

*The Symposium of Methodius of Olympus is a treatise on Chastity. It is one of the chief virtues and not concerned simply with the moderation of the sexual appetite. Thus it is the concern of the married and unmarried alike in the process of renewal, of return to men's primitive state of grace when there was no knowledge of evil. By the fall, man in the act of turning away from virtue created the usage of evil. Virginity is seen as the grace of Christ superseding the old law and thus in Gregory of Nyssa as a foretaste of the life of blessedness to come. Only the chaste man, the man whose life is moderated by virtue can come to this life of blessedness.*

My fair virgins, nothing can so help a person towards virtue as chastity. For chastity alone causes the soul to be guided in the noblest and best possible way and to be washed clean of the stains and impurities of the world. Indeed, ever since Christ taught us to practise it and revealed to us its unsurpassable beauty, the reign of the evil one has been destroyed, whereas before he had continually been capturing and enslaving mankind; so that none of the men of old were fully pleasing to the Lord, but all were overwhelmed by error, for the Law was not at all adequate to free mankind from corruption, until virginity, succeeding the Law, held man in thrall to the commands of Christ. (*St Methodius. The Symposium. Logos 10*).

The man who loves himself excessively and strives always to look to his own private good regardless of his neighbour does not honour chastity; indeed, he even dishonours it. For he is far from the number of those who worthily cultivate this virtue, since he does violence to the love and generosity and sympathy which are its fruit.

No, it is not proper to practise chastity and virginity and then become defiled and incontinent by evil deeds; or to profess purity and self-control and then become stained by sin; or to say that we are not concerned with the things of this world, and then try to possess them and make ourselves anxious over them. Rather, all our members must be preserved intact and untouched by corruption. Thus it would be ridiculous to keep one's generative organs pure but not one's tongue; or to keep one's tongue pure, but not one's sight, one's ears or hands; or to keep all these pure but not one's heart, allowing it to consort with anger and conceit. (*St Methodius. The Symposium. Logos 11*).

Indeed, who was ever able to grasp Christ or his Spirit perfectly without first purifying himself? Chastity is the exercise which from childhood prepares the soul for glory by making it attractive and lovable and with ease brings this adornment for her to the next world untried. It holds up great expectations as the reward for small toil and renders our bodies immortal. It is only fitting then that all should gladly praise and esteem chastity above all other things; some, because by practising virginity they have been espoused to the Word; others because by chastity they have been emancipated from that condemnation, 'Earth thou art, and unto earth thou shalt return'. (*St Methodius. The Symposium. Logos 10*).

This chastity we, who are devoted to virginity, cultivate to a special degree and offer it to the Lord. They also practise it who live chastely with their wives: they bring forth as it were little shoots around the trunk of the tree of chastity, blossoming with self control. Those, however, who, even though they are not committing fornication, are yet deluded into enjoying their sole and lawful spouses to excess, how will they celebrate the Feast? How can they rejoice if they have not decorated their tabernacle, that is, their flesh, with the boughs of the chaste-tree, and have not listened to the saying, 'That they also who have wives be as if they have none'? (*St Methodius. The Symposium. Logos 9*).

The life of virginity seems to be an image of the blessedness in the world to come, for it bears in itself many tokens of the good things reserved there in hope for us. We will prove the truth of this statement that it may be known. It is true, first, because a man who has died once for all to sin lives for the future for God, no longer bearing fruit unto death. And having, as far as possible, put an end within himself to a life according to the flesh, from then onwards he awaits the blessed hope and the manifestation of the great God, refraining from putting any distance between himself and the coming of God through intervening posterity: secondly because even in this present life he enjoys special fruits taken from the results of our resurrection. For our Lord has announced that the life of the just after our resurrection shall be as that of angels. Now it is appropriate to the angelic nature to be free from marriage; therefore the blessing of this promise has already been received by the man who has shared in the splendour of the saints and who by the stainlessness of his life has imitated the purity of these bodyless beings. If then virginity has become the patron of such favours as these, what words are fit to express the admiration of so great a grace? What other gift of the soul can be found so great and so honoured as not to suffer by comparison with this perfection? (*Gregory of Nyssa. On Virginity. P.G.46.380-1*).