprehension, wants us to live forever with Him in full and perfect love. We were created for this love, and our relationships on earth are meant to help us, and others, grow in this love.

Growing In Love

Do you think of chastity as "just a bunch of rules" that prevent us from expressing affection? On the contrary, we can discover *true* love through the practice of chastity, "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (CCC no. 2337).

Let's break that down.

This quote from the *Catechism* means that although chastity does require us to say "no" to some things (including sex outside of marriage), it is much more than a simple refusal of immediate pleasures. It is a "yes" to authentic love, which, though challenging, is in accord with who we are, helps us become who we were created to be, and leads us to our ultimate happiness (think: Simba).

Chastity is about how to love well as a man or as a woman. Because as human beings we're both body and soul, chastity isn't just about physical actions; it's about how we love in every aspect of our lives. It affects not only what we do or don't

do, but also what we say, think, wear, watch, listen to, read, and so on. It includes respecting our sexuality in these and all areas—for our sake and for the sake of others. Everyone is called to live chastely whether they're single, married, or religious. However, this article deals specifically with chastity in dating: romantic interactions between unmarried people.

Thanks for the Cake, But...

If we love someone, we want what is best for them and try to show it by acting accordingly, right?

Let's say we want to express love for someone who has a sweet tooth, but also has serious blood sugar issues. If we tried to show our love by baking them a chocolate cake with real sugar, our actions wouldn't match the loving intention in our hearts. Wanting to do something nice for someone we love is certainly an expression of affection, and baking a cake is a good thing, but it would actually be harmful in this circumstance.

Actions that are meant specifically for marriage, but are engaged in outside of that context, are similar to our cake situation. They are good in and of themselves, and the recipient receives something desirable, but these actions lack the right circumstances. They lack a necessary precursor—a total, faithful commitment to love that person until death, a commitment so permanent that it is made through wedding vows. No matter how sincere a couple's love and affection is, and no matter how good the intentions, sexual acts meant for marriage are only true, full expressions of love within marriage (more on this later).

Learning from Experience

The first time I started regularly dating someone, I came face-to-face with the question of "Why?": "Why is chastity so important? Why can't I show affection in this, that, or the other way?" But as time has progressed, and I've lived through my own experiences and learned from those of others, I've become even more convinced that the Church is spot-on in its teachings on chastity.

Is it easy to date chastely? No. But is it worth it? Absolutely. Sometimes we need to make sacrifices for the sake of something better—in this case, authentic love. These teachings aren't just true because the Church teaches them; the Church teaches them *because they're true*.

1. 20/20 Vision: It's harder to recognize whether a person is someone we truly love if we develop a bond with him or her that's not rooted in truth. If we're expressing physical affection that does not match the actual stage of the relationship (remember, we're both body and soul), we may feel a strong bond that isn't based on much more than physical attraction. This can confuse matters and keep us in relationships longer than we should be.

2. The Truth about Body Language: Sex is an act that is both physical and spiritual, and through it, we say, "I give myself entirely, completely, totally to you." In sex outside of marriage, no matter how committed two people are to each other, the commitment of sacred, permanent marriage vows is not there. This means that the language of our bodies, when we have sex outside of marriage, does not reflect the truth of the relationship, and is therefore neither honest nor loving.

3. Creativity: Waiting until marriage for things meant only for marriage gives us all the more reason to find creative ways to express affection—which is not only fun, but helpful to the relationship. It can help reveal character and personality traits, aid us in getting to know each other better in other ways, and provide unexpected opportunities for continued growth in deep and authentic intimacy (rather than intimacy based on physical affection).

4. Wanting the Best: When we love someone, we want the best for them. As Christians, we know that "the best" is living with God in perfect happiness forever. So if we love someone, we ought to help them on the path of holiness. How we do this will vary according to each situation; in the context of dating, it includes supporting each other in chastity.

New Beginnings

In his conversation with Mufasa, Simba asked his father how he could return home—he had changed. His choices had caused him to become someone different than who he had been. Chastity is not about our past choices. It is about the present and the future. If we have made mistakes, we may need to learn from them and work through some consequences. However, regardless of whether we've made past mistakes, chastity can start today and continue for the rest of our lives.

Getting Started

As we follow God and enter into ever-deepening friendship with him, we become more like him and more fully ourselves. If you're interested in learning more about chastity and how to practice it, there are a lot of wonderful pieces written on the topic. (One website you can check out is www.chastityproject.com.) In the meantime, here are some quick tips to get started: Commit (or re-commit) to living and loving as we're designed to do; seek the sacramental grace of Confession if a mistake is made (receive it regularly, regardless); after doing so, let the past go (God has forgiven you, so make sure to forgive yourself); and move forward with confidence that God is walking with you along this journey!

The author is a young professional who has a passion for sharing her ever-deepening discovery that the Church's teachings are rooted in love and help us become most fully ourselves.

*References do not indicate endorsement.

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