



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 17 January 2024*

[Multimedia]

The following text includes parts that were not read out loud, but should be considered as such.

Cycle of Catechesis. Vices and Virtues. 4. *Lust*

Brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today, let us listen closely to the catechesis, because afterwards a circus will perform here for our entertainment.

Let us continue our journey concerning vices and virtues; and the ancient Fathers teach us that, after gluttony, the second “demon” — that is, vice — that is always crouching at the door of the heart is that of *lust*. While gluttony is voracity with regard to food, this second vice is a kind of “voracity” with regard to another person, that is, the poisoned bond that human beings have with each other, especially in the sphere of sexuality.

Be careful: in Christianity, there is no condemnation of the sexual instinct. There is no condemnation. A book of the Bible, the Song of Songs, is a wonderful poem of love between two lovers. However, this beautiful dimension of our humanity — the sexual dimension, the dimension of love — is not without its dangers, so much so that Saint Paul already had to address the issue

in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. He writes: “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans” (5:1). The Apostle’s reproach concerns precisely an unhealthy handling of sexuality by some Christians.

But let us look at the human experience, the experience of *falling in love*. There are so many newlyweds here: you can talk about this! Why this mystery happens, and why it is such a shattering experience in people’s lives, none of us knows. One person falls in love with another, falling in love happens. It is one of the most astonishing realities of existence. Most of the songs you hear on the radio are about this: loves that shine, loves that are always sought and never attained, loves that are full of joy, or that torment us to the point of tears.

If it is not polluted by vice, falling in love is one of the purest feelings. A person in love becomes generous, enjoys giving gifts, writes letters and poems. He stops thinking of himself to be completely focused on the other. This is beautiful. And if you ask a person in love, “Why do you love?” they won’t have an answer. In so many ways their love is unconditional, without any reason. So be it if that love, which is so powerful, is also a little naive: a person in love does not really know the face of the other, they tend to idealise them, they are ready to make promises whose weight they don’t immediately grasp. This “garden” where wonders are multiplied is not, however, safe from evil. It is defiled by the demon of lust, and this vice is particularly odious, for at least two reasons.

First, because it *destroys relationships between people*. To prove such a reality, unfortunately, the daily news is sufficient. How many relationships that began in the best of ways have then turned into toxic relationships, of possession of the other, lacking respect and a sense of limits? These are loves in which chastity has been missing: a virtue not to be confused with sexual abstinence — chastity is more than sexual abstinence — but rather, to be connected with the will never to possess the other. To love is to respect the other, to seek his or her happiness, to cultivate empathy for his or her feelings, to dispose oneself in the knowledge of a body, a psychology, and a soul that are not our own, and that must be contemplated for the beauty they bear. That is love, and love is beautiful. Lust, on the other hand, makes a mockery of all this: lust plunders, it robs, it consumes in haste, it does not want to listen to the other but only to its own need and pleasure; lust judges every courtship a bore, it does not seek that synthesis between reason, drive and feeling that would help us to conduct existence wisely. The lustful seek only shortcuts: they do not understand that the road to love must be travelled slowly, and this patience, far from being synonymous with boredom, allows us to make our loving relationships happy.

But there is a second reason why lust is a dangerous vice. Among all human pleasures, sexuality has a powerful voice. It involves all the senses; it dwells both in the body and in the psyche, and this is very beautiful; but if it is not disciplined with patience, if it is not inscribed in a relationship and in a story where two individuals transform it into a loving dance, it turns into a chain that deprives human beings of freedom. Sexual pleasure, which is a gift from God, is undermined by

pornography: satisfaction without relationship that can generate forms of addiction. We have to defend love, the love of the heart, of the mind, of the body, pure love in the giving of oneself to the other. And this is the beauty of sexual intercourse.

Winning the battle against lust, against the “objectification” of the other, can be a lifelong endeavour. But the prize of this battle is the most important of all, because it is preserving that beauty that God wrote into His creation when He imagined love between man and woman, which is not for the purpose of using one another, but for loving one another. That beauty that makes us believe that building a story together is better than going in search of adventures — there are so many Don Juans out there! — that cultivating tenderness is better than bowing to the demon of possession — true love does not possess, it gives itself — that serving is better than conquering. Because if there is no love, life is sad, it is sad loneliness. Thank you.

APPEAL

I express my closeness to and solidarity with the victims, all civilians, of the missile attack that hit an urban area of Erbil, capital of the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. Good relations between neighbours are not built with such actions but with dialogue and cooperation. I ask everyone to avoid any step that increases tension in the Middle East and other scenarios of war.

Special Greetings

I extend a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors taking part in today’s Audience, especially the groups from Australia and the United States of America. Upon all of you, and upon your families, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God bless you!

Tomorrow the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* begins, which this year has as its theme: “Love the Lord your God [...] and your neighbor as yourself” (*Lk 10:27*). I invite you to pray that Christians may reach full communion and bear a unanimous witness of love towards all, especially towards the most fragile.

I extend a warm welcome to Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet the faithful of Bellizzi, the *FederCasa* group, the *Pio IX-La Salle* Institute in Rome and the Highlands Institute School in Rome.

Lastly, my thoughts go out to *young people, the sick, the elderly, and newlyweds*. Today the liturgy commemorates Saint Anthony Abbot, one of the founding fathers of monasticism. May his

example encourage you to embrace the Gospel without compromise.

And let us not forget the countries that are at war, let us not forget Ukraine, let us not forget Palestine, Israel, let us not forget the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip who are suffering so much. Let us pray for the many victims of war, so many victims. War always destroys, war does not sow love, it sows hatred. War is a true human defeat. Let us pray for people who suffer in war.

I give everyone my Blessing!

Summary of the Holy Father's words

Dear brothers and sisters: In our catechesis on the virtues and the vices, we now turn to lust, which is opposed to the beauty of that love which the Creator has implanted in our hearts and called us to cultivate in our relations with others, especially by the responsible use of our sexuality. Lust poisons the purity of love by turning it from a chaste, patient and generous acceptance of another person in all the mysterious richness of his or her being, into a egotistic desire for possession and immediate satisfaction. God's gift of sexuality, which finds sublime expression in conjugal love, is at the service of human fulfilment and authentic freedom, whereas lust enchains us in selfishness and emptiness. May our hearts always treasure the beauty of love, which shares in the mystery of God's own unconditional love for us, created in his own image.