

Can a book about chastity tell us something important?

EXPLORER: In his new book "Chastity", Erik Varden uses language to strip away empty ideals to reveal human beings wrapped in hope and enveloped in God's love and grace.

BOK

Registered

Erik Varden:

chastity
- Reconciliation of the senses
Bloomsbury Publishing

On the third floor of the National Museum hangs the painting "A scholar" by Harriet Backer. "A scholar"? A curious old word that comes to mind as I read Erik Varden's new book. Varden has written a number of books, spent ten years as a student and lecturer at Cambridge University, was abbot of an English monastery and is now a monk and bishop of Trondheim in the Catholic Church. Recently, the book

"Chastity - Reconciliation of the senses" was published by the major English publisher Bloomsbury.

"KYSKHET"?

Here, Varden embarks on an exploration of a word that he himself writes makes most of us cringe concerned; namely "chastity". Perhaps we might expect a monk to be concerned with chastity. That he gets the rest of us interested in it is more puzzling.

But Varden peels away the old concept layer by layer of misunderstandings and allows us to glimpse a coherent idea that is not hostile to humanity, but rather an expression of how humans can find wholeness in themselves in encounters with and with the help of God. And let me say right away, this is not a book

For Varden dives into the original meanings of the word "chastity", but his own language as a writer and his exploration of words and different narratives adds something on far more levels.

Firstly, Varden expresses himself with a rare clarity. He does not succumb to the temptation to write in such academic and comprehensible language that we ordinary readers do not understand anything. On the contrary, Varden has something he wants to say, and he says it in solid English that one can only hope will be just as good when the book is published in Norwegian.

VAR SOM VOICE

Secondly, we encounter a narrative voice that proceeds with caution. Those who like to have a lot to look up in "Chastity". The cairn moves into a terrain that is filled with signposts, or can be no to sex.

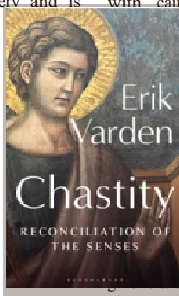
AS AN EXPLORATION

It stems from a need to understand chastity and content in a time when abuse and misuse in the church has given both the words celibacy and chastity a sickening sound. But the starting point for the book is semantic, i.e. linguistically exploratory.

And language is precisely why I'm writing a review of the book.



AUTHOR: Erik Varden, Catholic Bishop of Trondheim, is currently working on a new book with the English publisher Bloomsbury. Photo: Christian Nielsen



we should say front lines, in the Norwegian crisis. He writes about sexuality, pornography, gender and love between men and women.

And he is clear about his position, but shows how Adam, in broad terms

condition, is surrounded by God's love ever since mankind threw fig leaves in the garden and put on clothes made of leather that God had provided for them.

LITERATURE THAT GRIPS

A third element that adds something unique to the text is the use of fiction and stories. In my opinion, this is perhaps the most important feature of the book. Varden draws his examples from the Bible and Christian texts or anecdotes, but also from the world of literature

and stories, including scenes from plays, films and novels.

This allows his text to explore the boundary areas that non-fiction prose struggles to reach. We also find Norwegian literary references. When Emil Boyson gets a chance to talk about love, a lot has been said.

RECOGNITION

Varden's own language is uncommon in

himself. He dresses up the English language with Latin, Greek, German and French, but unlike many others, Varden explains his foreign words so that they become tools we can use to understand our own reality.

For example, he draws on Aristotle's "mimesis" and "catharsis" so that we can recognise the ancient Greeks' movement towards purification - via viewing the tragedies of others - in our own Netflix-watching age.

VIEW

Varden also uses comparisons and metaphors so that the non-fiction text opens up prospects for fiction. We touch something we don't quite know the full extent of, but we realise that it is beautiful, that it is worth looking at further.

Metaphors become part of the mystery of language that brings us closer to clarity on the themes, precisely because the themes cannot be explained down to the smallest detail.

But we realise that it's enough that

we have an inkling.

KNOWLEDGE

My introduction to Backer's image is not accidental. Reading the book is like walking through a gallery of curious, in the best sense of the word, knowledge.

We watch a scene from Bellini's opera, we flick through a medieval

We discover a Bergman film and browse through French love stories, we watch the eerie short film of a counsellor's abuse, we see a statue of Mary Magdalene.

In some places it is actually there in the book. But often we have to use our own inner eye in Varden's world.

ABOUT TO SEE

It is precisely these ways of seeing that are central to how Varden presents an expanded concept of chastity. This is something quite different from celibacy; chastity concerns us all.

Objections? I think that perhaps the text could have discussed to an even greater extent what is one of the book's starting points, abuse and misuse of power in the Catholic Church.

● **In Varden, we have an erudite reader and a Norwegian authorial voice that dares to explore where others shy away.**

As a reader, I would also have liked Varden to have shared more about his own path to becoming a monk. For a while, while reading, I also felt that there was a lot of interspersing of different texts and metaphors. But Varden carefully weaves threads back and forth in the text, so yes, that works too.

We discover that the quotes from Rilke come from a book that Etty Hillesum put under his pillow ten pages earlier. So we get where we're going, via both metaphors and stories.

And we get wiser along the way.

WAVE

Theologians may have issues they want to discuss with Varden - there are plenty of themes here - and the low-church reader may choke on his coffee when Varden starts his second chapter with a detailed description of the Catholic Eucharist.

But we must dare to look beyond the dividing lines. What lies in Varden's text is an exploration of the whole in the face of the human.

"Chastity" is even more about love than chastity. And in Varden we have a learned reader and a Norwegian author's voice that dares to explore where others shy away.

Victoria Bø
