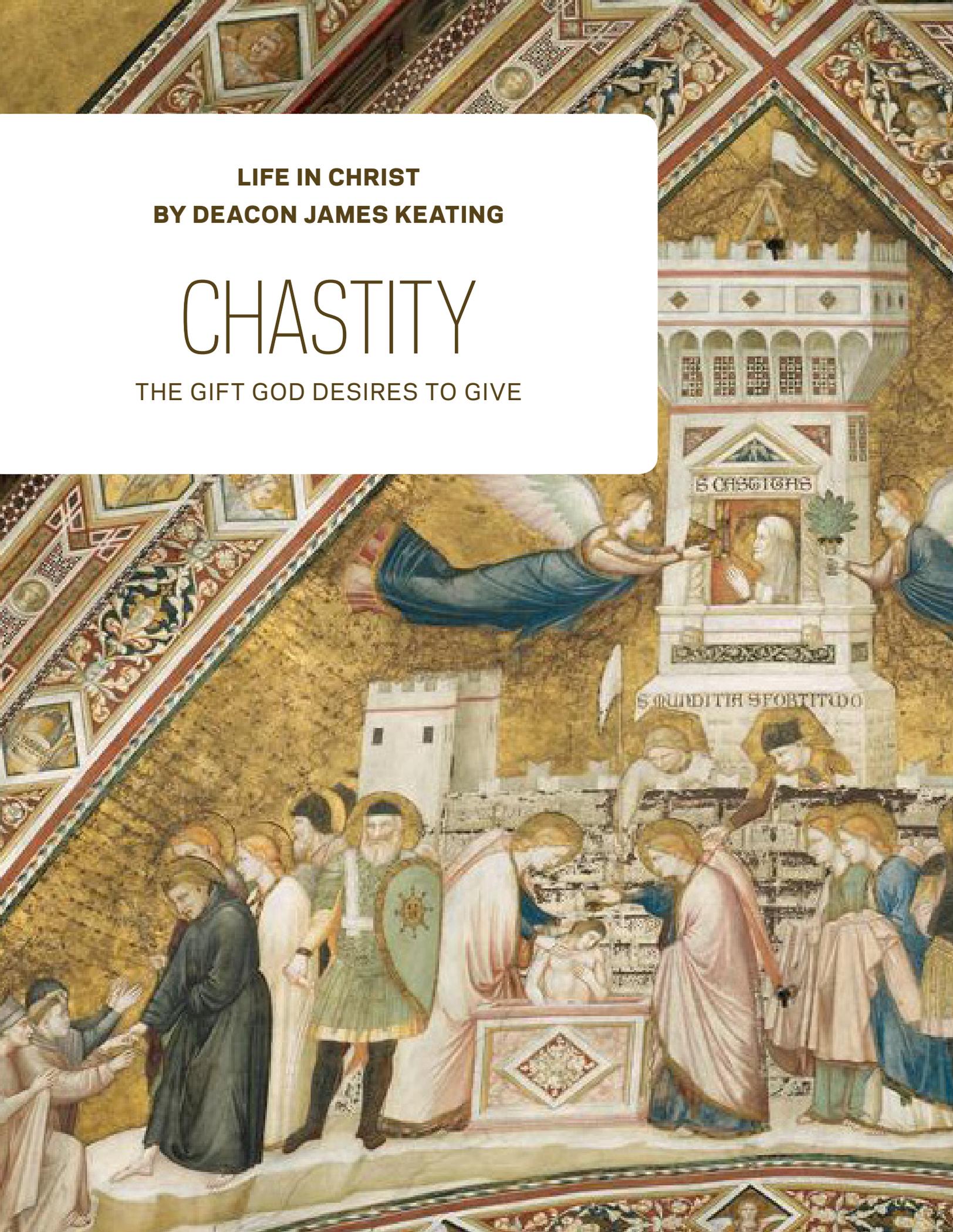


LIFE IN CHRIST
BY DEACON JAMES KEATING

CHASTITY

THE GIFT GOD DESIRES TO GIVE





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The dramatic quote below is found within a *Catechism* section realistically entitled, “The Battle for Purity”:

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“I thought that continence arose from one’s own powers, which I did not recognize in myself. I was foolish enough not to know . . . that no one can be continent unless you grant it. For you would surely have granted it if my inner groaning had reached your ears and I with firm faith had cast my cares on you (CCC §2520).”

St. Augustine, Conf. 6, 11, 20: PL 32, 729-730.

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The person who struggles with purity of thought and desire is called to turn not to his or her own “powers” for a remedy but to the One who can grant continence as a gift. Technically Catholics do not simply want to be continent; they want to be chaste. To be continent is to exercise *restraint*, but to be chaste is to *live in freedom* from unruly erotic desire. To live in such freedom is the result of a painful process of renouncing certain immoral choices and affirming one’s vulnerability to grace. In moving toward a chaste heart one has to *choose* behavior faithful to justice, temperance and modesty. To be unchaste is an *injustice* to one’s present or future spouse. Lust is *intemperate* in that it focuses solely upon the self,

LEFT
Giottoesque Master of the
Vaults, Franciscan Allegories,
The Chastity of Saint Francis,
c. 1315

and lust is *immodest* because one chooses to expose the self rather than behold the beauty of the beloved. To live a chaste life from birth to wedding day and beyond signals to one's spouse his or her singular importance, "I was faithful to you even before I knew you." This value of fidelity, symbolized by virginity and then chastity, is one of the more beautiful aspects of the Catholic teaching on marriage. It captures how God loves us too; faithfully with a pure heart, having our welfare as His singular desire. Augustine came to embrace the truth that chastity flows into the heart *as a gift from God*. Chastity, as gift, is a further indication of God's providential love.

Catechetically, we tend to be a bit tentative in urging people to ask God for the gift of chastity knowing that many *people like the sin of lust* and loathe to be reminded of how it can destroy their communion with the Trinity. Further, we ourselves may struggle with lust and hence feel the weight of guilt holding us back from a passionate defense of the virtue of chastity. Moreover, to go where Augustine went, *into intimacy with God*, might make us hesitate to use his approach to chastity formation. Perhaps only a few of us who teach the faith dwell at the level of "inner groaning." Finally, Augustine beckons us to *surrender to God*, to cast all our cares upon Him. Surrender is very difficult for we who live in an age of anxious self-maintenance. It is hard for us to trust in the providence of others, let alone God, who appears to dwell far from us.

In this anxious age of self-maintenance we will 'try' to be chaste but we will fail, not because we are not good enough or strong enough but because it is simply not possible. As Matthew Levering once wrote, "since the Fall of Mankind all communion is now accomplished only through sacrifice." Is surrendering to the grace of God and receiving the gift of chastity a sacrifice? Yes, for we love sexual sins more than most others, except

perhaps for gluttony. From both these sins we derive immediate artificial consolation (consolation that does not begin from or end in deeper communion with the Divine). In the world of artificial consolation our pain is assuaged fast. Such a world plays upon our need to get "a hit" and then move on to the "next thing." Fast food, fast pornography, fast relationships are all attractive because they move us to the "next thing", the next "hit."

These goods, food and sex, can both be perverted. The perversion is simple; goods meant to bring life, communion with others and legitimate pleasure are turned to serve only the purposes of the self. This "turning" is easy because of our weakened human state and once appropriated in perverted ways sex and food possess us, leaving us neither satisfied nor fulfilled but only isolated, alone, bored.

Instead Augustine asks us to enter the "groaning"; to suffer the passing of our perverted pleasure for the coming of communion with God. This passage is painful and we hate it because we know it is the way of truth and the way, ultimately, of divinely established serenity. We hate the way of "groaning" because it means the purification of desire and the end of artificial consolation. And so we resist groaning after God because we can feel these "consolations" slipping away and for what? "Do I want God as my love, I reach out to Him but He doesn't satisfy like "a hit". I *wait* for the Lord. But I *cannot* wait for the Lord!!! We want, in other words, our Eros to *never to be* taken up into agape (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, §§5-6). We want to keep my artificial consolations for the same reason an immature man wrestles away from spousal love in favor of "keeping his options open."

And so the one who wants to be chaste must suffer its coming all the way through the "groaning" and

into surrender. In such groaning and surrender prayer is hard but there is fruit if the aching lust is placed in the cross of Christ. In this kind of prayer one's resolve is tested like a deck hand weathering a storm. If one is able to cling to the promises of Christ the lust will pass and such prayerful intimacy, over time, will fashion a new heart. The fashioning of a new heart can be too much to bear as memory takes one back to the artificial consolations which are always calling or as Augustine noted, "They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered: "Are you going to part with us? And from that moment will we never be with you anymore? ... [T]hey were not openly showing themselves and opposing me face to face; but muttering, as it were, behind my back; and furtively plucking at me as I was leaving, trying to make me look back at them... for unruly habit kept saying to me, "Do you think you can live without them?" (*Confessions* 8.11)

If one allows Christ to live His mysteries over again in the heart then indeed one can "live without" lust. But such a living will be more gift than accomplished task, more what we suffer than what we choose through the evidence of clear logic, and more the result of "casting cares" to Christ then continuing to live the lie of self-maintenance. Indeed, it is a battle for purity until we surrender and let the Lord fight our battle (Ex. 14:14).

