

# POST #13 - CONVERSATION ON CHARITY AND CHASTITY

## SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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### *Charity and Chastity*

After the review and prayer based on the initial questions, I will usually ask the man about the life of charity and the life of chastity, if he has not already brought up these topics. A simple, “Is anyone driving you nuts?” often gets things moving. Or, “Are there any people you don’t want to sit next to in the refectory?” Sometimes, the men will ask if they should mention the names of the persons who irritate or annoy them. I have found that God has given me the grace of keeping what I know from direction distinct from other spheres of life; it does not cause consternation in me if I hear the name of the persons from the community. However, I would search my heart to see if that grace and freedom are there for you. If not, it would be more prudent to suggest that names not be used.

The questions about charity are helpful for the men to bring to the light their lack of love or the ways temptation works. As a future priest, God willing, the man needs to be comfortable enough about his lack of love in order to bring that to God for God’s love. Also, speaking about the temptations around charity can help expose the tricks of the flesh or the evil ones.

The second question I habitually ask is, “How are you doing with chastity?” Often enough, the answer is, “Fine. Good.” If so, fine and good, and there is no need to ask further questions. A further question, especially if the man is giving in to sexual temptations, would be, “How might you pray to resist that temptation? What way of praying *does* work for you?” If he is discouraged, it is helpful to look at where he has successfully avoided temptation.

In directing some young men who struggle with temptation, I have sometimes “picked up” that they are so dejected by temptations that they see their sexuality itself as a temptation. If that seems to be the case, I remind them of the goodness of sexuality and the gift that God gives us in our sexuality. I suggest that in the future, if they are not valuing this gift, that when they begin to feel a temptation, they first turn to God and thank Him for their sexuality. Then, after this act of thanksgiving, they can turn away from the temptation and go to God. As simple as this exercise is, for those who have this burden, it both helps them appreciate this great gift *and* be able to live more chastely.

Again, if a man is sorely tempted in chastity and seems discouraged, I will remind him that our celibate chastity is really about our choice for Jesus, made over and over again, in good times and in bad. Priestly celibacy is not primarily about avoiding sin; it is a focused choice for God-with-us. That choice, made over and over again, when rooted in God’s call to us, leads to charity and is a great source of strength for our pastoral ministry.

### *Feeling It*

As described above, for many in our culture, whether or not we are feeling something is *the* benchmark of authenticity. So, not to feel moved and inspired during Liturgy and personal prayer can be

deeply disturbing. Usually, it is good to affirm the goodness of our feelings.<sup>1</sup> Yes, feelings are a way we perceive truth. Our feelings are good indicators of authenticity; *but*, they are not infallible. There are times when we recognize the limitations of feelings and we act and move according to our faith convictions and past experiences of God; or, we make a naked act of trust in God until the feelings return. “Buck up, private” may work for a few days, but it is not a good strategy for the man’s coming to terms with the phenomenon of feelings or the absence of feelings in prayer.

If a man is very much attached to perceiving feeling as the marker of authentic conversion, it can be helpful to introduce him to some of the mystics or to contemporary commentators on the mystics. With that simple introduction, often a man’s appetite for the work of the Holy Spirit in infused contemplation will be whetted.

### ***Today, Do You Want To Be a Priest?***

In order to keep the man focused on discernment, I will often ask about his discernment. We, as formators, should encourage the seminarians to believe that they can come to a certainty of faith, based on the gifts of the Holy Spirit working through them and their cooperating with those gifts. Such a certainty involves a testing of whether God is calling them and whether they want to be priests. Sometimes, a man might be at the stage of conviction at which God wants him to be a priest, but he himself is not sure whether he wants it. It is always good when our men are honest, but such a stage is, at times, the occasion for discernment to grind to a halt. If this is so, it is because of some confusion or unacknowledged fear on the part of the man.

As directors, by teaching a bit about the varieties of spiritual moods, we can help the man see beyond any confusion that he holds in his heart about his vocation. Until our wills are completely united with God’s, we have periods when, on the more surface levels of the heart, we want nothing to do with charity and faith. Knowing that this is part of the playing field of vocational discernment can clear up confusion.

Secondly, at times, men will have fears that they do not want to face. For one man who fears becoming emotionally distant and isolated, it might feel disloyal to question whether he will be happy. As directors, we can help the man bring the fears into the light so that the Holy Spirit can bring understanding. For another man, there may be fear associated with guilt from past sins that have not been fully brought into the light. Bringing the past sins into prayer and into spiritual direction can sever all sorts of lies and cut into obscurity.

Thirdly, a man may be stuck by some unwillingness to serve, to obey. By gently leading the man to acknowledge this state of his soul—which the Holy Spirit may reveal to the director before He does to the man—the director can help the man to see God’s love and to choose grace.

### ***Difficult Cases***

I have already written about other facets of leading a man to prayer, but I would like to mention a few more difficult cases that may come up in direction.

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<sup>1</sup> In reaction to the over estimation of the value of feelings, priests sometimes err by dismissing their value.

## *Something Was Wrong*

After a session, you, as the director, might feel like something did not go well in the session. Perhaps you became angry and did not handle your anger well. Perhaps some very difficult reality came up, a reality that you had never encountered before, and you realize you gave a flat or erroneous response. Perhaps you realize that you did not direct the seminarian boldly, that the Holy Spirit had been focusing your attention to some matter that you half-consciously avoided probing. After a few years as a seminary spiritual director, if you never experience that you have handled something poorly, you may very well be covering up your mistakes in order not to have to face them.

The first thing to do when one's conscience is unquiet is to go to the Lord who is merciful and just, the Lord who called us to serve Him in the priesthood. Before we even open up what is bothering us, we need to make sure we are doing it in the Lord. Otherwise, the world, the flesh, and the devil can bring in all sorts of distortions. Unless the Holy Spirit preserves you by special graces, you will not serve in this ministry without some moments of failure. Those moments can be fixed and redeemed; however, unless we face this reality of failure, we can unconsciously block our ability to bring failure to the Redeemer.

Bringing disturbing sessions and moments to the Lord should most often be accompanied by bringing those sessions and moments to one's supervisor.<sup>2</sup> The Lord works through these meetings with supervisors, and they should always be a part of the seminary spiritual director's life. When one brings these moments of failure to the Lord and to one's supervisor, the path of remediation becomes clear.

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<sup>2</sup> By "supervisor," I do not mean the director of spiritual formation. This term is used to designate the director with whom one speaks in the internal forum about one's experience as a spiritual director. Some seminary spiritual directors have supervision with their regular spiritual director. Because of the special nature of accompanying a seminarian in the Lord in spiritual direction, many seminary spiritual directors have a special "director" with whom they pray and speak about what happens in the spiritual direction forum.