

Celibacy vs. Chastity?

Celibacy is a state of refraining from all sexual acts, while chastity is a virtue everyone is called to live

Question: I get confused about the various uses of the words *continence, chastity and celibacy*. Are they the same thing?

Answer: The words are related but also have distinct meanings. Continence, in the wider sense means “self control,” especially related to the body. It comes from the Latin *continentia*, which means “a holding back.” However, over the years, the word “continence” has also developed the more specialized meaning of sexual restraint or the complete abstaining from sexual intercourse. In this case, it is similar to a state of living as a celibate.

Celibacy’s wider meaning refers to anyone who lives in an ongoing state of refraining from sexual intercourse. And in this sense, anyone who is unmarried should live “celibately.” However, a person could eventually marry and the celibacy would cease. More strictly, “celibacy” refers in the Church to a vowed, perpetual state of refraining from sexual relations that religious and priests undertake. Here the celibate state is ongoing and expected to be maintained for life.

Chastity is the virtue whereby we refrain from all unlawful sexual activity and intercourse. It is a virtue all are called to have, but its manifestation will vary based on one’s state in life.

Thus for the married, chastity means fidelity to one’s spouse in body, mind and heart. Any sexual contact with anyone outside of the marriage is adultery. Further, the viewing of pornography and fantasizing about someone other than the spouse is a form of unchastity. The used of contraception is also annexed to unchastity because it willfully excludes openness to the procreative dimension of sex.

For the unmarried, chastity means refraining from any form of genital sexual relations, to include inappropriate touching, immodest or inappropriate conversations, the viewing of pornography, masturbation, and sexual fantasizing.

[This information on Catholic teaching on human sexuality is taken from the column “Pastoral Answers” by Msgr. Charles Pope in the January 25, 2015 edition of [Our Sunday Visitor](#), page 15. It is used with permission.]

-Presented by SMM’s Catholic Life Issues (Family Life Subcommittee)-