

# Foreword

I have never met Arleen Spenceley (the woman with five *e*'s in her name) in person. We met online after I linked her article "Why I'm Still a Virgin at Age 26" to a blog post. I admired her courage in "coming out" as a twenty-six-year-old virgin.

Let's pause for a moment and think of how unusual this is today: "coming out" as a virgin. Only about half of a century ago, virginity (outside of marriage) was the norm and expected. Now it is the anomaly and unexpected. The tables have completely turned. What the hey happened? It was called the Sexual Revolution, and it is still with us, continuing to morph and mutate and grow more and more extreme.

And yet, it is no longer a revolution. Like many successful revolutions, the Sexual Revolution has become the accepted, authoritative, unquestioned Establishment. Arleen doesn't take up this historical sea change in *Chastity Is for Lovers*. Rather, she starts with the here and now, with her experience and today's sensibilities and practices, in order to set the record straight, defining terms and dispelling myths about her "marginal" lifestyle. (Alternate titles for this book might be *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Chastity but Were Afraid to Ask*, *The Joy of Chastity*, and *Chastity and the Single Girl*.)

No matter what your own beliefs and experiences are, Arleen will make you think (or rethink) about them. And you'll enjoy her descriptive, readable, light-touch writing style. Hers is a nonjudgmental approach, partly because she is the one constantly being judged, questioned, challenged, and warned about the "dangers" of living chastely! Foremost among these "dangers" is the supposedly frightening specter of being single for the rest of one's life. But Arleen knows that finding the right marriage partner and preparing for a happy marriage (no matter how much one desires it or works hard at achieving it) is never a foregone conclusion, nor solely within one's own power. She also knows that just having lots of sex before marriage doesn't guarantee eventually getting hitched, a fact to which millions of sexually active singles in their thirties and forties can attest.

The despair and desperation that some endure to find love is expressed in Lady Gaga's song "Do What You Want with My Body." This song perfectly illustrates the profound body to soul, matter to spirit, physical to spiritual split that has affected so many sexually experienced singles. Lady Gaga sings of being afraid that she will be abandoned, so she decides that she will only give her body (as if this is somehow safer!). The song raises the question: When will Lady Gaga give her whole self, "heart, mind, life," to someone if she is giving out parts of herself now?

We are one person: body and soul. Whatever we do with our body, we do with our soul, and vice versa. We can do mental gymnastics to try to separate them, but the reality is that they cannot be separated. Our culture is in deep pain from the fallout of this unnatural tearing apart of what belongs together.

St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* and *Chastity Is for Lovers* both teach us that living chastity isn't simply "waiting" or "celibacy" or "abstinence." Instead, it's

proactively preparing for, or being in training for, true love and true sex. It's becoming whole persons so we have a whole person to give. It's living faithfully now so we can live faithfully later.

For many who have despaired that true love is even possible, Arleen has an answer. For those who tell Arleen that she is missing out on "getting some" now, Arleen has an answer. For those who believe that the goal of sex is only pleasure, Arleen has an answer. For those who feel that they have to compromise their beliefs or they'll never get married, Arleen has an answer.

In many respects, Arleen *is* an answer because she has chosen—and every day continues to choose—a life of chastity, which she believes is the surest path to authentic love. Arleen may be a lone "voice crying in the wilderness" of sex without love, sex without intimacy, and sex without lifelong commitment. And yet, like John the Baptist, she is right, and she is heralding the One who can give us everything we are looking for: true love, true sex, satisfaction, fulfillment, and peace.

Sister Helena Burns, F.S.P.

# Introduction

I rested my head on the tall back of a black vinyl, executive-style chair and stared at a computer screen. The chair's wheels rolled audibly across the mat beneath it as I—a staff writer for the *Tampa Bay Times*—reached toward the desk in front of me to type. The e-mail, addressed to an editor named Jim, expressed my sudden reluctance to do what I already promised I would: write about sex. A week earlier, I had pitched the idea to Jim with confidence: a sex essay for the front page of the “Perspective” section of the *Times*, inspired in part by the demise of a bad relationship. The day I pitched it, how many readers we had—more than four hundred thousand on Sundays—hadn't dawned on me. When it finally did, all that had been bold in me got anxious.

I—a budding columnist, a practicing Catholic, and a virgin by choice—had a passion for putting what I believed in print. But that morning, the thought of revealing my virginity to the secular public sounded like a bad idea. I so warily considered the potential repercussions—unwanted attention, unsafe situations, and uncomfortable colleagues—that I forgot why I pitched the idea in the first place.



Days before Thanksgiving 2008, the clicks of my heels echoed as I crossed the terrazzo floor in a Tampa church's

hall. I carried a press badge, a pen, and a reporter's notebook up to the woman in charge. I had come from the newsroom to be a fly on the wall for a story about four church groups—one Lutheran, one Catholic, one Methodist, and one Reformed—that distributed food from a pantry to people in need, three days a week. The woman covered her faded jeans and her heather-gray sweatshirt with a hunter-green apron. It is through her that I met him.

He unfolded a chair for me next to his under an awning at a table on the sidewalk. He was twenty-seven and handing out socks and sandwiches to homeless people. I was twenty-three and instantly smitten. I watched him work and took notes for the story. I never did write about him. I did, however, sooner or later date him. One afternoon, we sat side by side, cross-legged on a futon mattress on the floor in his apartment. We leaned against the lime-green wall behind us and talked and laughed. Then I asked the question.

“What crossed your mind the first time you saw me?”

He turned toward me, thoughtfully paused, looked into my eyes, and smiled before he spoke.

“I want a piece of her.”

This ultimately did not end how he hoped it would.

Before he and I dated, having sex had never been an option for me. Frankly, it hadn't been hard for me to keep the promise I made to myself in adolescence to wait until marriage to have sex. By the time I met the guy from the food bank, I still had been neither kissed nor in love. At my high school—a private, Protestant one so small I graduated in a class of fourteen students—no boys ever expressed interest. The boys I liked at church didn't like me back.

Hearing the words “I want a piece” while cross-legged on a futon mattress alarmed me. For the first time, I had stumbled, and unexpectedly so, into a world entirely unlike mine, in which “dating” and “having sex with” are

synonymous, sexual inexperience is unusual, and admitting that you are a virgin is potentially humiliating. It happened, too, in a culture in which few people plan to save sex for marriage, and few of the people who make that plan actually stick to it.

## Chastity and Dirty Cookies

Ninety-seven percent of men and ninety eight percent of women ages twenty-five to forty-four aren't virgins.<sup>1</sup> Eighty-eight percent of unmarried people ages eighteen to twenty-nine are sexually active.<sup>2</sup> Numbers like these upset churchgoing proponents of premarital abstinence. The statistics provoke condemnatory sermons at churches and church camps, preached without sensitivity to the sexual histories of the people in the pews. (Who says churchgoing young adults don't have as much sexual experience as "unchurched" young adults do?)

Knee-jerk judgments and analogies that compare people who are sexually experienced to cookies covered in dirt do not effectively define love, chastity, or sex, nor do they divulge the beauty of living them out as defined by the Church.<sup>3</sup> They also aren't motivators for behavior modification. Sermons that condemn people who haven't saved sex for marriage promote the misperception that there is an un-bridgeable gap between some people and God, who is the only true source of what all of us seek: hope and love.

Single, sexually active people don't fit a definitive mold. Some are pharmacy techs or journalists or professors or unemployed. Some are Democrats, others are Republicans, and others have no party affiliation. There are atheists and theists, Protestants and Catholics, people who use PCs and people who use Macs who, at the end of the day, share their beds even though there hasn't been a wedding. They have sex for a multitude of reasons but "because they don't

love Jesus” isn’t necessarily one of them. Sexually active people want exactly what sexually abstinent people want: intimacy, and a love that neither lets them down nor ever rejects them. They want healthy, happy relationships.

The essay I had pitched to the editor, ultimately about why I haven’t had sex, would be an unprecedented opportunity to introduce readers to a widely underrated way of life—one that illuminates the path that leads us to what we all innately seek. But I worried that writing about my choice to be chaste would be too big a public window into my life. I had permission to present a fresh perspective of sex to at least four hundred thousand people without condemning or judging the ones who haven’t lived it, and what I really wanted to do was back out. The day I e-mailed the editor, I tried.

Then I changed my mind.

The sex essay appeared in the *Times* in September 2009. I wrote a second, more popular one three years later. Writing about my choice to be chaste indeed *was* the window into my life I had worried it would be. But it was also a window for me into the lives of the readers who responded. There were elderly men who regretted hurting the women they dated as young adults, and college kids learning to navigate a world in which sexual activity was expected of them. There were parents who felt powerless against the influence of the society that surrounded their teens and tweens, and couples who were virgins at marriage (whose marriages have lasted up to seventy years). There were women and men of all ages who for myriad reasons wanted to keep talking about chastity and sex. All of them were bound to each other, though strangers, by a common tie: the desire to understand, experience, and exemplify authentic love.

## **Finding Love**

Authentic love demands self-disclosure, complete commitment, and uninhibited exposure. It can be a scary prospect for people who have been hurt, over and over, by counterfeit versions. In the Catholic Church's treasury of wisdom, there is an answer to a broken heart's cry for healing, a feast for hungry souls. But the Church is one of the most widely untapped and wildly misunderstood resources in the world for discovering love. And there are reasons for that.

For some, what the Church actually says about love and sex has been presented by people who have misunderstood it. It is distorted on delivery. Others grasp parts of the Church's teaching but have never been given reasons to save sex for marriage other than "God says so." But there are other reasons—practical ones that are hard but good—and we exist in the kind of culture that needs them.

Regardless of how willing we are to admit it, most of us are deeply aware that what our culture calls the path to love and happiness does not make good on its promise. Maybe "everybody's doing it," but how loving and happy is everybody, really? Despite evidence that the world's road doesn't actually end where we're told it will, people walk it over and over because a viable alternative to it is sincerely inconceivable. Many people neither have been introduced to an alternative nor have learned that a sexual relationship is not supposed to be a path to self-gratification or self-fulfillment. Nobody has told them that a sexual relationship is supposed to be a path to God, who—in giving up his Son—taught us authentic love. Love looks like sacrifice and shifting the focus from self to others. It looks like learning together and working together, resolving conflicts rather than denying that they exist. Saving sex is an exercise in love, which has



benefits before a wedding, after a wedding, and even if you're celibate for life.

This book is not about virginity pledges, abstinence rallies, or purity balls (which, for the record, are pretty disturbing). It's about a life of reckless abandon to a radical "homeless guy" who is both human and divine. It's about applying critical thought to social norms. It's about living lives that make sense in light of the Gospel regardless of how much sense our lives make to the people we meet. It's about acting on our needs for love and a Savior.

What the Church teaches about love, marriage, and sex equips us to love, Jesus-style; to embrace the narrow road and not just accept it; and to live as if marriage is for unity and community and not for gratification. It prepares us not to lower the bar, even if keeping it high means that we never meet somebody we could marry (or that finding that person takes longer than we would prefer). The Church's teachings dare us to live lives that contradict the kind to which our culture is conducive, and to love the people anyway whose don't. The Church digs deep, exposing truths the world obscures: love is selfless, marriage is a miracle, and sex isn't solely for pleasure.

## Redeeming Sex

For some people, the chaste life can raise a daunting question—a question a friend and fellow blogger brought up once in an interview: "Do you ever worry that one day you'll wake up and discover you are forty-five, still single, and past your sexual prime?"

I don't. In order to worry about that, I would need to believe the purpose of sex is pleasure and that we all better get some while the gettin' is good. I don't believe either of those things. I believe that whether a person ever has sex isn't that important. What's more important is why a

person has sex, and in what context. But because I don't worry about passing my sexual prime doesn't mean I don't worry at all. I do worry sometimes, but what I worry about is whether I write about this stuff with enough clarity. If I don't, and a couple of decades from now I'm *still* a virgin, I'd guess many people who've read what I've written will call my single life "proof" that the chaste lifestyle doesn't work. But the goal of saving sex isn't marriage. The goal of saving sex is saving sex (not putting it off, but redeeming it). Some people who save sex get married and some don't.

I do not know yet if I am one of the people who will get married or who won't. I do, however, know this: single forever or not, I am here to learn to love. How I learn—in part, for now, by *not* having sex—surprises most of the people I meet, which is funny for me, and weird. Some are captivated by my choice and others are scandalized. But my lifestyle is not a criticism of somebody else's. It's an option—something to try if an alternative to it isn't working for you.

I am surrounded by a society that is hyperaware of the implications of chastity and very interested in pointing them out to me. One implication is that my decision to save sex deters a lot of men from dating me. Another is that I won't know what to do or expect on my wedding night. Another still is that the average teenager has more sexual experience than I do (which is totally a bummer, assuming how cool I am depends on whether what I do aligns with classic adolescent behavior).

But this is not about that. This is about learning to die to self (or to die trying), and learning to be happy while I'm single and still a virgin. I am learning that the "terrible lover" is not the virgin who doesn't know what he or she is doing on his or her wedding night, and I'm learning that vocations are designed to result in the destruction of self-absorption. Finally, I'm learning that there are two kinds of sex: One is

the world's version, which is primarily for pleasure. The other is sex as God designed it, which is for procreation and unity, and involves the creation of a unique, pleasurable sexual relationship. I am finding that all of us—single, married, and religious—are called to learn to love.

But there's a catch.

We live in a culture that encourages us to date for maladaptive reasons, to treat love like it's a feeling, and to seek with our whole lives what we want rather than what others need. We live in a culture that isn't conducive to love. It mocks us when we model it, says there's something wrong with us for trying, and is never, ever going to cater to us. This is why I sometimes have had to ask myself the following question: what do I know that makes me OK with that?

The answer? Everything you will read in this book.

Chapter 1 differentiates chastity from abstinence and explores its important role in every state of life.

Chapter 2 identifies virginity as an intrinsically affirming, valuable choice, describes what it's like to be virgin in our culture, and responds to our culture's response to virginity.

Chapter 3 explains why the first step to discovering your vocation is seeking the kingdom of God.

Chapter 4 explores dating—the path most people take toward marriage—and clarifies its purpose.

Chapter 5 defines love and differentiates it from being in love.

Chapter 6 covers the controversy that surrounds contraception and explains how not using contraception can lead couples toward authentic love.

Chapter 7 defines purity and differentiates it from the myths created and damage done by "purity culture."

Chapter 8, a conclusion, clarifies what it means to be human, and explains why people who practice chastity are misunderstood.

It is by the grace of God that I discovered what follows in a culture that distracts us from it. It is for his greater glory that I share it. To live out love, marriage, and sex as each was designed takes discipline and courage in our culture. So does learning to love. When we do, we won't fit in. In fact, we'll mostly stand out. May what you read make you OK with that, and may it remind you that you are not alone.

# Chastity

## A Better Sexual Ethic

"Only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love."

—St. John Paul II



Four days a week, a phone and a police scanner compete for my attention at the second desk from the left, second row, in a *Tampa Bay Times* newsroom. While I write, I answer calls from Pasco County's general public and listen to dispatchers and deputies work car crashes and domestic disputes. What I do outside the newsroom—such as be a virgin and blog about it—hardly comes up in conversation with colleagues, which, for workflow's sake, is probably for the best. But even my colleagues can't evade discussion of a topic I talk about a lot outside of work. Our culture's relationship with

sex, tied today to a widespread quest for a better sexual ethic, is as popular in casual conversation as it is important.

Around three o'clock on weekday afternoons, the news staff at the Port Richey bureau of the *Times* stops working. We save story drafts, end internal calls, and congregate in the corner of the newsroom closest to the exit. Our press badges hang from the lanyards around our necks as we parade out the glass door, across the staff parking lot, into a mostly dirt yard, and through a gate in a chain-link fence. The trip ends where we are recognized as regulars and likely to loiter if we aren't on deadline: at Dunkin' Donuts.

The outing, which we call "the walk," is a nearly thirty-year-old tradition, prized by the Pasco news staff and pivotal in the cultivation of camaraderie and the restoration of blood flow to our legs. During "the walk" one afternoon, a photojournalism intern pointed at the yellow bumper sticker on the rear windshield of my car. Above the whirl of the cars bound north and south on US Highway 19 to our right, he read it aloud: "Chastity Is for lovers." He tilted his head to a side, evidently perplexed. "How can chastity be for lovers if chastity means you can't have sex?"

I smiled and said, "It doesn't."

The intern's assumption reflected a popular but deficient definition of chastity—a misconception of it that persists in our culture because a lot of people use "chastity" interchangeably with words not actually synonymous with it. So, like the intern puzzled by my bumper sticker, the average adult detects no difference between "chastity" and "abstinence." The word chastity triggers thoughts of barbaric belts or perpetual virginity, of purity balls or abstinence pledges, of "an impossible standard of sexual piety unfairly exclusive to women," according to an anonymous respondent of an informal survey I conducted, or of eras

long past in which innocent adolescents courted, married, and over time turned into our grandparents.

But that isn't chastity. Chastity is actually a virtue that results in authentic love, and misconceptions of it create deterrents to it. In a world that not solely condones but encourages nonmarital sex, chastity as an option is usually perceived as quaint and is quickly mocked or disregarded by the general public. "This reads like something your grandma wrote in the forties," one reader tweeted about one of my chastity-laden sex essays in the *Times*. Thoughtless dismissal of chastity fails to consider seriously the benefits of a level of sexual self-control that demands more of us than serial monogamy. Some consider "chaste sex" to be an oxymoron; others mistakenly presume chastity is expected of women but not of men. All of this produces an aversion to chastity.

When chastity is real, it is as important to practice it while you're married and sexually active as it is to practice it while you're not. It isn't for women; it's for *people*. It simultaneously requires and elicits the courage to be the people we were created to be, designed to give and receive authentic love, and to believe *all* our drives—sex or otherwise—can be within our control.

### Chastity Is Not Abstinence

If I could go back to "the walk" the afternoon the intern read my bumper sticker, I would boldly and bluntly declare a clearer truth: *chastity is not abstinence*.

Abstinence, in the realm of sexuality, is refraining from having sex, but chastity is "the successful integration of sexuality within the person," according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 2237). I'm neither a theologian nor articulate in catechesis, so at first I tripped over the definition. Now, it captivates me.

*Integration.* To integrate is to unite, to make into one what ought to be one. Integration puts the parts together that are better together. In other words, *chastity is a virtue that aims to integrate sexuality with the rest of the stuff that makes us human.*

So chastity preserves the unions between body and soul, reason and passion, fertility and pleasure. Chastity enables us to respect each other and ourselves. It upholds dignity, promotes integrity, and allows a person to experience love as God designed it. It helps heal the wounds of our pasts (whether inflicted by others or self-inflicted). Chastity neither pretends sexuality doesn't exist nor treats it as if it is the only significant part of a person. Chastity doesn't condemn the people who haven't always practiced it. It puts sexuality where sexuality best fits.

### *Chastity for the Newly Abstinent: An Interview with Becki Alford*

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"Chaste living can be difficult and often seems impossible in a culture . . . that indoctrinates us with the idea that we must have a sexual partner in order to 'be normal,'" said Becki Alford, a single mom and writer. She continued:

One of the best remedies for someone thrust into a celibate way of life after being sexually active is meditation on the Song of Songs. . . . In this mystical poetry of erotic nature, we can begin to understand that God chose to create our desire for the opposite sex and the expression of those desires through sexual union as an icon of his desire to be in relationship with humanity as a whole, and [with] each one of us individually. . . . Take comfort in the fact that as we give up being sexually active through chaste living after divorce, separation, or conversion from a sexually active lifestyle outside marriage, we are being invited to greater intimacy with



Jesus as we offer our desires to him. Entering into this intimacy is the ultimate goal of our destiny as sons and daughters of God. . . . When the piercing fire of rejection and loneliness ensues, his consolation awaits us. . . .



Chastity “includes an apprenticeship in self-mastery” (CCC 2239), so like abstinence, it requires discipline. But unlike abstinence, it requires critical thought. People who are chaste make choices that align with their vocations and states of life, and they consider the implications of their potential actions before deciding the time is right to have sex. Chastity is for everyone: female or male; straight or LGBTQ; single, married, or religious. Like charity, chastity is patient, and kind, and forbearing (see 1 Cor 13:4-7).

Chastity never ends. Abstinence does. Chastity infuses sex with love, and love with sacrifice. Abstinence doesn’t. Chastity never trivializes sex, and it refuses to use or objectify people. It says we can have what we want when what we want is good for us and it equips us to discern whether it is.

Chastity looks like the person who treats a significant other first as a brother or sister in Christ. It looks like the friar who spends his time being a true friend to a homeless couple, and like the radiant nun whose unbridled commitment to Christ fulfills her more than any earthly marriage ever could. It looks like the sexually inexperienced newlyweds who are bold enough to learn together, and like the husband and wife who, after sixty years of marriage, are still devoted to each other, even when one of them is diagnosed with dementia. Maybe chastity *is* old fashioned, but to borrow a quote from a woman I met once at a church in Tampa, “The old-fashioned way wasn’t broken.”