

Celibacy vs. chastity?

Question: I get confused about the various uses of the words continence, chastity and celibacy. Are they the same thing?

– Name withheld, via email

Answer: The words are related but also have distinct meanings. Continence, in the wider sense, simply means “self control,” especially related to the body. It comes from the Latin *continentia*, which means “a holding back.” However, over the years, the word “continence” has also developed the more specialized meaning of sexual restraint or the complete abstaining from sexual intercourse. In this case, it is similar to a state of living as a celibate.

Celibacy’s wider meaning refers to anyone who lives in an ongoing state of refraining from sexual intercourse. And in this sense, anyone who is unmarried should live “celibately.” However, a person could eventually marry and the celibacy would cease. More strictly, “celibacy” refers in the Church to a vowed, perpetual state of refraining from sexual relations that religious and priests undertake. Here the celibate state is ongoing and expected to be maintained for life.

Chastity is the virtue whereby we refrain from all unlawful sexual activity and intercourse. It is a virtue all are called to have, but its manifestation will vary based on one’s state in life.

Thus for the married, chastity means fidelity to one’s spouse in body, mind and heart. Any sexual contact with anyone outside of the marriage is adultery. Further, the viewing of pornography and fantasizing about someone other than the spouse is a form of unchastity. The use of contraception is also annexed to unchastity because it willfully excludes openness to the procreative dimension of sex.

For the unmarried, chastity means refraining from any form of genital sexual relations, to include inappropriate touching, immodest or inappropriate conversations, the viewing of pornography, masturbation and sexual fantasizing.

End to purgatory?

Question: I heard a priest who gave an orthodox description of purgatory say, as he concluded, “Purgatory will end when the world ends.” I have not read this before. Can you clarify?

– **Jim Flynn**, via email

Answer: Part of the answer is wrapped up in the mystery of time. We cannot be sure that time in purgatory, and certainly in heaven, is experienced the way it is here. Likely it is not. And if there is time in purgatory, how does it relate to time here? And what the “end” of the world means in temporal relation to heaven and purgatory is unclear.

What we do know is that some sort of purgation is necessary for anyone who dies in sanctifying grace, but is not yet perfected with the holiness necessary to see God (Heb 12:14).

Even if the world ends today, it does not seem reasonable that no purgation would be necessary for those still on earth. So some means to accomplish this would seem necessary. In this sense purgatory (as a process) would exist even if the world ends. But we need not assume that such a purgation will go on for “years” in time as we know it now. The biblical data implies a finished quality to all things on Judgment Day, and this is probably what the priest meant. Yet, God will surely accomplish any needed purifications in a way known to him.

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signed, but anonymity may be requested.