

A VOW OF CHASTITY

A LAY WOMAN

TONIGHT I am so tired that I don't know whether I'll be able to write anything about the vow of chastity at all. However, if His Majesty wills it, something will be written. The joy and peace of these past days since May 4th have been wonderful. I wake up every morning with happiness at the thought of it—of this precious promise between Jesus and me. And then I go to Mass and I am tired and almost fall asleep, and I am sorry that he has a bride who can pay so little attention to him. But he has willed it to be so. He has chosen me. . . .

To write about this vow is difficult because my appreciation of it is limited; it is difficult, too, because I cannot write of it without writing about everything else—about my whole relationship with God, about the marvel of his love for me. I cannot think of chastity without thinking of charity.

Love, O my Lord, I desire nothing but love; I will nothing but love; I aspire to nothing except love. I want to be lost in love. Spirit of Love, consume me in love. May my union with Jesus entered into in chastity be consummated in charity.

This vow of perfect and perpetual chastity gives him what I have given him again and again. It is not something new, but the formal ratification of an understood thing.

Have I ever belonged to anyone except you?

Haven't you always—my whole life—made me realise that virginity was the only course for me? I don't think there ever was any doubt of it. I must admit that sometimes in my weakness there were idle day-dreams, but the thought of marriage never took hold of me. It was always quite clear: I could belong to no one except our Lord. He must be the only Lover I could know.

There was no painful struggle, no pulling, no attraction except toward him. I know how grateful I should be for this. My vocation to virginity was simple and clear. There was no disturbing doubts that some girls have; no complexities; no wondering in which direction his will lay; no real temp-

tations away from it. (I don't mean temptations against purity; I'm thinking here of struggles over it because the idea of having a husband and children becomes so appealing.) But I was never really disturbed by anything of this sort. Why have you made it so easy for me? Why—except that in your wisdom, for your glory, you wanted to give me a head start in loving you!

This is of your goodness, your free gift. That is why the vow of chastity is a vow made in humility. Other women can achieve sanctity through having a husband, but if you hadn't taken me directly for yourself, I have no doubt that I would be lost. I would have found it difficult to have kept the order of love; so in your mercy you arrange it that I have only you to love.

I don't mean to imply that the making of a vow of chastity was completely devoid of difficulties for me. Since I'm supposed to be explaining my reaction to making the vow for life, I think it would be good to tell how I came to make it in the first place. While I was still in high school I thought of it, but I thought of myself as going to make my vows in Carmel. I was completely confident that it would be there that I would be the bride of Christ. I remember one summer especially praying to our Lady and asking her to see to it that I'd make my vows. To her I made, not a vow, but I suppose I could say it was an understanding between us. I bargained with Mary, even telling her *when* I wanted to make my vows (in Carmel—as I hoped). Our Lady granted my request, in a way I hadn't dreamed of; in fact, she played a sweet trick on me and saw to it that I made my vow even before the time I had set.

After my first year in college when my plans to enter Carmel had fallen through, I got the idea of making the vow of chastity. It came to me about July, but it was an idea I tried to forget. My pride drove it out of my mind. It was pride I know—because I wanted to do it, but I was afraid or embarrassed to ask Father about it; for I knew he could refuse me on account of my unworthiness. It takes humility to ask for great things, and I did not have the humility to beg for this. So I said nothing but kept it in the back of my mind. I told our Lady I'd ask Father about it 'some day'.

It was on November 7th that I finally was given the simplicity to ask Father if I might make the vow. I remember being surprised that his reaction was so favourable. His answer was 'yes', that I should ask him about it the next week. I was very happy until—I think it was—the day or so before I was to ask him about it again. Then I began to be troubled a great deal. It was not that I had any doubts about wanting to make the vow: I wanted it with my whole heart and soul. But I started thinking that I was completely unprepared for it, that people who enter religious life spend a long time getting ready for their vows, that I had the nerve to burst in and claim a prize I had not won. 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread'—but I was doing something worse in offering my unworthy self to the Son of God. It wouldn't be right for me to do it. I remember this all very clearly, and I remember going to confession and telling it all to Father. I remember his answer vividly. It was: 'Can't a beggar give a king a cup of cold water?' The problem was solved immediately. Nothing ever became so simple to me so quickly. Yes, of course, I could give him my chastity. He a king, and I a beggar, and my virginity the gift between us. I was unworthy, but if he asked this gift, how could I refuse him? I had myself to give; mine was a small gift. But a king could accept a cup of cold water, and God could accept the gift of myself.

So I made my vow of chastity. It was November 14. I found out later it was the Feast of All Saints of the Carmelite Order.

It was the day of our Sophomore Tea Dance and I went to it afterwards. The whole situation seemed ridiculous, and I was so happy for a reason no one knew about.

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I don't think it would be strictly true to say that I had no preparation for the vow. I think our Lord had done a very intensive job on me in the months before. The particular grace of those months was being able to give up Carmel. What I mean by that is that our Lord taught me that I must be attached to his Will alone, and that nothing—not even what seemed to me a great spiritual good—must stand between us. I must allow him to take me as his bride

in exactly the way he wished. To desire nothing except his will is a great grace, and I don't mean to imply that I received it all at once. But in those months (perhaps it would be more accurate to say the year) before I made the vow, he revealed it to me gradually. Then, too, Father had made me give up many people and activities to which I was attached (over all my wilfulness and inner protestations) and I realise now that that did a lot to free my heart to make a vow of virginity. For although the vow itself covers only the relinquishing of the use of sex and the pleasures attending it, it implies much more. For one does not preserve virginity for its own sake, but in order to be totally free to give oneself without hindrance to Christ. To be truly the bride of Christ completely given over to his love, the heart and soul, as well as the body, must be truly virginal—having no affection, no attachment except himself. I realise more and more grace is needed to be the perfect bride of the Son of God. To be completely his—actually, in everything I do, in every part of my being, as well as by vow—is something to which I aspire. To fulfil completely my vow requires my sanctity. Perhaps I am going far afield, for as usual I find myself on the verge of talking about charity—the fullness of love which the vow of chastity implies—but I can console myself that this is excusable. Charity must be the form of chastity if it is to be true virtue, and God has clearly indicated that virginity is the way to sanctity for me. I don't mean to imply, of course, that it is an indispensable necessity for sanctity. How I wish and pray for married saints! But they too must be virginal at heart. However, in his mercy, he has given me this grace of going to him directly without the intermediary of husband, of belonging to him totally through the yielding of my body to him alone. He has freed me from the sorrows, trials, joys and consolations of human love to let me be enamoured only with the divine!

What an obligation I have to love!

To keep this orderly I should go back and complete what I was saying about my taking of the vow. I was allowed to make it first for six months. After that I renewed it every year for three years. I asked Father several times about making it for life, and he always answered that perhaps I'd

enter a convent and that would complicate matters. (To tell the truth, I never knew what he meant by that!)

Of course when I made the vow I meant it for life. I can't imagine taking Christ for Spouse just for a short period of time. It seems to me that anyone making such a vow would be thinking of it as a lifetime vocation, otherwise she would not do it. Not that I mean it isn't right to make temporary vows. I don't doubt the wisdom of making the vow for a short period of time—especially for us of the indecisive vocations in the world. And it also seems to me possible that our Lord would let someone make such a vow temporarily and use it to draw her closer to himself, although later he wills her to marry while remaining virginal in spirit. But at the time one makes the vow it must appear to the soul as a lifetime vocation, a decisive step. It seems to me that those who make it while remaining in the world must have greater maturity and a more carefully proved stability even than those who are in a convent. For remaining in the world one has many more difficulties in keeping the vow—I don't mean merely in the matter of temptations against chastity—but others besides. While I was at college, and even now at home, the whole atmosphere is geared to 'marrying and giving in marriage', and it requires detachment, great love and constant prayer not to be influenced by it. I think in the matter I've had less difficulty than some girls might have, because I had never been interested in 'dating'; consequently there were no complications in doing a sudden about-face. But in families where parents are husband-minded for their daughters there would be practical problems. It seems to me (and this was my special suffering) that the person who makes such a vow in the world has to endure a particular loneliness, a realisation of not belonging. There is not the support, the security religious life gives. Missing are 'the prayers and the companionship of the sisters'.

All this probably sounds as if I've found the vow difficult or a cause of much suffering. I think the opposite is true. It has simplified my life and it has freed my heart to love. I'll explain what I mean by this later. I just want to finish up tonight how the permission to make the vow forever (not

really just for life, for the glory of virginity remains in heaven) caused me much joy. The days before I made it I prepared for it particularly by praying to Mary and Joseph. I prayed to them simply, as I did when I was a child. I have no doubt that they secured the grace for me. The days preceding it were days of suffering. Our Lord was preparing me himself for this perpetual seal. When Father asked me on the day my temporary vow expired if I wanted to make it for life, for a moment I was deserted by God and interiorly I had to implore him, from the agony of my soul, for the grace to say 'yes'. How obvious it was and is to me that even the consent the soul gives (we say: *I made the vow*) is of the Holy Spirit. Thank God he gave the grace, and now—as I have always desired—'my sole occupation is love'.

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I become more and more convinced that virginity in the world is a definite vocation—for our times at least. I'm sorry there isn't more written about it. I've found little on the subject except what is written about the lay institutes. One day I had a discussion with someone about whether or not virginity in the world was a definite vocation (that one freely chose because God had chosen it for one) or whether it was merely something which was forced upon one, or which one embraces because there is no other alternative. It seems clear to me that there is a definite call to virginity in the world, and that it is entirely different from the vocation of those who 'perforce remain unmarried'—even though they make the best of their situation and accept the will of God. We who remain virgins in the world do so, not because we can't get a husband or because there is some obstacle to our entering the convent, but because this is our vocation, this is our call from God. Ours is a different vocation from the unmarried woman in the apostolate who serves God and her neighbour, faithfully fulfilling his will, but who doesn't feel herself settled for life and looks forward to marriage as her ultimate vocation. Again, it is different from biding one's time until one can enter the convent. Although as a vocation God may reveal it through unsuccessful attempts to marry or to enter the convent, when the person enters

upon it she does so with the conviction that it is the will of God, not with the feeling that she is taking something second rate until a better alternative comes along.

The reasons why Providence makes this a vocation for our day are many. I have an appreciation of only a few of them. One obvious one seems to me to be that in the world—right in the midst of people and the tremendous evil of our day—God wills there should be souls totally dedicated to him and to his glory. There should be souls who have no other interest in life, no other distraction than the honour of their Spouse. By their total dedication they are to remind the world of Christ whom it has forgotten.

There should be souls totally free to give Christ to others. Not held back by any personal concern, they should be able to point out to others what reality is, what is the one thing necessary in life. Virginité in the world brings with it social obligations. Because they have no children of their own they must realise their call to a more fruitful, more extended spiritual motherhood. The suffering a natural mother endures in bringing forth her children is as nothing compared to what a virgin should be willing to endure for all the children of God. I was so happy when I read how St Thomas stresses this social obligation and aspect of virginité. It is in his answer to the objection that virginité is unlawful because God said: 'Increase and multiply and fill the earth'. He answers that some must do this (marry) for the sake of the whole human race, but others must remain virgins to contemplate divine things for the sake of the whole of humanity.

Religious make a public profession, but virgins in the world make no such public profession. Nevertheless theirs must be an interior profession which extends to all of their living. Their actions and their entire life must bear witness to their Spouse. That is precisely why he wills them to be in the world.

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I suppose I shouldn't have started off on all this—it isn't what Father told me to write about—but to finish up: the part virgins in the world play in the restoration of marriage is different of course from the apostolate of 'like by like'.

They can have the influence which nuns in convents cannot have because they (in the world) are accessible, they are not noticeably different or set apart from everybody else; they are still lay! However, their influence is different from the one girls who are interested in getting married have on other girls of like mind, or which married women have on other married women. They influence girls who are thinking of marriage (and they help married women with their difficulties) not by being like them, in having dates and so forth, but by genuine interest, sympathy and love—by being completely approachable and totally lacking in a shocked attitude toward sex. These are just ideas I've been mulling over, but I think they may be true because they help to explain why God wills there should be virgins living in the world at a time when all apostolates appear to converge on the restoration of society through Christian family life.

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A few things I should add:

I didn't mean to imply, in giving what I thought might be the reasons for virginity in the world today, that that is why I made the vow. It was simply that it seemed God's will for me, that I had a very real certainty that he wants me in the world and not in a convent but that I must belong completely to him. I have discovered—in this as well as in other matters—that God often indicates what he wishes me to do, and only later gives the rhyme and reason for it.

It seems to me that one thing anybody who lives a life of virginity in the world has to guard against is 'going her own sweet way'. Of course, obedience guards against doing one's own will, and that is why I'm glad I have a vow of obedience as well as a vow of chastity. But what I mean to say is that the circumstances of a married woman's life are such that she has less opportunity of becoming comfortable and selfish. I can see that in the hardships my married sister has, or in our neighbour's having all her children sick with chicken-pox and then measles! A life of chastity isn't supposed to make life easier—except that it is supposed to make it easier to love God more perfectly and with one's whole being—but it isn't supposed to make it easier in the sense of making it more comfortable. We who escape the hardships

and sacrifices of married life must realise we are called to even more difficult sacrifices, more complete immolation. It is this realisation constantly alive before us which will guard against our becoming selfish spinsters. I can see this especially as far as little things are concerned, because they are not discussed with our director, nor do they come under the matter of obedience—like being attached to one's daily bath, or having one's tea a certain way, or one's room always in perfect order. Yet we must become flexible in God's hands and guard strongly against inflexibility. A vow of chastity should keep one young, for one is to remain always the young bride of Christ—becoming daily more radiant at the wonder of his love, being surprised every day at discovering something new about him. There cannot be any of this growing staid or settled. His love is always fresh, always thrilling, and a vow of chastity should mean a perpetual wedding day.

Living a life of virginity in the world calls for one sacrifice, and that is the sacrifice of an honourable position. A married woman has status and a nun has dignity, but a single woman generally is pitied or considered an old maid and nothing more. This, of course, I don't think very important. But it can be a sacrifice offered to God.

And I was happy that making my vow was stripped to its bare essential. No glamour about it, no ceremony. And I was aware of the Trinity and our Lady and that it was all so solemn, so sacred that it concerned only them and me. They have the glory of it, and I the humility.