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Chastity for everyone

A monk and bishop argues that we are all called to be chaste

TERESA MORGAN

Chastity: Reconciliation of the Senses

ERIK VARDEN OCSO

(BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM, 176 PP, £14.99)

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SHOULD WE be more chaste? What might become possible if we were? In this timely and thought-provoking book, Erik Varden explores the meaning of an unfashionable but, he argues, important and liberating idea.

Varden is not mainly interested in sexual chastity, although he spends some time on the connection between chastity and sex in Christian tradition. His real concern is with how the practice of chastity can help us find integrity and equilibrium in every part of our lives. This involves learning how to negotiate both the external forces that bear on us and our internal affections or passions, and Varden takes monastic life as an example of a "laboratory" in which this practice has been intensively studied. The ultimate aim of a person who seeks chastity, he argues, is the orientation of our nature towards God and a life lived fully, attentively and fruitfully.

This is a powerful vision, beautifully articulated, and for some people it will be compelling. At the start, oddly, Varden downplays the apologetic aspect of the book, but the rest reads as the invitation to pursue chastity that it is surely intended to be.

Varden begins by distinguishing chastity from celibacy. Celibacy is for the few, chastity for everyone. Nor is chastity about mortifying the flesh or the senses. Varden reports that the English word is related to the Latin *castus*, which is equivalent to *integer*, "whole", and to Greek *katharos*, "pure", and that the equivalent German term derives from the Latin *consciens*, "aware", which he glosses as "a conscious awareness of the good, whole and pure; then, a will to construct one's life by these values".

Varden says that his concern is not to trace the history of chastity, but here an historian becomes nervous. When you offer a linguistic genealogy of a concept, history matters, because concepts exist in place and time and



Erik Varden

cultural communities. *Castus* is occasionally equivalent to *integer* in Latin, usually when one is talking about sacrificial animals which have to be physically "whole" or unblemished to be ritually pure, but *castus* (like *katharos*) almost always means just "pure". *Consciens*, meanwhile, does not particularly mean conscious awareness of the good, identified with the pure or the whole, nor the intention of living in accordance with whatever one identifies as good or whole. *Consciens* nearly always refers to everyday knowing, consciousness, or being privy to knowledge.

Varden is therefore redefining existing terms and concepts somewhat to suit his argument, which is a pity, because it is disingenuous and unnecessary. As an English speaker, he could simply have described the way he is using "chastity" (which does not fall outside English and Catholic usage, taken together) and proceeded from there. It turns out to be a recurring feature of the book that it takes a circuitous and sometimes tendentious route to its point, in which a wealth of cultural references often acts less as a series of stepping stones than an obstacle course for the reader. One 20-page passage, for instance, considers the tensions and contradictory passions which militate against chastity via the Norwegian Battle of Stiklestad, a story about the English Carthusians, the Psalms, T.S. Eliot, Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*, Tim Winton's *Breath*, the poet Emil Boyson, another dodgy Latin etymology, the Book of Genesis, Martin Buber, Rashi of

Troyes, Paul Claudel, Jacques Lusseyran, pictures of a ballerina and Mozart's *Magic Flute* (Bergman production). It is a virtuoso display of high culture, and entertaining in a breathless way, but the argument becomes so fractured into quotations and brief observations, and the references reflect so many other possible lines of thought, that an important point gets lost in the dazzle. I could not help wishing Varden had found a more direct way to engage his audience.

I also wonder about that audience. Varden wants to build bridges between Christianity and secular western society. I am no engineer, but I am pretty sure that to build a bridge you have to know the ground on both sides of whatever you are bridging, and found the structure securely at both ends. There is only a limited sense here of how most contemporary westerners think and live. Varden seems to take it for granted that most people are looking for a higher purpose than the material world can offer. I wish this were true, but it is, to put it mildly, not obvious. He assumes that there are two sexes, two genders and one sexuality and, like it or not, these are no longer the only categories in play. He explicitly sidelines current controversies in and about the Church, despite the fact that, for many people, these challenge, if not invalidate, the Church's right to lecture anyone about chastity. The book is woven through with unexplained technical Christian terms. There is nothing wrong with a book addressing the author's own group, but that does not seem to be what Varden set out to do.

This is a learned and humane book, gracefully written. I hope it stimulates discussion of a topic which deserves much more attention.

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