

## Chapter 11: Our Life in Consecrated Chastity

By MJ Groark

According to the website for Saint Xavier University, the college I have studied at for the last four years, nearly 70% of the enrolled student body is female. Needless to say, the call to a life of consecrated chastity is very real to me, and is a dimension of my vocation that I am constantly aware of.

Chapter 11 of our constitutions, as I read it, presents the call to chastity as a means towards a life of freedom and grace. There was a time in my early discernment where I thought chastity might be an unrealistic ideal. I viewed chastity as an end in and of itself. I thought that chastity meant that I would have to take up a life of radical asceticism and bodily mortification in order to keep these unruly senses and imagination of mine in check. This is surely what God wants! However, this was a shortsighted, destructive way of understanding the vow, and a terrible way of imagining how to integrate my sexuality in a healthy and holistic manner.

The majority of my life prior to the Capuchins was lived in a very selfish and isolated manner. Back then, the idea of chastity would have stuck me as irrational, impossible, and unnatural. This was most likely due to a world view I constructed with my ego in the center, and any life decision that detracted from my immediate gratification, or selfish desires was thought of as a bad idea. This was also a world view that largely rejected the notion of community or real relationships that may detract from a highly individualistic way of life.

As I have grown and been formed in this fraternity, and as our constitutions make clear, the call to consecrated chastity is not an end in itself, but rather a means towards personal and spiritual liberation, and ultimately it can serve as a vehicle towards healthy relationships. Chastity is “a reflection of the infinite love binding the three divine Persons,” and considering the kenotic action of God, “impels a response of total love for God and for one’s brothers and sisters.” The call to chastity should have as its source and goal to be in relationship. Taking up this vow should never bind, hinder, or limit me. Rather, it should serve to liberate, free, and inspire me towards a life of incredible joy emanating from true and plentiful relationships with my Capuchin brothers, and the wider world.

This vow has not been easy, but we are told “affective and sexual maturity gradually travels a path of conversion from a self-centered and possessive love to one that is self-sacrificing and capable of giving itself to others.” When I struggle with this vow, at university for example, I have to remind myself that this is a journey of constant conversion. I have to look within myself and wonder whether my impulses are self-centered or self-sacrificing. Truth be told, they are usually the former. This is where I find an opportunity for growth, and a real dependence on God’s grace and mercy.

The goal, I suppose, is to one day “give witness of a love that is gratuitous and universal.” There have been several ways that this is slowly becoming a reality for me in my vocation. First,

I have the constant support of the brothers who help to support me, form me, and inspire me towards the upmost integrity in my vocation. Second, I stay close to the sacraments, and try very hard to be faithful to a life of prayer. Finally, I have found that many areas of my life that were difficult become a bit easier to manage when I take charge of my health. When I allow my physical well being to fall apart, I find that I struggle with the vows as well. The more I mature in this life, and allow myself to be open to a spirituality that includes "self-mastery and discipline," I find that I become more available to God's grace working in my vocation. For me to progress in this life, and with special attention to the vow of chastity, I have become absolutely aware that body, mind, and soul are all intimately connected and need to be equally nurtured and maintained. In other words, I have to learn to love myself and care for myself first before I can offer a well-integrated sexuality that is free, healthy, and available to be offered to the rest of the world.

Saint Francis "captivated by a love for God and for all peoples, indeed for all created beings, is a brother and a friend of all. He was noted for the richness of his affections and his capacity to express them." I desire to have just a sliver Francis' ability to love. Francis clung to nothing, even his sexuality. He struggled for sure, but he gave me a model of conversion that leads to amazing freedom. Pope Francis has called on religious men and women to "wake up the world." I find that my call to consecrated chastity is a vehicle towards deep, authentic relationships that will help me to engage a world that is often asleep when presented with freely given authentic love.