

Perspective: How chastity can lead to good sex

By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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As a colleague and I crossed the parking lot at the Port Richey bureau of the *Tampa Bay Times*, he pointed at the bumper sticker on my car's rear windshield.

He read it aloud: "Chastity is for lovers."

He furrowed his brow and tilted his head, perplexed by what he had read.

"How can chastity be for lovers if it means you can't have sex?" he asked.

What I said surprised him:

It doesn't.

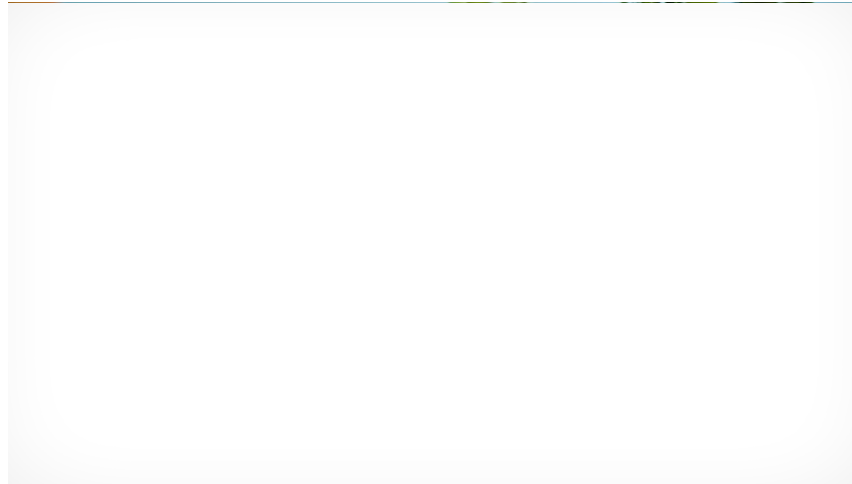
I am a single, 29-year-old virgin, abstinent because as a Roman Catholic Christian, I practice a virtue called chastity. My colleague's misconception of it is classic. He didn't know what too few people do: that chastity isn't abstinence.

Abstinence has only one requirement: no sex. But chastity requires a person to define sex as a sacred, physical sign of the vows husbands and wives made at the altar where they were married, designed to express a married couple's union, and for procreation.

Chastity provides depth where abstinence lacks it. It requires us to abstain from sex outside marriage, but unlike abstinence, it also explains why. Chastity clarifies that we are not supposed to abstain from sex outside marriage because sex is bad (it isn't), or because it will soil us (it won't), but because of what sex is: an expression of the unity achieved by the sacrament of matrimony.

All people who practice chastity must govern their appetites instead of being governed by them. But chastity otherwise implies something different for each of us, depending on our states of life. Chaste single people save sex (or sex from now on) for marriage. We believe marriage is designed to result in the destruction of self-absorption, and that we are designed to create a pleasurable sexual relationship with the person we

marry, not to marry somebody because the sex is "good." Chaste married people agree neither to use nor abuse each other, and to treat sex as a mutual gift of self, not as mutually advantageous selfishness.



Stories about Christian kids, or kids of other religions, who turned into adults who saved sex for marriage and wish they hadn't, fuel derision for the religious belief systems that influenced their decisions to save sex. But their regrets don't out premarital abstinence as a bad idea. They expose an *actual* bad idea: teaching abstinence without also teaching chastity.

Some people who abstain from sex until marriage have traumatic wedding nights, or hate sex, or get divorced. But they do not have traumatic wedding nights, or hate sex, or get divorced because they abstained — abstinence doesn't cause dysfunction. Part of what causes this kind of dysfunction is the promotion of abstinence outside chastity, a virtue that necessitates good sex ed and marriage prep.

Abstinence just challenges us not to have sex. Chastity challenges us to live lives in which desire is subservient to reason, which equips us to love as Jesus does: selflessly.

Children who turn into adults who don't know the difference but were raised in Christian churches have been robbed. The adults who told them to abstain from sex without also discussing chastity, sex or relationships have been irresponsible. "The problem isn't the church's teaching," said Dae Sheridan, a licensed mental health counselor and board certified clinical sexologist. "The problem is ignoring basic tenets of sexuality education."

On their wedding night, Samantha Pugsley and her husband fumbled around in the dark. For her, sex hurt. Afterward, she cried in the bathroom. "If I could go back, I would not wait," she wrote in an

xojane.com essay last year called "It Happened to Me: I Waited Until My Wedding Night to Lose My Virginity and I Regret It."

She wrote that she abstained from sex until marriage because she had signed a pledge when she was 10 that said she would, because if she maintained her virginity until after her wedding, as she had learned at church, "my marriage would be blessed by God."

But at first, she hated sex. Waiting until marriage had not resulted in the happily-ever-after the adults at her church told her it would. A couple years into her marriage, she wrote, she admitted that to her husband.

"My feminist husband was horrified that I'd let him touch me when I didn't want him to. He made me promise I'd never do anything I didn't want to do ever again," wrote Pugsley, who is still married. "It was the first step on a long journey to healing."

Churches like the one Pugsley attended as a kid build walls between kids and sex instead of telling kids the truth about it — that it is possible to create a unique, pleasurable sexual relationship after a wedding; that sex's goodness is far more fundamental than how fast it gratifies you; that it's okay if sexual compatibility isn't intuitive or effortless, because sex isn't static.

"Prepare for the fact that if you don't know how your bodies are going to work together, there's going to be some trial and error," said Sheridan, the counselor. "Most people have to discover each other and communicate."

Kids can't know that if all their parents or preachers ever tell them is "don't do it."

"I didn't know how to transition," Pugsley said. "I couldn't figure out how sex went from bad to good (after a wedding). It still felt bad."

But sex isn't bad. And it's time, by teaching chastity, to make sure that kids become adults who know that.

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