



How Catholics Live



Section 8:

The Sixth & Ninth Commandments: Sexual Morality



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

THE SIXTH AND NINTH COMMANDMENTS: SEXUAL MORALITY

PART THREE • SECTION EIGHT OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

PART III: HOW CATHOLICS LIVE
(MORALITY)

SECTION 8: SEXUAL MORALITY

The Sixth Commandment:
You shall not commit adultery

The Ninth Commandment: You shall not
covet your neighbor's wife

1. The contemporary situation

By its own admission, what our age finds most unacceptable in the Church's perennial wisdom is her sexual morality. Almost every controversial issue dividing "dissenters," inside the Church as well as outside, from the Church's traditional teaching today is about sexual morality: fornication (sex outside marriage), contraception, homosexuality, divorce, and, most radically of all, abortion. For abortion too is a sexual issue, for it is demanded as backup birth control, and birth control is the demand to have sex without having babies.

The Church has always shared her Master's holy unpopularity. But never before the "sexual revolution" did her (and his) unpopularity center almost exclusively on sex.

In all eras and cultures, fallen man has never been very good at obeying any of God's commandments. Man has always failed to practice what he preaches. But today he denies the preaching, the ideal itself.

But only when it concerns sex. A cross-section of popular movies and TV will reveal that most other areas of traditional morality are still assumed to be rightful and attainable ideals. But traditional sexual morality is almost always assumed to be unhealthy and unattainable, and the Church is usually portrayed as obsessed with sexual morality.

This obsession with sex is not the Church's, but the world's – though the world often projects it onto the Church, its critic. There is much more to the Church's sexual morality than “just say no,” much more to the Church's morality than sexual morality, and much more to the Church's teaching than morality. This series is divided into 30 Sections, and this Section on sexual morality is only one of the 30.

Each age has a different perspective. It seems incredible to most modern minds that the universal Church nearly endured a worldwide schism over the right date to celebrate Easter, in the fourth century, and did go into schism over whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only, or from the Father and the Son, in the eleventh century, and over the relation between faith and works, in the sixteenth century. All our Catholic ancestors, whether from the fourth, eleventh, or sixteenth centuries, would be just as shocked at our preoccupation with sexual morality as we are at their very different priorities.

We should not expect the Church's teachings to coincide with “the wisdom of this world” (1 Corinthians 1:20) in any age or culture, for her teachings do not come from this world but from Heaven, not from man but from God. Man has gone off the

track set for him by God – “sin” *means* separation from God – so God’s track has always appeared to fallen man as “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” (1 Peter 2:8), just as Christ himself did. We should expect that. G. K. Chesterton said, “I don’t need a church to tell me I’m wrong where I already know I’m wrong; I need a Church to tell me I’m wrong where I think I’m right.”

2. *The need for sexual morality*

There are three things we need – holiness, happiness, and health – because there are three levels on which we live: spirit, soul, and body; our relationships with God, with ourselves and others, and with the material world

Living according to God’s laws makes us holy, happy, and healthy. Violating them makes us unholy, unhappy, and unhealthy. This is as true of sex as of anything else.

First, sexual sin is *sin*, and separates us from God.

Second, since God loves us and wants our happiness, disobedience to his plan for us will necessarily bring us unhappiness. Worldly statistics confirm this heavenly logic: every one of the sins that adulterate sexual love brings with it a catalog of miseries. For instance, divorce, which is the suicide of the “one flesh” created by marriage. Divorce means the destruction of society’s most indispensable foundation, the family, and it will inevitably stamp the same destructive marks on society at large as it already has on its immediate victims, millions of children: a hard, cynical spirit, the death of security, of trust, of faith in persons and promises and in the adventure of self-giving love.

Third, sexual sin has obvious and radical health effects: the epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases now affecting over half

of all sexually active people, the fear of AIDS, and the rising infertility rate. But the most notable physical effect of the “sexual revolution” is *death*. The human victims in just one generation of the abortion holocaust in most Western nations already vastly outnumber the victims of all the wars in their history.

It is high time to turn our attention to God’s alternative.

3. *The need for “the big picture:” some basic principles*

Controversies have a way of narrowing our vision. They are usually resolved only by backing up and enlarging our perspective, especially by looking at foundations. The foundations of Catholic sexual morality include:

- God as the Creator and Designer of sexuality;
- the centrality of love (the very nature of God) and the need to “get *that* right” above all;
- the holiness of matter, and the body, and procreation, and sexual love as an image of divine love;
- the primacy of the family;
- the Church as the extension of Christ, and her teaching authority as an extension of his;
- the divinely designed intrinsic purpose of sex as pro-creating new eternal persons for God’s family;
- and above all, sex as a sign of the goodness of life. Every baby conceived is a sign that God has not given up on man. It is not a mere product of automatic nature, but a deliberate act of God. God makes a soul when we make a body. He is not forced to do this; he chooses to.

4. *Sexuality is not merely physical*

“*Sexuality* affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul” (CCC 2332)*. It is not merely biological, as it is with animals, any more than eating and drinking are merely biological, as they are with animals. Our sexual identity extends to our souls, our personalities, our spirits. There is indeed a “feminine *mind*” and a “masculine *mind*,” as well as body, for we are a “psychosomatic unity” (soul-body unity). To think of one’s soul and mind as neither masculine nor feminine is to separate body and soul artificially, as did the ancient Gnostics; likewise to think of the soul as a sexless “ghost in a machine” instead of the life and “form of the body,” and to think of masculinity and femininity as merely a biological, animal thing.

5. *Complementarity*

It is no accident that “opposites attract,” sexually as well as electromagnetically. There is both “*difference and complementarity*” (CCC 2333) between the sexes. Men and women are different, by nature and divine design, not just by society’s conventions. These differences are meant for union: each is for the other. God judged that “it is not good that man should be alone” (Genesis 2: 18) – for God himself is not alone, but a Trinitarian society.

“Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way” (CCC 2335). Power is by nature more obvious in men, tenderness in women; yet a complete man is also tender and a complete woman is also powerful.

*CCC= *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

6. *Sexuality as an image of God*

As soon as Scripture mentions “the image of God,” it mentions sexuality: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Sexuality is an image of God by being a reflection of the Trinity: as God is one yet three, spouses are two yet one. *Relationship* “goes all the way up” into divinity.

More specifically, *family* relationships “go all the way up.” We ascend from one level of the mystery – biological and psychological complementarity – to another – the human family as “the domestic church” (CCC 2204) – to yet another – the Church as “the family of God” – until we reach the highest and holiest mystery of all, the nature of Ultimate Reality, the nature of God; and we find that this too is a family, the “divine family” of the Trinity. It is all the same mystery, on different levels.

The Church sees the mystery of sexuality in this larger context. We often do not. That is the deepest reason why her wisdom often contradicts ours.

7. *Marriage personalizes sexuality*

“Sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another in the [1] complete and [2] lifelong [3] mutual [4 free] gift [5] of a man and a woman” (CCC 2337) – the five essential ingredients in a marriage. Marriage is complete “self-donation,” physical body and spiritual will. Lovers find their deepest thrill in the discovery of this intimacy: that they can actually give their very selves to each other, not just their time, possessions, work, goodwill, and pleasures.

Sexual intercourse effects this self-donation in the most intimate and complete way. For this is an intercourse of whole persons, not merely of animal bodies. “Sexuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is not something simply biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such....”¹⁴³ (CCC 2361). This is why “[t]he acts in marriage by which the intimate...union of the spouses takes place are noble and honorable; the truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify...”¹⁴⁵ (CCC 2362). Note the surprising similarity here to the Church’s formula for a sacrament: a sign that actually effects or fosters what it signifies.

8. *The relation between sex and marriage*

The Church’s teaching on the relationship between sex and marriage is very simple and very clear. It is the same as that of orthodox Judaism and Islam, and has never changed. “The sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion” (CCC 2390) until repented of and forgiven in sacramental confession.

9. *Chastity*

The one word that refers to all sexual virtue as opposed to all sexual vices is “chastity.” It does *not* mean the same thing as *abstinence* (abstaining from sexual intercourse), for chastity includes good sexual intercourse between spouses. It means *purity*: pure sex, unadulterated sex, right sex, not crooked sex.

Since we are all tempted to “crooked sex,” chastity requires *self-control*, self-mastery. This is not “repression” or

“enslavement;” in fact it alone is the road to freedom. “Chastity includes an *apprenticeship in self-mastery* which is a training in human freedom. The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy.¹²⁶ ‘Man’s dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within, and not by blind impulses in himself or by mere external constraint...’¹²⁷ (CCC 2339).

Chastity is also a form of *charity*. “Charity is the *form* [essence] of all the virtues. Under its influence, chastity appears as...the gift of the person” (CCC 2346), or “self-donation” – the very heart of charity.

10. *Chastity requires society’s help*

“Chastity represents an eminently personal task; [but] it also involves a *cultural effort*, for there is ‘an interdependence between personal betterment and the improvement of society’¹³¹ (CCC 2344). A good society cannot come from any other source than good persons; and one of the strongest factors that help make good persons, in turn, is a good society. If a good society is “a society that makes it easy to be good” (Peter Maurin), then modern Western society is not a good society, especially with regard to chastity.

11. *Sins against chastity*

The *Catechism* lists six specific sins against chastity: 1) lust, 2) masturbation, 3) fornication, 4) pornography, 5) prostitution, and 6) rape.

- 1) “*Lust* is disordered desire... for sexual pleasure... [It is] morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes” (cf. 2528; CCC 2351).

Lust does not mean sexual pleasure as such, nor the delight in it, nor the desire for it in its right context. Contrary to what the world thinks, the Church teaches that sexual pleasure is good, not evil. For God invented sex and its pleasure. “The Creator...himself established that in the generative function spouses should experience pleasure and enjoyment of body and spirit....”¹⁴⁶ (CCC 2362). It is natural and right that great pleasure accompany great things, and the human sexual act is a great thing because of its two great essential purposes: 1) uniting man and woman in “one flesh,” body and soul, in mutual self-donation, and 2) procreating new persons who bear God’s own image and will exist forever – the closest man ever comes to sharing God’s own power of creation.

The essence of sex, like any intelligently designed thing, is in its purpose. Lust, like any sin, must be seen against that background. Lust divorces the two things God designed to be together, it seeks the pleasure *apart from* the purpose.

No spontaneous thoughts and feelings can be sins until they are willed or consented to by the will. Thoughts and feelings of sexual arousal are not lust; lust is willing the thoughts and feelings just for the pleasure, without the purposes of the marriage union (personal self-donation and procreation).

- 2) “By *masturbation* is to be understood the deliberate stimulation of the genital organs in order to derive sexual pleasure. ‘Both the Magisterium [teaching authority] of the Church, in the course of a constant tradition, and the moral sense of the faithful have been

in no doubt and have firmly maintained that masturbation is an intrinsically and gravely disordered action.’¹³⁸ ‘The deliberate use of the sexual faculty, for whatever reason, outside marriage is essentially contrary to its purpose...’¹³⁹ (CCC 2352). Masturbation is wrong for the same reason lust is wrong, with the physical act now added to the mental act:

“For here sexual pleasure is sought outside of ‘the sexual relationship...in which...mutual self-giving and human procreation...is achieved’”¹³⁹ (CCC 2352).

However, “[t]o form an equitable judgment about the subjects’ moral responsibility...one must take into account the affective [emotional] immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychological or social factors...” (CCC 2352).

This sin, like lust, is very common and, in that sense, “natural.” But that no more makes it right, or innocent, than the fact that selfishness is common makes it innocent. The “natural law” is not derived from observing how people do in fact usually behave, but from how their human nature is to be fulfilled and respected.

- 3) “*Fornication* is carnal union between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. It is gravely contrary to the dignity of persons and of human sexuality which is naturally ordered to the good of spouses and the generation and education of children” (CCC 2353). *Adultery* is even more gravely wrong because at least one of the parties is married to another (see paragraph 16).

(By the way, the use of the words “gravely” and “dignity” does not signify an attitude of humorlessness or pomposity. Good sex can be quite healthily humorous. Rather, “dignity” means “greatness or high honor”; and “gravely” means “very much, not lightly.”)

- 4) “*Pornography* consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners in order to display them deliberately to third parties....[I]t perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other.... It is a grave offense. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials” (CCC 2354).
- 5) “*Prostitution* does injury to the dignity of the person who engages in it, reducing the person to an instrument of sexual pleasure.... Prostitution is a social scourge. It usually involves women, but also men, children, and adolescents. (The latter two cases involve the added sin of scandal.) While it is always gravely sinful to engage in prostitution, the imputability of the offense can be attenuated by destitution, blackmail, or social pressure” (CCC 2355).
- 6) “*Rape* is the forcible violation of the sexual intimacy of another person.... Rape deeply wounds the respect, freedom, and physical and moral integrity to which every person has a right. It causes grave damage that can mark the victim for life. It is always an intrinsically evil act. Graver still is the rape of children committed by parents (incest) or those responsible for the education of the children entrusted to them” (CCC 2356).

12. *Homosexuality*

“Homosexuality refers to [sexual] relations between men or between women who experience...sexual attraction to persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained.”

“Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity [Genesis 19:1-29; Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:10; 1 Timothy 1:10],¹⁴¹ tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’¹⁴² They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity [that is, they refuse the divinely designed “otherness” built into sexuality]. Under no circumstances can they be approved” (CCC 2357).

There is no doubt, no “gray area,” and no change in the Church’s teaching about the objective sinfulness of homosexual acts. However, improved psychological and biological knowledge require us to be much less judgmental about the subjective culpability of homosexual persons. “This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided” (CCC 2358).

It is also necessary to make a sharp distinction between homosexual *desires*, or a homosexual “orientation,” and homosexual *acts*. We are responsible for the acts we choose to perform, but not for the desires we experience (unless we freely will them or consent to them). Homosexual desires are *disordered*, but they are not *sins*.

“Homosexual persons are called to chastity” (CCC 2359) just as heterosexual persons are. They need the virtue of self-control to conquer powerfully attractive desires for illicit pleasures, just as heterosexual persons do. And they can be serious and even saintly Christians just as heterosexual persons can.

However, we must distinguish persons who experience homosexual desires from persons who choose to embrace the homosexual (or “gay”) lifestyle. “Dignity” is an organization of “gay Catholics” who justify their homosexual acts and seek to change the Church’s perennial teaching against them. “Courage” is an organization of homosexual Catholics who support each other in the sincere effort to live in chastity in fidelity to Christ and his Church. The difference between them typifies the fundamental difference between two kinds of morality (on any issue, not just homosexuality): the first seeks to conform the teaching of Christ’s Church to fallen human desires and sinful lifestyles; the second seeks to conform human lives to the teachings of Christ’s Church. The first group treats the Church as their pupil, the second as their teacher.

13. *Birth control*

What is usually called “birth *control*” is really birth *prevention*. This, the Church opposes. Essentially, the Church’s teaching is 1) that birth is wonderful and 2) that birth control can be legitimate, but 3) that birth prevention (contraception) is not. Each point must be understood in light of the one before it.

- 1) “Fecundity is a gift, an *end of marriage*, for conjugal love naturally tends to be fruitful. A child does not come from outside as something added on to the mutual love of the spouses, [or as an “accident”!] but springs from

the very heart of that mutual giving, as its fruit and fulfillment” (CCC 2366).

- 2) If two criteria are met, birth control is legitimate: a subjectively good intention and an objectively good means, or method, or way of regulating births. “For just reasons, spouses may wish to space the births of their children. It is their duty to make certain that [a] their desire is not motivated by selfishness but is in conformity with the generosity appropriate to responsible parenthood. [b] Moreover, they should conform their behavior to the objective criteria of morality... ‘[For] the morality of the behavior does not depend on sincere intention and evaluation of motives alone; but it must be determined by objective criteria, criteria drawn from the nature of the person and his acts...’”¹⁵⁶ (CCC 2368). “[M]ethods of birth regulation based on self-observation and the use of infertile periods is in conformity with the objective criteria of morality. These methods respect the bodies of the spouses” (CCC 2370). Natural Family Planning (NFP) is such a method. It is much more reliable than the old “rhythm method,” as successful as “the pill,” and fosters such great intimacy and communication among its users that they have a one percent divorce rate as compared with society’s 50 percent.
- 3) “[T]he Church, which ‘is on the side of life’¹⁵¹ teaches that ‘it is necessary that each and every marriage act remain ordered *per se* to the procreation of human life’”¹⁵² (CCC 2366; *Humanae Vitae*). Man may take advantage of God’s naturally designed infertile periods, but he may not himself try to redesign fertility and lock the door of

his fertility against God's coming. Contraception is "protection" against *God*.

For every conception is an act of God, not only of a man and a woman. We only *procreate*; God *creates* a new immortal soul at each conception. "Let all be convinced that human life and the duty of transmitting it are not limited by the horizons of this life only: their true evaluation and full significance can be understood only in reference to *man's eternal destiny*"¹⁶¹ (CCC 2371). The sex act is like the consecration at the Eucharist, and contraception is like saying the words of consecration while deliberately preventing it from happening (e.g. by using no bread). What contraception deliberately prevents is not an "accident," but an act of God.

"This particular doctrine, expounded on numerous occasions by the Magisterium, is based on the inseparable connection, established by God, which man on his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent to the marriage act"¹⁵³ (CCC 2366). The act *means* "I give you my whole self, with nothing held back" *and* "we hereby perform pro-creation." "The language of the body" speaks a word in the sex act which by its own essence means both mutual self-giving union and openness to procreation. To contracept is to lie, to say one thing with the body and the opposite thing with the contraceptive instrument. The body says, "Let there be new life," while the instrument says, "Let this life be prevented."

"Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of not giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of

the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality...”¹⁶⁰ (CCC 2370).

Even if all this teaching is not fully *understood* by one’s reason, it must be *believed* by faith; for being a Catholic must include believing some things on God’s authority, not our own. That is one of the things “faith” means. And even if polls show a large percentage of Catholics disagreeing with the Church’s teaching, in belief and in practice, on this or any other issue, God does not change his mind and will to conform to opinion polls. We did not elect him to be God, and we cannot vote him out of office.

14. *Large families*

Family size is rightly under the authority of parents, and responsible birth regulation by natural methods is a good thing. Not everyone can or should have many children. However, “Sacred Scripture and the Church’s tradition...see in *large families* a sign of God’s blessing and the parents’ generosity”¹⁶³ (CCC 2373). Large families are another sign of the radical difference between the outlook of the God of life and “the culture of death.”

15. *Sins against procreation*

“Techniques that entail the dissociation of husband and wife, by the intrusion of a person other than the couple (donation of sperm or ovum, surrogate uterus), are gravely immoral. These techniques (heterologous artificial insemination and fertilization) infringe the child’s right to be born of a father and mother known to him and bound to each other by marriage” (CCC 2376).

“Techniques involving only the married couple (homologous artificial insemination and fertilization) are perhaps less reprehensible, yet remain morally unacceptable. They

dissociate the sexual act from the procreative act. The act which brings the child into existence is no longer an act by which two persons give themselves to one another, but one that ‘entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children’¹⁶⁸ (CCC 2377). *Procreating* turns into *manufacturing*, and persons (children) are turned into objects.

16. Adultery

Adultery is gravely immoral for at least three reasons.

- 1) “Adultery is an injustice. He who commits adultery fails in his commitment. He...transgresses the rights of the other spouse...” (CCC 2381).
- 2) He does injury to the marriage bond and undermines the institution of marriage.
- 3) “He compromises the...welfare of children, who need their parents’ stable union” (CCC 2381).

The adulterer sins against his spouse, his society, and his children, as well as his own body and soul.

17. Divorce

The Church cannot allow divorce, as almost all Protestant churches do, because she does not have the authority to contradict Christ her Master (see Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Mark 10:9; Luke 16:18.) “The Lord Jesus insisted on the original intention of the Creator who willed that marriage be indissoluble.¹⁷⁴ He abrogates the accommodations [for divorce] that had slipped into the old [Jewish] Law”¹⁷⁵ (CCC 2382). In

fidelity to her Master, the Church teaches that “a ratified and consummated marriage [between two baptized Christians] cannot be dissolved by any human power or any reason other than death”¹⁷⁶ (CCC 2382).

The Church’s prohibition of divorce can be understood only in light of her teaching on marriage. The most important aspect of this teaching, and the one hardest for many today to understand and accept, is that marriage is not a human invention. It has its own unchangeable inner essence, like anything else in nature, as designed by God.

Part of its essence is its indissolubility. Once two people freely create a marriage and become “one flesh,” this cannot be un-created or dissolved “for any reason other than death.” It is like a child. Ending it before death is simply not a possibility offered to us by objective reality. In other words, divorce is not just *bad*, it’s an *illusion*, a fantasy. The “one flesh” is as objectively real as a rhinoceros, and as non-negotiable. It may be good or bad, happy or sad, but it is real. We can disguise it, or ignore it, but it will go on existing, even if we declare it dead by divorce. It is not dependent on our will or our love to keep existing.

“*Divorce* is a grave offense against the natural law. It claims to break the contract, to which the spouses freely consented, to live with each other till death” (CCC 2384). It is the *prime* example of promise-breaking, as marriage is the prime example of promise-keeping, and the primary human image of God’s covenant with us. We are the people of a faithful God, not one who breaks faith.

“Contracting a new union, even if it is recognized by civil law, adds to the gravity of the rupture: the remarried spouse is then in a situation of public and permanent adultery” (CCC 2384).

It would *not* be “compassionate” for the Church to allow divorce. The Church forbids divorce precisely because she is compassionate, and knows that divorce “brings grave harm to the deserted spouse, to children traumatized by the separation of their parents and often torn between them, and because of its contagious effect which makes it truly a plague on society” (CCC 2385). Children of divorce find it much harder to have stable marriages. The Church’s “No” to divorce gives Catholics who marry (and their children) a wonderful sense of security. In a society where half of all marriages end in divorce, the Church mercifully locks the exit door to that tragedy.

Like her teaching on contraception, the Church’s teaching on divorce is rejected by many today, in belief and/or in practice, and constitutes a test of faith; for faith believes what God tells us is true and good for us because it is designed by the love and wisdom of God, even when we do not understand it. Faith gives permission to God’s revelation to correct and instruct our fallible human minds and fallen human wills, realizing that God’s wisdom is bound to contradict man’s – unless man and his culture are not fallen. Catholic Christianity is always counter-cultural in some way. For instance, the Church’s prohibition of polygamy is just as counter-cultural in Africa as her prohibition of divorce in America. Each human culture, like each human being, has its blind spots. One of the reasons God gave us his Church is to correct and instruct us.

There are three things the Church does allow that are often confused with divorce.

A *separation* is not a divorce, and is justified in extreme examples such as domestic violence.

An *annulment* is not a divorce. It is a finding that there never was a valid marriage to begin with, because one of the essential

ingredients that make a valid marriage was missing from the beginning. Although annulments may have been overused and abused in practice, especially in America, they remain valid in principle – like “indulgences” (see Part II, Section 5, paragraph 19).

A *civil divorce* is not a Church-recognized divorce either. Therefore “[I]f civil divorce remains the only way of ensuring certain legal rights, the care of children, or the protection of inheritance, it can be tolerated and does not constitute a moral offense” (CCC 2383). What marriage means to the State is very different from what it means to the Church.

18. *The ninth Commandment*

The ninth Commandment (You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife) adds an internal dimension to the sixth Commandment (You shall not commit adultery), just as the tenth Commandment (You shall not covet your neighbor’s goods) adds an internal dimension to the seventh Commandment (You shall not steal). Already in the Old Testament law God revealed that he wants not only morally good actions but also morally good hearts. For Love is not satisfied with external deeds alone.

19. *The meaning of the “heart”*

The ninth Commandment forbids an act of the *heart* (coveting another’s spouse). The “heart” is the Scriptural term for the very center of the soul, as the physical heart is the center and source of life-blood in the body. The “heart” is deeper than feelings, emotions, or sentiments. It is also deeper than thought, for it is the source of thoughts as it is the source of feelings. Solomon advises, “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23). “The heart is the seat of moral personality: ‘Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder,

adultery, fornication....³⁰⁵ [Matthew 15:19; as well as good thoughts, charity, purity, and honor]. The struggle against carnal covetousness entails purifying the heart...” (CCC 2517). We must begin farther back than with actions; we must “take every *thought* captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

20. “Concupiscence”

“Coveting” your neighbor’s wife or husband is similar to “lusting after” her or him. We are responsible for it, for we choose to do it or not to do it. There is no sin where there is no free choice.

Coveting is to be distinguished from concupiscence, which is not our free choice but our condition (as “original sin” is our condition and each “actual sin” is our choice). “Concupiscence” means “the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of the human reason” (CCC 2515). What reason says No to, concupiscence says Yes to. “Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins”³⁰³ (CCC 2515). No one can avoid concupiscence. But we can avoid obeying it and being dominated by it. It is like an albatross around our neck, but it need not be our master.

21. “Body” vs. “flesh”

“It is not a matter of despising and condemning the body....” (CCC 2516); Scripture condemns “the *flesh*” (*sarx*, *sakra*), not the *body* (*soma*). The body comes from God’s creation; the “flesh” comes from man’s fall. “The works of the flesh” listed in Galatians 5:19-21 include non-bodily sins such as idolatry, jealousy, and selfishness. The *high* ideals of Catholic sexual

morality stem precisely from a high view of the body, as “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19), not from a low one.

22. *Modesty*

Chastity and purity are essentially the same in every time and place. They must be distinguished from *modesty* (avoiding sexually provocative action, speech, and dress), which is culturally variable. “The forms taken by modesty vary from one culture to another. Everywhere, however, modesty exists as an intuition of the spiritual dignity proper to man [and to human sexuality]” (CCC 2524). Modesty is an important *aid* to chastity.

23. *The rewards of chastity*

“The sixth beatitude proclaims, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.’³⁰⁷ ‘Pure in heart’ refers to those who have attuned their intellects and wills to the demands of God’s holiness, chiefly in three areas: charity;³⁰⁸ chastity or sexual rectitude;³⁰⁹ and love of truth and orthodoxy of faith.³¹⁰ There is a connection between purity of heart, of body, and of faith.... ‘pure hearts may understand what they believe’”³¹¹ (CCC 2518).

“The ‘pure in heart’ are promised that they will see God face to face and be like him.³¹² Purity of heart is the precondition of the vision of God. Even now it enables us to see *according* to God...” (CCC 2519). “The heart has its reasons, which the reason does not know” (Pascal): it is the lover who best understands the beloved, human or divine. This is why saints are wiser than mere theologians. Pure love yields pure knowledge.

24. *Some practical helps*

Today, as never before, many feel that these two Commandments, unlike all the others, are unrealistic: too

difficult, or even impossible, for man to keep. They are indeed difficult, but not impossible. We should not be surprised that obedience is difficult for us, since each fallen human soul is a battlefield between good and evil, love and its counterfeits. But God does not ask the impossible. The saints offer some practical orientations, some weapons of spiritual warfare to conquer sin in any area, especially the area of sex, where modern man seems to need the most help:

1. Humility is the first requirement. We must admit that we cannot succeed by ourselves. We must confess, with Saint Paul, “I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh” (Romans 7:18) but we must also confess that “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13). Saint Thomas Aquinas says that God often withholds grace from us and lets us fall into obvious sin in order to prevent our more calamitous fall into the more subtle and more serious sin of pride and self-satisfaction.
2. We must also be uncompromising about truth, and demand total honesty with ourselves, never hiding or evading the light, no matter how uncomfortable (see Part III, Section 10).
3. The sacrament of reconciliation is our most powerful weapon against any sin. Satan hates and fears it and the Eucharist more than anything else in this world.
4. We can do something, and not just wait for temptations to come. We can fight offensive, not just defensive, spiritual warfare, and be proactive rather than just reactive, by voluntary penances, cheerfully chosen for love of God’s honor.

5. We must resolve to give God *everything*, including our very first thoughts (2 Corinthians 10:5). For, “sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”
6. Saint Thomas Aquinas says that “the only thing strong enough to overcome an evil desire is a stronger good desire.” Love, not fear or loathing, can overcome lust. Love of Heaven, not disgust with earth, overcomes inordinate love of earth.
7. Christ gave us his Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary, from the Cross (John 19:26-27) as our own mother and model. Images of holy motherhood can combat images of impurity.
8. Remember that there are no “victimless crimes,” that every time you weaken your soul you injure the Body of Christ and every member of it, including those you love the most.
9. As with any long and hard struggle, take it “one day at a time,” and one step at a time. The present problem is the only one that is real; let tomorrow and yesterday take care of themselves.
10. Remember who you are: God’s child, bought with the price of Christ’s blood, destined for Heaven. We act out our perceived identities. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?” (1 Corinthians 6:15).
11. Remember where you are going. “Look to the end.” There are few sins man will commit on his deathbed. But we are on our deathbed as soon as we are born.

12. Remember where you are: on a battlefield, not an easy chair. If you are a Christian, you are a spiritual warrior.
13. Remember that the battle is especially urgent today, when Christ's Church faces a "culture of death."
14. Remember who the enemy is: "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).
15. Remember that Good is infinitely stronger than Evil. Remember that Satan has been conquered definitively and forever by what Christ did for you on the Cross. Take refuge *there*.

The most important aspect of the whole topic of sexual morality is Jesus Christ. He is the Word (Mind) of God who designed sex; he is the One whose love gave his blood as the price of our forgiveness for abusing his designs; and he is the one who assures us, in his very last words on earth, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end" (Matthew 28:20).

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

¹⁴³ FC 11.

¹⁴⁵ GS 49 § 2.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Sir* 1:22.

¹²⁷ GS 17.

¹³¹ GS 25 § 1.

¹⁴⁶ Pius XII, Discourse, October 29, 1951.

¹³⁸ CDE, *Persona humana* 9.

¹³⁹ CDE, *Person humana* 9.

- ¹⁴¹ Cf. *Gen* 19:1-29; *Rom* 1:24-27; *1 Cor* 6:10; *1 Tim* 1:10.
- ¹⁴² CDE, *Persona humana* 8.
- ¹⁵⁶ *GS* 51 § 3.
- ¹⁵¹ *FC* 30.
- ¹⁵² *HV* 11.
- ¹⁶¹ *GS* 51 § 4.
- ¹⁵³ *HV* 12; cf. Pius XI, encyclical, *Casti connubii*.
- ¹⁶⁰ *FC* 32.
- ¹⁶³ Cf. *GS* 50 § 2.
- ¹⁶⁸ CDE, *Donum vitae* II, 5.
- ¹⁷⁴ Cf. *Mt* 5:31-32; 19:3-9; *Mk* 10:9; *Lk* 16:18; *1 Cor* 7:10-11.
- ¹⁷⁵ Cf. *Mt* 19:7-9.
- ¹⁷⁶ CIC, can. 1141.
- ³⁰⁵ *Mt* 15:19.
- ³⁰³ Cf. *Gen* 3:11; Council of Trent: DS 1515.
- ³⁰⁷ *Mt* 5:8.
- ³⁰⁸ Cf. *1 Tim* 4:3-9; *2 Tim* 2:22.
- ³⁰⁹ Cf. *1 Thess* 4:7; *Col* 3:5; *Eph* 4:19.
- ³¹⁰ Cf. *Titus* 1:15; *1 Tim* 1:3-4; *2 Tim* 2:23-26.
- ³¹¹ St. Augustine, *De fide et symbolo* 10, 25: PL 40, 196.
- ³¹² Cf. *1 Cor* 13:12; *1 Jn* 3:2.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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