

LETTER X  
Force, Arcanum of Virginity  
La Force

*Study guide by Carl McColman*



In the last century, the concept of virginity has undergone a radical shift in how it is understood — and valued — in our society, at least in secular terms. Once upon a time, virginity was a badge of honor — one hears of traditional cultures where the sheets of a wedding bed, bloodied by the bride's torn hymen, are proudly hung outside by the family to declare, "yes, our new daughter-in-law was indeed a virgin!" (one wonders about how this custom impacted the lives of those young women whose first sexual experience did not include bleeding).

Compare that to our day, when a movie like *The Forty-Year-Old Virgin* tells the story of a shy man who never experiences sex until he reaches the titular age of 40. Much of the humor that drives this story is based on an unquestioned assumption that virginity is, far from a badge of honor, something one ought to be embarrassed about.

What the bedding ceremonies and *The Forty-Year-Old Virgin* have in common is a reductionistic idea of what "virginity" is all about: it's about sexual innocence and/or genital intactness — and nothing more. Today, it is easy to list the problems with this idea of virginity — for example, the double standard that punished sexually active unmarried woman, while basically assuming that "boys will be boys" and tacitly expecting young men to do what they need to do to become sexually experienced (presumably involving the services of a sexworker).

So the first thing we have to say about this challenging letter in *Meditations on the Tarot* is that it requires a willingness to see virginity as a category of spiritual being, which involves far more than simply the observance of traditional chastity. "The state of virginity is that of the consonance of three principles—the spirit, the soul and the body," explains our author. "A being in whom spirit, soul and body are in consonance is in a state of virginity." (page 278) While this "larger" understanding of virginity is not without its own problems, at least it offers us a way of approaching the message of these chapter that does not immediately get bogged down either in traditional patriarchal assumptions — or are contemporary market-driven rejection of such ideas.

What, then, can we say about the virginity that the arcanum of force represents? Perhaps we can begin with the author's insightful consideration of two ways of seeing. First, there is the "open and innocent look which desires only to reflect the light," but in contrast is the "scrutinising look" which is dedicated to profit — and predation (page 272).

The first way of seeing belongs to the virgin, the second to the serpent. The first is that which sees a virgin forest as a place of natural and unspoiled beauty; the second immediately sets about calculating how much profit might be realized by clearcutting the forest (and mining the land beneath it for good measure).

Fans of Tolkien — another traditionalist Catholic whose brilliant writing is nevertheless marred by a kind of guileless sexism — we can see the view of the virgin in the lifestyle of the hobbits or Tom Bombadil, while the serpent's way of scrutinizing is embodied in the filthy industries of Mordor or Saruman's orcs.

Put simply, the "force" of the serpent dominates, while the force of the virgin simply relates. Thus, the lion who shares the image of this Arcanum with the maiden, obediently yields to her even though she is clearly powerless in its presence. Her force is not a strength that overpowers, but rather a "consonance" that unites the spirit of earth and heaven in a common commitment to "overcome" by changing "the enemy into a friend."

In sharing this perspective, our author — who is often so theologically conservative that he makes this commentator bristle — makes a statement that aligns with Cardinal Hans Urs von Balthasar's famous "empty hell" theory of divine judgment. The devil himself "will be overcome only at the moment when his voice—no matter whether it is rough or smooth—will be heard in chorus with the choirs of celestial hierarchies praising God." (page 282). Not only does this fly in the face of the idea that divine punishment must necessarily be eternal, but it implies that reconciliation is really the only end to which the saving action of Christ must point. God, in other words, shall remain restless throughout eternity like the widow searching for the single lost coin — never resting until every broken relationship is mended.

Thus, doubt and faith are not irreconcilable opposites, but rather doubt is like faith slightly out of focus. The final measure that distinguishes “true” from “false” power (force) is apparent powerlessness: for true power always comes to us through its own crucifixion, while false (serpentine) power exercises itself by crucifying others. False power seeks to maintain its own position while finding a scapegoat to blame, whereas true power is often likely to be the target of the scapegoating.

As a case study of this true (“virginal”) power, the author offers his own interpretation of the Biblical ten commandments. They are worth reflecting on, but I also invite you to consider yet another contemporary interpretation of the decalogue — from the Biblical scholar Brian A. Haggerty, whose reading of the ten commandments, found in his book *Out of the House of Slavery* (Paulist Press, 1978) is anchored in his conviction that they are in essence a “mission statement” for those recently freed from slavery. Considering how *Meditations on the Tarot* and *Out of the House of Slavery* offer contrasting ways of interpreting the commandments might offer us yet another doorway into understanding force — this “virginal” power that might even take us beyond the limitations of the patriarchal Catholicism that the *Meditations* author does not seem willing or able to criticize.



#	Bible	Meditations on the Tarot	Out of the House of Slavery
1	You shall have no other gods before me.	Surrender to the living God.	Only God has proven worthy of unreserved faith and unbounded trust. You shall not worship transitory gods but shall serve only the living God.
2	You shall not make any graven image or likeness.	Do not substitute products of the human mind, or of Nature, for the reality of the living God.	You shall not enshrine any notion, ideology, or interest as God and allow yourself to be dominated by it.
3	You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.	Act in the name of God without making use of God's name in order to adorn oneself with it.	You shall not lay exclusive claim to God's blessing or call upon God to bless your selfish purposes.
4	Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy.	Practice meditation.	Show reverence for the land; regard those who labor with respect.
5	Honor your father and mother.	Observe the continuity of effort and experience.	Treat the elderly with respect and deference.
6	You shall not kill.	Maintain a constructive attitude.	You shall not threaten the lives of others by your aggressive or irresponsible behavior.
7	You shall not commit adultery.	Maintain faithfulness to the alliance.	You shall not threaten another person's marriage or family life.
8	You shall not steal.	Renounce the desire to accept merit which is neither the fruit of one's own work nor the gift of grace.	You shall not deprive other people of their freedom.
9	You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.	Renounce any accusatory role toward others.	You shall not cause another person to be treated unjustly.
10	You shall not covet your neighbor's property.	Consider respectfully the private and personal life of others.	You shall not grasp after what belongs to someone else or seek for yourself what belongs to all people.

## Points to consider as you read Letter XI:

- “Natural Religion” exists, and reminds us that true spirituality is deeper than mere doctrine and theology, but is found “through each act of generosity and every expression of respect, admiration and devotion.”
- The spiritual life calls us both to *perceive* and to *react* to the Divine Presence — even in nature
- Virginal seeing illuminates while the false force of the serpent sweeps away — compare the wisdom of Plato to the arguments of Karl Marx
- As the principle of force, the virgin represents cooperating with the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit.
- Life and Electricity (page 277) — perhaps the author is speculating on the distinction between dualism and non-dual consciousness?
- “Virginité is obedience to the Divine, and is therefore in harmony and cooperation with the Divine.” (page 277)
- Two dimensions of life: *zoe* and *bios*
- The Virgin as the embodiment of Mary-Sophia (page 279-280)
- It is the nature of virginal force to transform foes into friends, while serpentine force simply seeks to dominate
- The relationship between pleasure, joy, bliss and beatitude (page 285)
- Two ways of sleeping, two ways of dying: the body fails (“sclerosis”) or the Spirit simply abandons the body (“ecstasy”)
- Page 291: the Virgin is “the principle of springtime, i.e. that of creative spiritual élan and spiritual flourishing.”
- Understanding the relationship between tradition and “honoring the father and mother”
- “The ten commandments signify much more than simply a moral code of daily life. They signify, further, the hygiene, the method and the condition of the fructification of the spiritual life.” (page 296f).
- “Mysticism is the awakening of the soul to the reality of the presence of God” (page 297) and is distinguished from pantheism or atheism.
- There is no contradiction between real progress and living tradition, “for life —spiritual as well as biological—is always tradition, i.e. continuity.”
- Understanding how “criticism and polemicism” are not as effective for spiritual growth and liberation as “fertile” or “constructive activity.” To be for takes precedence of being against.

## **Questions for Reflection:**

- 1. The author relies on traditional gender stereotypes and ideas to illustrate his views. Do you find his perspectives helpful, problematic, or both?**
- 2. Can you think of examples in your life of virginal force in comparison to the force that “sweeps away” (i.e., that dominates and crucifies, rather than willingly being crucified). How do we cultivate the virginal force rather than the serpentine force in our lives?**
- 3. How does the author’s interpretation of the ten commandments helps to illustrate his meditation on force? Do you find his understanding of the ten commandments to be helpful for your own response to this foundational moral/ethical code?**
- 4. This letter brings us to the halfway point on our journey through the Major Arcana of the Tarot. Can you summarize what you have learned or gleaned from these meditations thus far? What questions or hopes do you have for this journey as we continue through the remaining Arcana?**