

# why purity

NAVIGATING  
THE  
CONFUSING  
CULTURAL MESSAGES

FRANCIS INSA & DALE PARKER

 Scepter

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## DEDICATION



*In memory of Pedro Ballester,  
a young man with a pure heart who looks  
down on us from heaven.*

# CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION .....	1
1. THE GAZE OF JESUS .....	5
JIMMY'S DISCOVERY / 5	
How Did Jesus See Things? / 8	
2. WHY LIVE CHASTITY? .....	15
IF I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT, WHY SHOULD I DO IT? / 15	
Are You Your Body? / 17	
You Will See God / 20	
Is Sex Good? / 21	
The Virtue of Chastity / 24	
3. WINNING THE WAR .....	31
BEGINNING TO PRAY / 31	
Attracted? / 35	
Not Just Effort / 38	
Prayer / 41	

Two Pairs of Sacraments /	47
Mortification /	50
Acts of Service /	52
Good Use of Time /	54
<b>4. TIME FOR A LIFESTYLE CHANGE .....</b>	<b>57</b>
ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM /	57
Fertile Soil /	59
Faith and Chastity /	61
Hope and Chastity /	69
Charity and Chastity /	73
THE CONFESSION /	75
<b>5. A LONG-TERM PLAN .....</b>	<b>79</b>
A STICKY WEB /	79
The Internet /	80
Should I Seek Professional Help? /	83
The Blessed Virgin Mary /	88
<b>6. HOW DO I TALK ABOUT IT? .....</b>	<b>93</b>
LEARNING TO LIVE A NEW LIFE /	93
Confession /	94
Spiritual Accompaniment /	98
Waiting for Love /	100

<b>EPILOGUE: NOT A JUST NICE THOUGHT, BUT POSSIBLE .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>FURTHER READING .....</b>	<b>107</b>
Church Documents.....	107
Spiritual Books.....	107
Key Websites.....	108

# INTRODUCTION



IT'S HARD TO EXPLAIN THIS BOOK'S topic to a modern audience. The phrase "the virtue of chastity" won't ring many bells nowadays. Virtue evokes some puritanical connotation. Chastity or purity reminds one of living in a medieval monastery. What could these words possibly mean today? Maybe it's best to start with definitions.

We're going to use chastity and purity interchangeably and use the definition from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "Chastity means the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being."<sup>1</sup> It is not just for singles. Everyone is called to chastity, whether God calls them to be single or married. The same paragraph concludes that all are called to preserve "the integrity of the person and the integrality of the gift [of self]."

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1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2337

The Bible is keen on chastity. When Moses gave Israel the Ten Commandments, a fifth of them concerned chastity. In the New Testament, Jesus made chastity one of the seven Beatitudes.

Some people, young and old, don't see the point. They raise all kinds of questions: "*The standard seems so strict!*" "*How can non-Christians be expected to live chastity if it's hard enough for us?*" "*Is this something between God and me?*" "*How can the Church ask us to live this way, given the trash we're exposed to on TV, streaming, the Internet, and so on?*" "*Everyone's having sex before marriage, what's the big deal?*" These are all good questions, and hopefully by the end of this little book we'll give you some thoughts to help work through them.

We alluded to our audience at the beginning of the introduction. So we should clarify who they (or you) might be. We've written the book thinking about high school and college men, though others may find what we say useful. We've written the book with little fluff (hence its brevity) and in a colloquial style, hopefully making it easier to read. Our aim is not to be exhaustive, but simply

to offer some new ideas based on conversations we've had with young men in our work as educators, mentors, and (in Fr. Insa's case) as a priest. If you'd like to go deeper, we offer some suggested readings at the end of the book.

The topic of chastity is so large that it's impossible to do it justice in such a short volume. That's why, within the limits of the virtue, we selected a theme to guide the conversation: how living holy purity allows us to *see* the world and others as Jesus does. To move from *gazing* to *contemplation*.

These pages are also for those who have dedicated themselves to mentoring young men—for example, parents, priests, counselors, and teachers. Nowadays, we have to be sensitive and prudent when we raise these issues with young people. One way to start the conversation might be this very book. For now, let's start with a story, one we will come back to throughout the book.



## THE GAZE OF JESUS

### JIMMY'S DISCOVERY

James Allen, Jimmy, is a sophomore at St. Elmo High School. He has average grades, friends, and has been going out with Emma Lane for a few months. Faith is not important in his life; he goes to St. Elmo for the academics. He made his first Holy Communion and confirmation, but mostly because Grandma kept asking when he was going to do it. His family goes to Mass on Christmas and Easter, and Jimmy also goes to the more important school Masses.

Recently, the question of faith became a little more interesting. He caught the flu and spent a week in bed. He passed the first two days on his phone, mostly sending messages to

Emma. By day three, boredom took over. He moped around the room. He stared into space. Out of curiosity he looked under his bed.

He found a cardboard box labeled "Don't Throw Away!" Jimmy couldn't remember what it was, so he pulled it out next to his bed. It was full of knick-knacks from grade school. One thing caught his eye. It was a New Testament, a first Communion gift from his grandmother. He picked it up and began to flip through it. "I don't know if I've opened this book since she gave it to me," he thought. His eyes were drawn mostly to the pictures. A photo dropped out, one of himself with his grandmother, on the day of his first Communion. He looked happy, the way only kids can look happy, though she was beaming as well.

He opened to a random page and began to read. It was one of the Gospels. As he read a few chapters, the figure of Jesus began to strike him. Jesus wasn't much like he had imagined, before. Jimmy had always thought him a well-meaning guru who told people to

*"be yourself"* and *"accept others."* He would have defined Jesus as a wandering wise man who worked some miracles and somehow got crucified. The reality was different. Jesus called Pharisees "white-washed tombs," and a "brood of vipers." That explains why the same group plotted to kill him. He was kind, but he made people angry.

This new idea of Christ made Jimmy uncomfortable. What would Jesus call Jimmy? He wasn't exactly living a holy life. At the same time, this Jesus was a lot more interesting than the old one he had in mind. This Jesus had feelings and a solid personality. He got mad, hungry, tired. He inspired fanatical devotion in people he just met and had amazing things to say in what was called the Sermon on the Mount.

On the very page where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, a picture showed Christ sitting on a rock and looking out at . . . HIM, Jimmy. His eyes stayed with Jimmy as he fell asleep.



## HOW DID JESUS SEE THINGS?

We'll leave Jimmy behind for now, but stay with his discovery of the Gospels. Maybe you've read them or at least heard some of them at Mass. There's a detail, though, that you may never have considered. The Gospel writers often note where Jesus is directing his vision. He looks up to heaven to address the Father (Jn 17:1), and on earth his eyes look out for the destitute (Lk 7:11–17). Sometimes, people had a spiritual experience only because Jesus looked at them. Think about what it would be like if Jesus looked at you. Those big warm eyes that knew what it was to weep (Jn 11:35). Thinking about that can give us fresh material to pray about, or at least an insight into our Lord's sacred humanity.

Let's look at a few passages.

Jesus' gaze is fixed on the Father in a continuous dialogue that is often made out loud (Mt 14:19; Jn 11:41). This teaches us that, just as Jesus turned to his Father, we should look at God our Father and turn to him even in our everyday activities—in class, at home or on the street,

or while we study or play sports. Just as a father watches his children play sports or participate in a recital, Christ also looks upon us.

He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him. (Mt 9:9)

This happened with the other disciples as well: John and Andrew (Jn 1:38–39); Peter (Jn 1:42); Bartholomew (Jn 1:47–51); and so on (Mt 4:18–19). What power that gaze must have had! At Jesus' glance, people "left everything, and followed him" (Lk 5:28). Jesus does not impose himself, he does not oblige, he does not force, he simply invites.

Our Lord usually received a positive response. But once, he met a rich young man who wanted to do more for God. So Jesus showed him a way:

And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mk 10:21)

He goes away sad. Our Lord looks around and laments, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk 10:23). This incident shows us how Christ is limited by our freedom to say no and how Jesus does everything he can to encourage us to follow him.

### Left Everything

This encounter between Jesus and the rich young man shocks Peter. "We have left everything and followed you" (Mt 19:27). Our Lord assures Peter that anyone who gives up earthly goods for the Kingdom of Heaven will be rewarded. Maybe Peter didn't realize it at the time, but the greatest reward is to spend time with Jesus, and to have him call us his friends (See Mt 9:15, Jn 15:13–15).

And what kind of friend is Jesus? He respects our decisions even when they don't align with his desires, but he can be demanding. He rejoices when we're faithful to him (Lk 22:28–30) and saddened by infidelity. What would it be like for Peter to look at Jesus after betraying him? (Lk 22:61).

What else can we say about how Jesus treated people? We can think about the chance encounters Jesus had. There was one time where

Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a multitude was coming to him, Jesus said to Philip, "How are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" (Jn 6:5)

Jesus notices the needs of those around him and responds, just as his mother did at the wedding feast of Cana when the wine was running low (Jn 2:3). Another time, he notices the sadness of a widow whose only son died and works a miracle to bring him back to life. (Lk 7:11–17)

He loved his people—he wept as he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 19:41). On the other hand, he's exuberant upon seeing acts of love. We only have to think about the alms of the poor widow (Lk 21:2–4) and the repentance of the Good Thief (Lk 23:42–43). He noticed when love was lacking. When local merchants had turned his Father's house, the Temple, into a bazaar, he got angry and drove them out (Jn 2:14–15). What

can we draw from these stories? One common thread is Jesus' eye for little things. Based on these details he praises, laments, and corrects. But the other common thread? He acts with eyes dilated by love and burns for all men to raise their sights to the heavenly Father.

Jesus also had closer friendships. His intimate friends included both men and women (Lk 8:2–3). Of special note is his friendship with the siblings Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. They lived in Bethany, and Jesus often visited them when in Jerusalem (See Mt 21:17, Jn 11). Jesus was so close to them that, when Lazarus died, Jesus wept in public for him (Jn 11:33–36) and then raised him from the dead.

Likewise, his encounters with women are powerful and worth meditating upon. An example is when Jesus dines at the home of Simon (Lk 7:36–50). As a Pharisee, we know Simon's attitude of strict observance of Jewish law. Jesus is reclining, enjoying the party, when a certain woman appears. She was clearly not invited and her presence shocks the other guests. She was a public sinner, not the sort

to show up at a party for Pharisees. She begins to cry. Her tears fall on Jesus' feet and she uses her hair to dry them off. Is she crazy, a street vagrant? She's not crazy, but rich (perhaps by dubious employment). To everyone's shock, she breaks open an alabaster jar and pours precious ointment onto the feet of our Lord. The woman, this waste, and most of all Jesus's acceptance of it all, scandalizes Simon who doubts if Jesus really is a prophet.

What do we learn from this strange episode? The very presence of Christ had a powerful effect on people. It inspired hardened sinners to repent and go over the top in their repentance. His secret? It's hard to say for sure, but we can guess. Just imagine how this woman was usually treated. Decent women would look upon her with disgust and good men with shame. All would avoid her except the most base members of society. These latter would look at her as, let's say, something less than a daughter of God. And then? Jesus Christ, purity itself, looks at her and smiles. Maybe it was the first time in a long while that an honorable man did so.

We can have a similar experience with Jesus. An episode from the life of St. John Vianney (the patron saint of priests) illustrates the point. He often saw a man from the countryside, one who spent a long time in front of the tabernacle in his church. Impressed by his piety, St. John asked him what he told the Lord. The man replied, "I look at him, and he looks at me." That's a man who knows how to pray. Step into a church sometime and quiet yourself. Look at the tabernacle where our Lord has made himself a prisoner of love. If you take a long, slow glance and let him look upon you, you'll understand how that country contemplative could spend so much time in prayer.

Would you like to see the world the way Jesus did? I'm assuming the answer's *yes* or you probably wouldn't have read up to this point. If yes, then you should know a certain prerequisite: the virtue of holy purity. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8).



## WHY LIVE CHASTITY?

### IF I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT, WHY SHOULD I DO IT?

Let's go back to Jimmy. Since his illness and discovery of the New Testament, he started to get more interested in religion. But just a little. He wasn't going overboard, and he certainly didn't tell anyone about it. He just started paying more attention in religion class, and occasionally he'd crack open his New Testament.

He wondered if he should make some changes in his life. He thought about things he did with his girlfriend, Emma. Would she be offended if she knew about the websites he visited? Although self-improvement sounded good in theory, he wasn't sure how