

# The Construction of Catholic Male Chastity: A Modern Understanding of Catholicism's Views on Sex through the Life of the Saints (1859-1954)

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**Abstract:** *In History of Sexuality Volume 1, Foucault claims that despite commonly held beliefs that Victorians restricted public references to sex, they and subsequent generations could not stop talking, writing, and researching topics that dealt with intercourse. If Foucault's hypothesis is true, and this paper assumes it to be so, a question to research is how different groups within Western culture understood, constructed, and dealt with sexuality from the Victorian era into the twentieth century. One of the groups that interest this article is the Catholic Church. Catholicism has traditionally defined itself as a religion that encourages sexual abstinence as a means of achieving salvation, but the notion of restraint was particularly applied to women until the nineteenth century. From the second half of the nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century, a shift occurred emphasizing both male and female agency to police their bodies. It was during this time that the figure of the "martyr for chastity" emerged, a symbol for the Church to communicate to the laity a sure way of attaining salvation through the exercise of the will and the control of the body.*

**Keywords:** Catholicism, sexuality, hagiography, masculinity, sainthood

## 1. Introduction

During the modern period, the Catholic Church developed different understandings of virginity, chastity, the integrity of the body, and their relation towards human salvation. Changing perspectives on how the body operated were influenced by the French Revolution, discoveries in science, and the migratory movements of the first and second industrial revolutions from traditionally Catholic European countries to industrialized nations with Protestant majorities in the Western Hemisphere or the European colonies in Africa, Asia, and Australia. [1] Such upheavals presented the Catholic institution with ideological challenges that defied the Vatican's teachings on sexuality and virtue. [2]

The Catholic Church's emphasis on sexual restraint, although present since the first centuries of its founding, gained momentum in the early decades of the early nineteenth century when the perceived chaos and anarchy wrought by the French Revolution on Catholicism was understood to be in part due to a lack of control over the body: "From the standpoint of Rome, the events of the late 1790s confirmed the rapacious and sacrilegious character of the *esprit de révolution* sweeping Europe and the need to rally around the Pope". [3] It was a belief that persisted throughout the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century, as attested by various Church documents, such as Pius IX *The Syllabus of Errors*, Leo XIII *Americanism as heresy* and Pius X *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*. [4]

Morality was equated with physical restraint, and the lack of it was a synonym of problems for the nation-state's inhabitants. An article in the Carlist press of Spain explained why voluntary restraint was important for humanity:

We are so disposed to the original disorder...passions rebel against reason. Man, who suffers everything is in a constant rebellion against God. Man grieves for this constant upheaval...If we leave flesh in liberty, the spirit weakens, and if man is to prosper as reason would want so, it is necessary that the body suffers. When the body is

left in liberty, its immoderate and deadly desires grow without measure or end, and the poor spirit becomes less active as it has no strength but to feel remorse. If the spirit is to possess strength and vigor, it is indispensable that it fight against the flesh, that it mortify it, that it extirpate all carnal desires, that he circumcises them with a strong hand, because it is the only way to eradicate the scars left from the Garden of Eden that we have increased by committing personal sins. [5]

As can be gleaned from the texts, the body, and the soul were at odds with each other from a Catholic perspective, and their struggle had real consequences on the physical world. To achieve a balance between the body and the soul it was necessary to control the flesh, and if that was accomplished, the soul should be able to become strong. The belief that the soul was superior to the body that sheltered it during a person's lifetime went unquestioned for Catholicism in the period we study.

According to the Catholic press, the concept of "reason" used extensively since the Enlightenment had toppled monarchs, criticized Christian ideology, executed its ministers, destroyed or appropriated Church property, destroyed the Holy Roman Empire, provoked the independence of Latin America and motivated the execution of priests and nuns, imprisoned Popes and destroyed the old-world order: [6] Catholics did not consider these events as reasonable. They rejected Rousseau's belief of a good savage that thrived in a "natural order of the world". [7] For Catholics, misinformation on the natural state of man imperiled the soul and made humans less self-restrained. [8] Indeed, it was a lack of restraints of the flesh that propagated violence inspired by the French Revolution throughout Europe and Latin America.

Catholics understood that control of the body ensured the stability of civilization and the well-being of individuals. An article in the Encyclopedic Journal of European Civilization extolled the benefits of self-control through the proper use of chastity in men:

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True genius inspired by itself, gives involuntary fruits within the soul and it expresses itself through a spontaneous vocation, like the tree that holds within it the seed for its posterity; because abstinence from coitus increases vigor in every being, because when we communicate life, we diminish our own life. Physical and intellectual heroism... is reinforced by chastity, which duplicates both the visual and encephalic energy. [9]

Chastity was a concept of great importance to the Catholic Church throughout the nineteenth century, but it also appealed to other groups: middle-class values of the nineteenth and early twentieth century contrasted heavily with the sexual culture of the *ancien régime*. In Great Britain and North America, sex was viewed with mistrust, as "the middle class believed that men, unlike 'naturally good women', were beset by powerful gusts of sinful sexual desires" while the male's "nature was considered simultaneously the source of men's greatest danger and...power." [10] In such a system, repression of sex became the public norm.

Michel Foucault places the change in sexual understandings and the construction of discourses surrounding sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. [11] Capitalism transformed North American and Western Europe's social system by empowering the bourgeoisie, who introduced a particular moral code that involved repressing public displays of sexuality, screening different forms of sexuality. [12] Concepts of sexual mores were instituted in a series of discourses on sex that was dominated by certain elites, particularly the clergy, the medical establishment, and lawyers. The control of knowledge and discussions on sexuality gave power to those particular groups who "radiated discourses aimed at sex, intensifying people's awareness of it as a constant danger." Taking Foucault's premise, the pedagogization of children's sex constructed understandings used to exert power over the bodies of children and teenagers. [13]

Foucault argues that sexuality was incompatible with a dedication to work that should be general and intensive. [14] By the nineteenth century, "capitalist, industrializing society in the West... had inscribed sex in 'an ordered system of knowledge, ' a 'technology' which operated through 'four great strategic unities'." [15] For Foucault, sexuality was a means of "an especially dense transfer point for relation of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity." [16] The irreconcilability of work and sex along with a discourse of controlled sex was, according to Foucault, "the very production of sexuality." [17]

This paper examines how self-control and restraint over the male body were constructed by institutional Catholicism from 1859 to 1954 through the use of the hagiography, "the name given to that branch of learning which has the saints and their worship for its object." [18] It explores how male agency over the body increased in importance as a Catholic discourse against perceived hedonist tendencies, in which male sexuality was considered particularly problematic.

The first date chosen, 1859, marks the publication of a biography of Dominic Savio, written by John Bosco. Unlike other accounts of saints, this hagiography placed an emphasis on the saint's agency and the way he dealt with sexual temptation. In that narrative, agency was key his saintliness and women were not held responsible for the saint's election of chastity. The year 1954 saw Pius XII draw the Encyclical *Sacra Virginitas*, which dealt with the importance of chastity and virginity among the clergy and religious orders. The pope stated that self-restraint brought man closer in relationship with God and was a certain way of achieving salvation. [19] The canonization of new saints had the aim of promoting and inspiring young unmarried Catholics to remain chaste. This paper argues that before modernity, chastity was an important component in the hagiography of the saints but not the main motive for sanctification; in the twentieth century, the martyrs for chastity or purity became important for a Catholic understanding of saintly behavior and the interaction of God with humanity through the proper uses of the body. [20]

### 1) Catholic underpinnings of sexuality

Catholicism believes that an understanding of the working of God's grace on individuals or communities is achieved through the study of history and the place miracles have in the lives of people. [21] I propose that a cursory look into Catholicism understands and construction of a moral theology is important to understand its purview on sexuality. [22] The Catholic God's designs for the universe can be gleaned through the guidance of the Church and its particular interpretation of the gospels.

Catholicism explains that there are truths that cannot be tailored to our interpretation of God. [23] These unmodifiable truths are contained in the Nicene and Apostles' Creed, whose words determine the role of the Trinity in the universe and in the lives of individuals. [24] The Creeds, and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, allude to Christ's conception without resorting to sexual intercourse. In the Catholic imaginary, the people involved in the conception and birth of Christ were virgins and remained so until their death. [25] Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians about the virtues of abstinence and the need to view the body as a temple, under the belief of an imminent return of Christ. [26] In the Pauline purview, Christians should flee from sexual immorality [27] and celibacy was to be encouraged among the unattached, because sexual activity corrupted the Christian's body and should preferably not be practiced, [28] although Paul allowed those men and women who could not abstain from sex to marry. [29]

The Church does not consider sexual intercourse wrong *per se*, as it understands that sex is "the means devised by God for the preservation and increase of the human race." [30] What is wrong though is intercourse outside of the sacrament of marriage or losing oneself in the carnal act. The encounter is sinful because it is not a reasonable action: we should want to engage in sexual intercourse to follow God's injunctions to reproduce with our heterosexual marriage partner, this makes sex a paradoxical act: it is good, for it allows for reproduction but the pleasure it generates is sinful, for it allows us to lose ourselves in our senses and not think of God. [31]

This argument brings us to what was central to Catholicism's belief: the notion that sin is perpetuated through sexual intercourse even if practiced within the bounds of marriage. [32] The pleasure felt through sexual intercourse is a symptom of man's failure "to will the good. The Church encouraged virginity and chastity as a means of bringing people particularly unmarried adolescents and young adults closer to God. [33]

Thomas Aquinas explained in *Summa Theologiae* that virginity was not only a physical but also a spiritual attribute, which "is not situated in the flesh." [34] An individual could lose their physical virginity by force but remain a spiritual virgin. Agency is an important concept for sexual abstinence, but willing chastity is sometimes not enough: God's grace is necessary for those moments when the will falters, and sexual activity threatens the person's will.

The lack of sexual activity was an important aspect of Catholic identity in modern culture: chastity was popularly understood as "a virtue that according to the Holy Fathers turns men into angels. It is a virtue that detests luxury, vanities, the beauty of the body, and any type of earthly pleasure. It is a virtue which expels the most gracious of fragrances." [35] Despite the poetic definition of what chastity meant, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* defined it as:

[T]he virtue which excludes or moderates the indulgence of the sexual appetite. It is a form of the virtue of temperance, which controls according to right reason the desire for and use of those things which afford the greatest sensual pleasures. With chastity is often confounded modesty; though this latter is properly a special circumstance of chastity or rather, we might say its complement. Modesty is the quality of delicate reserve and constraint concerning all acts that give rise to shame, and is, therefore, the outpost and safeguard of chastity. [36]

Pius XII emphasized the importance of sexual abstinence as aiming "at the divine" and turning "the whole mind and soul... to want to please God in everything, to think of Him continually, to consecrate body and soul completely to Him." [37]

A desire to engage in non-marital sexual relations was "disobedient to reason" and was deeply upsetting to the Catholic understanding of a relationship with God. [38] Acting upon lustful desires has the capability of familiarizing "the soul with wrongdoing, lessening the fear of God in the soul, diminishing the fervor of charity and causing God to withhold those more abundant graces which he would otherwise give." [39] Sexual offenses were understood as venial sins but engaging in them frequently could precipitate the offender into the category of deadly sin. [40]

*The Baltimore Catechism* emphasized the importance of confessing sins for the good of the individual. [41] Catholicism had a means of supervising the sexual activities of its followers: the confessional. [42] It was there that the

priest would listen, cajole, and educate the penitent using information the Catholic Church considered important "to bring back the penitent into harmony with the divine will." [43] Catholicism understood non-procreative sexual relations as the sin of lust and categorized it under venial sin. [44] It was considered an unreasonable desire and subject to the animal whims of the body which had caused the fall of man. [45]

But "managing the language of sex and body [in the confessional was] baffling." [46] Christianity's emphasis on original sin and its sexual connotations was a part of the confessional system of the Catholic act of repentance: [47] "The technical language involving language of contrition, involving sexual desires or actions involving 'occasions of sin' and 'firm purpose of amendment', was easily grasped, but not so easily applied to situations in real life." [48] To make sin less prevalent, a code of conduct was also enforced that placed women's bodies at the center of the question of sexuality.

In that particular vision, the physical integrity of women and men was a guarantee of salvation and goodness. [49] A female's policing of her sexuality was interpreted as an assurance for a man's good behavior. An article in the *Irish Standard* explained the benefits Catholics had over other cultures regarding purity thanks to women and their self-restraint:

It is generally admitted that the virtue which most clearly marks the moral condition of a nation, the virtue which shows most distinctly the restraint of moral and religious principles upon the home life of a nation, is female chastity. Where this is held in honor the passions and impulses of both sexes are held in check; where it is not held in honor the result becomes apparent in the large proportion which illegitimate births bear to those which are legitimate. [50]

The author posited that female chastity was the guarantee of a society's success in a Catholic belief system, as women were viewed as gatekeepers who could make society swing in a godly direction. [51]

Women were understood as either good (chaste or pure in the parlance of the era) or temptresses. [52] Through their volition to have sex or refrain from it, women could make a man sin or remain on the good path: [53] "We are all proud of the high standard of female virtue upheld by the Catholic Church. We are never tired of extolling the purity of our Catholic women; a purity that is generally acknowledged by friend and foe of the Catholic name." [54] However, as the article expands on its ideas, it loses its optimism and explains how "bad" women can damage the fabric of social well-being: "A Catholic woman must not only be chaste herself but must shun all intercourse with the unchaste; especially when such intercourse can be made to mean an approval of female impurity." [55]

If a Catholic woman did not satisfy this criterion, she was considered shameless: "the most brazen adulteress in the world is the Catholic woman who under the pretext of a legal divorce, leaves her husband behind and publicly shares

her couch with another man... she disgraces all the Catholic women in the world.” [56] In the scheme presented, women possessed agency and should exercise it to control their sexuality for the benefit of men, who were closer to their animal natures and had less control over their sexual impulses. [57] This argument would exempt men from responsibility over their bodies and posit the responsibility of initiating sexual encounters on the women but, in the twentieth century, the belief that men had little responsibility for their sexuality changed as it became clearer that sexual encounters did not only occur between men and women but could also involve other men, children, and teenagers.

## 2) The Martyr for Chastity

During the twentieth century, the figure of a particular Catholic saint began to emerge which reflected the growing importance of a virtuous body: the martyr of purity, also known as the martyr of chastity. This type of saint's hagiography was characterized by the preference of death over any sexual contact. Most of the martyrs for the cause of chastity were women who were killed by men for not acceding to have sex with them or to avoid the indignity of rape. But as chastity became more important for conservative elements of the Church, male chastity dependent on the correct use of agency also increased in importance. Pius XII wrote:

Virginity consecrated to Christ is in itself such evidence of faith in the kingdom of heaven, such a proof of love for our Divine Redeemer, that there is little wonder if it bears abundant fruits of sanctity. Innumerable are the virgins and apostles vowed to perfect chastity who are the honor of the Church by the lofty sanctity of their lives. In truth, virginity gives souls a force of spirit capable of leading them even to martyrdom, if needs be: such is the clear lesson of history which proposes a whole host of virgins to our admiration, from Agnes of Rome to Maria Goretti. [58]

Reverential accounts of the lives of saint's- hagiographies became an important reference in guiding Catholics on how to behave and please God on Earth. Most Catholics trusted the information given by the priests who, following Rome's dictates, apprised them of what conducts were appropriate, and which were not, to attain salvation. [59] Knowledge of the saints was also important as they were able, through the will of God, to intercede for miracles that subvert the natural course of events. [60]

Saints become positive agents in the intervention of God on human processes, but their category of celestial agents is reliant on Church recognition and approval of their lives as recorded in history. [61] Saints function as examples of men and women who achieved recognition for actions that led them to saintliness through mastering and disciplining their bodies. [62] To comprehend the exercise of God's grace in the world, Catholics investigate the past to identify God's gracious acts (including miracles) within the lives of his most devoted subjects, among their own or other Catholic communities.

Grace is rarely felt in the present; it is only learned and understood from the study of the past. The understanding of

the narrative of God's action on history is monopolized by the Church, who by recounting the histories of people and taking a polarizing Manichean view of evil and good, shows episodes of God's grace operating throughout time by Catholic standards and explains how these stages impact the Christian's life. [63] We can call this reflection on the past and its beliefs or biases as “mythic consciousness”, [64] which is explained as “what is experienced as real is real in its consequences”. [65] If some people believe their chastity ensures their future wellbeing, they will practice it because they are certain it is good for them.

Robert A. Orsi quotes a teaching sister from Marygrove College in Detroit writing about the importance of saints in the development of a cultural strain in 1937:

The bodies of others may become the vehicles for the materialization of the sacred. This was especially true in the psychological and religiously fluid domain of Catholic devotionalism. In this religious world, the bodies so used were, first, those of the saints. It was from the cult of saints and relics...that this orientation toward the sacred experienced in bodies was developed and popularized in Catholic cultures. [66]

Though writing about saints occurred since the Acts of the Apostles, the writing of modern saints' biographies changed in the seventeenth century thanks to Jean Bolland and his followers, who instituted the modern critical hagiography, which departed from the medieval narrative of sainthood to make the hagiography closer to reality than the supernatural. [67]

Saints' hagiographies are what Alex Garcia-Rivera called “the little stories” of Christianity, “told by specialists and non-specialists”, which contrasts with the “Big Story” of Christianity, told by theologians and other scholars. [68] Little stories “are in no way exclusive or contradictory from the big story...they are interdependent”. [69] They reinforce a series of theological beliefs instituted by Catholicism since the Council of Trent, which includes the acceptance of miracles through the intercession of saints on behalf of humans. Catholic tenets during the period we are analyzing are considered as characteristic of pre-modern religion. They are typified by a belief in supernatural presences in the world. These beliefs contrasted with modernity's disbelief in the supernatural. [70] In this narrative, the Catholic space is filled with beings angels, demons, and saints whom we cannot see but who can communicate with humans and God through prayer.

The narrative of the hagiography is reflected the virtues of “normal” people who had undertaken extraordinary actions to live their life according to the Church's purview. In these narratives, sexual abstinence was necessary, and if not practiced at one point in the saint's life, it had to be exercised at the end of the sainted person's life. But while in the Middle Ages, a woman like Margaret of Cortona could be canonized, despite having lived some years as the mistress of a nobleman, [71] in the nineteenth century, this was no longer tolerable or acceptable. A tightening of the

understanding of virginity and chastity was placed by the Church on the laity's salvation.

The first male saint to the new cause of sexual chastity was not a martyr but became a prototype of how young men could achieve sexual purity through the correct use of agency. In the hagiography of St. Dominic Savio, written by St. John Bosco, one of the main virtues of the saint was choosing not to engage in sexual actions and avoiding any circumstance where sexual temptation may have occurred.

### 3) Willing Slaves of Chastity

By sanctifying individuals who reinforced the importance of chastity and virginity through their private behavior and the proper exercise of agency, the Catholic Church sent a message that stood against modern culture. Let us analyze each one: the first example is the proclamation of Mary's Immaculate Conception, the second is the canonization of Saint Maria Goretti, the third is the canonization of Saint Dominic Savio and the fourth is the proclamation of Blessed Fernando Saperas as a martyr for chastity. [72]

In the first instance, the proclamation of Mary's Immaculate Conception Pope Pius IX upheld a doctrine discussed since the Middle Ages and which had been rejected by saints like Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux. [73] The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception stated that the Virgin Mary was a unique woman in the history of the world for she was chosen to bear the Son of God. [74] This favor entailed, according to Catholic views that Mary's uniqueness is that she is a human *better than the rest of humanity*, for God chose her to bear Christ.

Mary's uniqueness for Catholics was confirmed when the Archangel Gabriel addressed her as "full of Grace" in Luke's gospel. [75] Being full of grace is no feat a human could claim, for each person inherits sin through their parent's sexual intercourse. Did Gabriel's statement mean that Mary was not stained by original sin, like the rest of humanity? The Catholic Church concluded so: in 1854, Pope Pius IX, a devotee of the Virgin, stated *ex-cathedra* that Mary had been born free of sin. [76] The Pope's statement in *Ineffabilis Deus* ended any residual discussion on whether Mary could or could not have been stained by sin, and confirmed that she was a perpetual virgin. The Church's statement was confirmed by Mary herself, according to Catholic belief, in an apparition at Lourdes, France, where she unequivocally informed Bernadette Soubirous that she was "The Immaculate Conception", giving Pius IX the miracle that justified the Papacy's declaration. [77]

The proclamation of the Immaculate Conception placed chastity on a higher ideological plane throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, [78] and a roster of young men and women canonized during that period seemed to prove the Church's certainty that abstaining from sexual intercourse was a sure conduit to heaven, as it had been for the Virgin Mary. Saints who died for chastity looked up to Mary as a guide and an example of how they should live. [79]

On June 24, 1950, the Evening Star, an American newspaper, reported on the canonization of Maria Goretti, a

girl murdered in an attempted rape: "Pope Pius XII will present the murdered child as a model for all worlds' youth. She perished 48 years ago at the age of 11 from 14 dagger wounds, rather than submit to a man's passion." [80] The canonization coincided with a holy year and five hundred thousand pilgrims were expected to attend the ceremony, which would be held outdoors.

Maria Goretti was a twelve-year-old girl murdered by a neighbor in a tragically clumsy rape attempt. [81] The wanton act of the rapist and the way Maria handled the heinous event gave her immense respect among the laity and later propelled her canonization. Maria did not die defending Catholic faith or dogma; it was her actions during the attack that earned her the title of a saint: as her attacker threatened to rape her with a knife, Maria exclaimed, "No, no Alessandro, it goes against God's wishes." [82] Maria's struggle to ward off the rapist enraged him and in the fight that ensued, he stabbed her. [83] She did not die immediately.

Her family took her to the hospital hoping she could be saved from the wounds. Before her death, Maria Goretti forgave her attacker and asked her mother to do so as well. She was later referred to as a child who had "died defending her faith." This tragic event can be problematized from the standpoint of how the Church views sexual intercourse.

Though Maria Goretti was defending her integrity, Catholicism celebrated that she preferred to die before she would lose her virginity. "The Story of Maria...caught the Italians' fancy; thousands sought her intercession and hundreds reported receiving miracles. In no time, the peasant girl became a powerful symbol of sexual purity." [84] Pope Pius XII used the declaration of her blessedness in 1947 to "denounce those in the movie industry, the fashion industry, the press, the theater, and even the military...for corrupting the chastity of youth." [85]

Such recognition of Maria Goretti highlights the importance Catholicism places on female chastity and also provides a new narrative on how women did not provoke men to rape them. Let us analyze each premise. The moral of Goretti's hagiography was that it may be better to die before losing one's virginity in ways not approved by Catholicism. It is also important as a woman to "forgive those men that couldn't help themselves." [86] What interests us about this belief though is that Catholicism no longer viewed women's bodies as the instrument to seduce men. In this case, it was recognized that Alessandro had agency and the choice to rape or not. Previously, virgins canonized by Catholicism had been recognized for their martyrdom in the cause of Christ and as witnesses to the faith.

The hagiography of Saint Dominic Savio, who died from an illness shortly before his fifteenth birthday, also highlights the importance of virginity to the Catholic purview during this period. [87] Though some members of the Catholic Church considered Savio too young to be canonized as a saint, his canonization garnered support from his teacher, Saint John Bosco, as well as family and neighbors who testified to his "heroic virtue". He was praised for obeying his parents, praying willingly, attending mass frequently

with his mother, and being overall what people would call a “good boy”. What interests us is the narrative Saint John Bosco recounts on how Dominic Savio was tempted to act incorrectly:

Some of his school companions were not very good, and on one occasion he was in grave danger of doing wrong. In the hot weather, some of the boys used to go swimming in the streams and other water pools where water was available. Bathing has its physical dangers and, not infrequently, the death by drowning of young people and adults has to be lamented. *It can also have its dangers for the soul in certain circumstances when boys are stripped together and have little care and respect for each other.* Dominic was persuaded by some of his companions to go swimming with them on one occasion. But when he saw what was done and said, he was profoundly grieved and made up his mind never to go again. [88]

Dominic Savio was invited to go again, but refused, stating: “I’m not going. In any case, if you want the truth I’ll tell you. I went once before, but never again; not simply because it is easy to get drowned there, but more still because from what I saw last time it is also easy to offend God.” [89] Saint John Bosco recounts that it was at that moment when his soul became endangered for the first and last time. He might have fallen into temptations which would have changed the course of his life by altering his ability to will the good. [90]

Savio’s devotion to Mary as the Immaculate Conception encouraged him to seek corporal punishment and “never look...at a girl and never let...his eyes roam.” [91] Saint John Bosco’s words on Savio’s early death were “God wanted to take him to himself in the flower of his youth, also to free him from the perils and dangers in which even the best of souls can be shipwrecked.” [92] In Saint John Bosco’s analysis, Dominic Savio was a teenager who could have fallen into sin if he had followed the other boys to the water hole or if he had lived a long life. His death seemed a better fate, for it protected him from the dangers of living and the possibilities of sinning.

Dominic Savio was held as an example of how teenage men should act in a virtuous manner. His canonization, in 1954 by Pope Pius XII, was different from those held before the 1850s, in that he seemed to be canonized for his goodness and his exercise of celibacy. [93] His integrity could be viewed as something not quite extraordinary; many good people live their lives without being canonized as saints following their deaths. But his virtues were elevated to the altars as an example of what teenagers could aspire to become. The hagiographies highlight how the Catholic Church from the nineteenth century onwards started placing a higher value on the status of chastity among its members, particularly adolescents who were not yet old enough to marry or take holy orders. The individual’s decision to practice self-restraint determined the course of their future saintly actions and seemed to guarantee their goodness in other aspects of their lives.

Though the term martyr for chastity was employed to

describe ideal feminine behavior, it was Spain where a male martyr of chastity emerged. The Spanish civil war (1936–39) was characterized by wanton violence and atrocities on both republican and nationalist sides. For the Republicans, Catholic priests were particular targets: “Churches are in flames all over Spain. Priests are being killed, their homes violated, and their properties stolen. The Archbishop’s palace at Singüenza was raided and looted of 1, 000, 000 pesetas in valuables.” [94] The General Quarters of the Jesuits in Rome claimed that one hundred Jesuits had been murdered “since the outbreak of the war.” [95] Revolutionary anticlericalism went after the Catholic Church and its representatives. Many of the priests earned the palms of martyrdom according to Catholic tradition, for dying in the cause of Christ.

One of the priests captured by Republicans was Fernando Saperas, a member of the Claretian Order who was born in Alió, Tarragona Spain, on September 8, 1905, and professed as a Brother in 1930. [96] Because of the persecution priests experienced, many hid their identities by dressing as laborers. Saperas was discovered despite his disguise and captured by a militia in Montpalau. [97] One of his jailors began taunting him by asking, “Have you ever been with a Nun?” to which Fernando replied: “Kill me if you desire, but do not speak of those things.” [98] The reply may have given the captors a clear understanding of how the priest could be further tortured. According to the hagiography, two captors held his arms and took his clothes off, one of the captors “sprung forth to rape” the priest, who staved off the attack thanks to his physical strength. As he tried to defend himself he kept screaming, “Kill me if you want, kill me, kill me but do not do that.” [99]

To further the torture, they took him to “brothel after brothel where they used every possible means to defeat Fernando’s strength. They used crude language, provocative stances... they stripped him. At every provocation, he would reply ‘I am a virgin and will die a virgin’.” [100] The soldiers’ torture of the Claretian priest was so appalling that the prostitutes interceded for Fernando to be left alone. To finish off his life, they took him to the cemetery of Montpalau and shot him. [101] Before his death, he asked to speak to his captors: “Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do. I forgive you; I forgive you. Long live Christ the King! Long live religion!” [102] The martyrdom of Saperas on August 13, 1936, was not uncommon for Catholic priests during the Spanish Civil War, but his title “Martyr of Chastity” is unique for a man.

Saperas’ experience was likened to María Goretti’s in a homily given by Father Montiu-de Niux in 2014: “Very possibly if Brother Ferrán Saperas is declared blessed, as we hope, then his testimony of faith and virtue and, especially, his example of fidelity to the virtue of chastity in the middle of great trials, could have a worldwide repercussion. It would be an immense good! Let us remember the impact that Saint María Goretti had.” [103] Fernando Saperas was recognized as Blessed, the last stage before sanctity in the Catholic Church, on 21 October 2017, along with another 109 martyrs of the Claretian order. Angelo Cardinal Amato spoke:

In front of the tsunami of persecution, Claretians reacted with the efficacious weapon of charity and forgiveness. For those who wanted to annihilate the presence of Christianity in Spain, the martyrs responded by forgiving, praying, and screaming: 'we are not afraid'. Their martyrdom bears the testimony that goodness defeats evil, and is an invitation to the fidelity of Christian life. [104]

Xavier Novell, Bishop of Solsona, explained that Brother Saperas was "the best-known witness of the 110 martyr's faith." [105]

Saperas probably understood that he would not survive his humiliating ordeal: during the Spanish Civil War one out of every seven priests was murdered. [106] In Christianity, death by martyrdom is not problematic: traditionally it is understood that torture and death caused by being a Christian guarantees the individual's salvation. What probably disturbed Saperas most was the attempted rape. It appears that he had internalized the Catholic understanding that the conservation of sexual purity ensured approbation by God. Catholicism may have wanted to single Saperas because of a belief he had a choice between chastity or death if he did not comply with the Republican's orders. The captors were not asking him to renounce Christ—they said he could go free if he engaged in sex (although he probably knew they would not keep to their word anyway). This says something about the Church's ongoing emphasis on the importance of chastity—since he was recognized 'Blessed' as recently as 2017.

From the proclamation of the Immaculate Conception to Saperas' death, we can see through the narrative contained within the hagiography of saints that male agency, volition, and sexual desire had to be reined in. Unlike other periods, man's control over his sexuality was not reliant on the behavior of a woman. St. Dominic Savio's sexual restraint was tested by male school friends, while Saperas' sexual restraint was hardened by the abuse other men attempted to enforce. In both narratives, it was men, not women for the prostitutes did not engage in coitus with him and tried to protect him—who endangered the physical integrity of the men. Though Catholicism considers Saperas a martyr for dying in the cause of Christ, the words "for chastity" appended to the word martyr imply that because of the attempted rape and his actions this was a defining moment in his conduct as a Catholic. In that particular interpretation, Saperas and Dominic Savio's rejection of sexual temptation was one of the aspects that favored their canonization, for they specifically sought to enter a relationship with God through the rejection of sexual activity.

Pius XI wrote in 1930 that "Unbridled lust...is the most potent cause of sinning." [107] The only way a man could control his passions is by subjecting

Himself to God [which] must be his primary endeavor, following the plan divinely ordained. For it is a sacred ordinance that whoever shall have first subjected himself to God will, by the aid of divine grace, be glad to subject to himself his passions and concupiscence; while he who is a rebel against God

will, to his sorrow, experience within himself the violent rebellion of his worst passions. [108]

Pius XII, the successor of Pius XI and following a similar line, explained that virginity should be preferred to marriage; "However" he said, "one should not abstain from marriage for reasons of self-interest, nor from fear of assuming its responsibilities, but to concentrate one's self more freely and fully to the service of God and neighbor. [109] Pius XII "cautioned that the Catholic Church's doctrine is sometimes forgotten or even altered", a fear that was demonstrated by the need to exalt the martyr of chastity or purity in the twentieth century. The martyr of chastity rejected the role of sexual life as part of the "human equilibrium" and established the importance of virginity and chastity as hallmarks of Catholic identity. [110]

## 2. Conclusions

Though Catholicism explains that Christ's message has not changed throughout the centuries, the realities of modern life forced the Church to reflect on its stance on virginity and chastity. Discoveries in the natural sciences and the migration of Catholic populations to different countries and urban centers forced Catholicism to explain and redefine the importance of sexual abstinence for the laity. The use of hagiography and popular devotions to saints who were willing to die before succumbing to sexual activity gained momentum throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly during and after the papacy of Pius IX, who by pushing forth the dogma of the Immaculate Conception indirectly emphasized the importance of chastity for both men and women. Masculine chastity grew in importance as the role of women and men also underwent changes caused by modernity: while women had been viewed as temptresses in the past, modernity brought forth two other problems to masculine chastity: same-sex attraction and the violence wrought by men against the bodies of priests, friars, and lay brothers. Pius XII's Encyclical on virginity seems to prove that for Catholics of the modern period, chastity and virginity, along with the practice of other virtues, was a clear way to attain salvation and thus became the marker of a good citizen.

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- [71] Margaret of Cortona was the mistress of a nobleman who turned to God when her lover died.
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- The term "full of grace" signifies that she is unique in respect to the rest of humanity, which is tainted by the original sin. The status of Mary's position within the economy of salvation is still debated between Catholics and Protestant Christians.
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- [90] Víctor M. Macías-González and Anne Rubenstein, *Masculinity Sexuality in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2012), 24-25. Víctor M. Macías' article on the importance of bathing publicly in nineteenth-century Mexico seems to prove Bosco's beliefs that there was a culture of homo-eroticism and experimentation in water-holes, rivers or lakes in Latin cultures. Macías explains through a story about homoeroticism in Mexico: when Lencho swam next to Nandino, "he would pinch higher and higher until he caressed" his penis. This was the beginning of Nandino's experience with homoeroticism. We can contrast Nandino who was about to buy flower-scented water but instead went to the water hole where presumably he lost interest in religion and Savio who refused to do so. In Bosco's purview, Savio had been saved from becoming a young man like Nandino.
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- [93] "Del Vaticano," *El Siglo Futuro* (Madrid), February 22, 1933, 1.
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- [95] "Jesuits Say 100 Killed," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), July 18, 1937, B-3.
- [96] "Mateo Casals y 108 compañeros, Beatos," *Catholic.net* (website).n.d., <https://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/67107/cat/1239/mateo-casals-y-108-companeros-beatos.htm>. In some texts, he is referred to as Ferrán and in others as Fernando. Ferrán is the equivalent of Fernando in the Catalan language.

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