

What does the Church teach about teasing?



Question: What is the Catholic position on teasing? A friend told me to give it up for Lent. Is it always wrong or just a matter of not too much?

– Name location, withheld

Answer: Perhaps it is good to review the dictionary definitions of the word “tease”: “to make fun of or kid, to disturb or annoy by persistent irritation or provocation, especially in a petty or mischievous way, to pester, to persuade or manipulate to acquiesce especially by persistent small efforts.”

As we can see, none of these definitions speak to something that is good or particularly helpful. While teasing can come across as humorous, the humor is usually at the expense of the one being teased. It is usually a form of detraction that calls attention to the known faults or foibles of a person but in a way that is at least mildly humiliating, if not more so. It is almost never appreciated by the target of the teasing. Neither is it usually an effective way to incite change. It is usually more effective to speak to a person directly and clearly about concerns, needed changes or decisions rather than to tease or pester them.

Teasing does admit a range of seriousness. Some teasing is more lighthearted while some is more biting or even cruel. Sometimes close friends can engage in banter or exchanges that are similar to teasing, but the context is between equals who know that they are not being serious or trying to manipulate and humiliate. But as a general rule, teasing is a bad idea

cloaked in humor but often biting in its effects.

A certain form of teasing can be especially problematic, and that is tickling. Many children are subjected to this by certain elders and, even though they are laughing (which is a physical response to tickling), they often experience it as cruel and want it to stop. In times like these, with all the sexual abuse and similar violations that have come to light in our society, tickling should be seen as a violation of the boundaries that children have a right to expect.

Churching of Women

Question: Can you explain the term “Churching of Women”? Why and when was it used in the Church, and why did it stop?

– **Name withheld**, Decatur, Illinois

Answer: The Churching of Women was a blessing given to women after childbirth. This tradition continued in the Church until the 1960s, when it was largely discontinued. To some degree, it was replaced by the blessing of the mother in the Rite of Infant Baptism.

It is rooted in the feast of the Presentation. Biblically this feast commemorates the Jewish practice of a woman presenting herself at the temple 40 days after the birth of a male child in order to be “purified” and blessed by the priest. As an observant Jew, Mary fulfilled this obligation, and it is recorded in Luke’s Gospel: “When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord” (Lk 2:22-24).

The custom and instinct of blessing women after childbirth was retained in the Church, albeit with an altered understanding from Jewish teaching. As early as the sixth century, Pope Gregory protested the notion that childbirth caused defilement and that purification was therefore needed for mothers.

Further, the Catholic prayers of the old “Churching of Women” rite did not mention a need for purification, speaking only of blessing, thanksgiving, the beauty of Christian faith and the dignity of mothers.

Though the rite was never required by the Church, it was widely celebrated as a beautiful way to welcome back and bless a woman who may have been away for a few weeks after giving birth. She has labored well for her family, and the Church’s thanksgiving and welcome are appropriate. Here is the concluding prayer of the rite: “Almighty, everlasting God, through the delivery of the blessed Virgin Mary, Thou hast turned into joy the pains of the faithful in childbirth; look mercifully upon this Thy handmaid, coming in gladness to Thy temple to offer up her thanks: and grant that after this life, by the merits and intercession of the same blessed Mary, she may merit to arrive, together with her children, at the joys of everlasting happiness. Through Christ our Lord.”

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