

The 144,000

“These are they who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins” (Rev 14,4)

A. “These are they who have not defiled themselves with women....”

The reference to women in this context indicates that the 144,000 are all men. The search for what it means to be ‘defiled with women’ takes us back to the account of the fall of man and to the full result of his redemption. It can not, and does not, mean that the relations between the sexes is now, and always will be, a source of defilement, impurity or uncleanness. The union of man and woman was blessed by God in the beginning (Gen 1,28) and is a part of the Creator’s design (Gen 2,24-25).

By their disobedience the parents of the human race fell out of harmony with God, with creation, with each other, and with their own nature. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God, for the shame of their nakedness. *“Therefore God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity, to dishonouring their bodies with each other”* (Rom 1,24).

The sexual aspect of human nature was so deeply disturbed by the first sin, that in Old Testament times even ‘lawful’ (marital) sexual intercourse was considered to make both partners impure for a certain time (Lev 15,18). It was imperative that when a man found himself in this temporary state of impurity he avoided his duties in the temple (Lev 15,31; 22,3-7) and in military service (Deut 23,10-12; 1Sam 21,5-6).

In the light of Christ, the New Testament teaches us that defilement (impurity or uncleanness) originates in the selfish and disordered desire of our own hearts (Mark 7,20-23), and it is there that sin first takes place (Matt 5,27-28).

The expression ‘they who have not defiled themselves with women’ therefore refers to men whose hearts have never been stained by selfish and disordered sexual desire for women. It accurately describes the virtue of chastity in a very particular group of men. If sexual behaviour was that part of human nature most profoundly struck by the first sin, then purity in relations between man and woman is a sign of the most perfect reconciliation with God.

B. “for they are virgins”

The addition of this statement to the previous expression shows that we must understand the chastity of the 144,000 men in a more complete way. In their love of women, these men are not only chaste, but they are also virgins. That is to say that they have never had a wife, children or sexual relationship with any woman.

A person can be chaste without being a virgin: the one who is reformed in Christ and by the grace of God avoids impurity in his relations with women or with his wife if he is married. In the opposite way, a person may be a virgin without being chaste: the one who lusts after women in his heart, but has never taken a woman or wife to himself.

It is also possible, but only by God’s grace, to be both chaste and virgin, and this is the way we should understand these two consecutive statements about the 144,000 men: *“These are they who **have** not defiled themselves with women, for they **are** virgins”*. In other words, they **have** always been chaste, meaning that in their past, their hearts had never been defiled by selfish or disordered desire for women; and they **are** virgins in the most literal sense of the word, meaning that they are unmarried and have never had sexual intercourse with women.

Because of the precise wording of these two statements, other interpretations can be rejected. If we were meant to understand that the 144,000 men had always been chaste, but were not necessarily virgins in the literal sense of the word, it would be repetitive and superfluous to add ‘for they are virgins’, since their chastity is already fully described by the first statement. If we were meant to understand that these men are now chaste, but were not at some time in their past, the text would not say ‘**have** not defiled themselves with women’, with emphasis on the past.

It is worth reflecting on the purity laws of Moses in the light of Christ. So low was man’s condition that even the practice of lawful (marital) sexual intercourse and the occurrence of the natural discharges of the genital organs were considered defiling, as well as numerous other practices such as touching a corpse.

We suppose that it was realised that these practices provoked an unhealthy mental preoccupation or fascination with the experience, which lasted for a while afterwards. By taking certain precautions during this vulnerable period (i.e. by being aware of the impure disposition, bathing oneself and avoiding certain duties) the impure thoughts could be contained and so prevented from giving birth to sin (James 1,14-15) and all its disorder (James 4,1-3). We see here the gentle wisdom of God guiding man in his shameful state until the time for his redemption and sanctification in Christ.