

Celibate Chastity: A Different Way of Loving

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1. “Jesus Christ is enough for me.”

Clara comes from a wealthy family. Her father was a director of a world-famous business concern. Her elder sister got married to an executive, and had two children.

Clara too was in love with a very nice young man who loved her sincerely. As the family was getting ready for her wedding, however, Clara began to experience a different call. She felt called by God to the religious life. Her father knew a community of sisters, and took Clara there for a look. The sisters invited her to stay overnight.

She told the sisters that she had a boy friend. She liked their response: “That is beautiful. If you want to see what religious life is, you are most welcome to spend a few days with us.”

Clara did not like it one bit: no TV, no amusements, no talking at night, no running water, no luxuries.

Coming from a wealthy family where she had so much—for instance, the birthday gift she received one year was a grand piano—she found herself miserable in the little room in the convent. There was nothing in the room but the bare walls and a bulb. “I cried the whole night,” Clara told me. “I had so much at home. I missed all that.”

She felt she could not bear the poverty and hardships of convent life. She thanked the sisters, and went back home.

In the week she spent at home, she reflected, and realized this simple truth: “I do not need any of these things to be happy. Jesus Christ is enough for me.”

Clara went back to the same convent, to join religious life.

Clara is a happy, loving and genuine woman, who has impressed me and others for her sincerity, cheerfulness, depth, readiness to listen and learn. Intelligent and charming, she relates well to all. Many find her inspiring. After she spent two weeks with a group of college students—all women—belonging to different religions, several of them wrote to her saying, “When I grow up, I want to be a woman like you.”

She has completed a term as a major superior. She has had to deal with very trying situations, and handled some very difficult personnel issues. Through it all, she writes, “I have never lost the joy of my vocation.”¹

How can a young woman (or man) coming from a comfortable background, who has many choices ahead, find joy in this sort of life? What is a person choosing when he or she chooses religious life and celibacy? What is celibacy in today’s world? How do we present it to young religious and seminarians (and to the public at large) meaningfully? How do we help them learn to live it meaningfully and with their whole heart? After all, it is a strange, unusual, statistically “abnormal” choice to make.

2. Celibacy: Meaning, Examples, Essential Elements

Celibacy, like marriage or parenting or making friends or keeping fit, is best learnt from experience. What do happy celibates say about the experience of being celibate? Here are some quotes from today’s celibate men and women, in India.

¹ Oral communication. Whenever I quote an oral communication or refer to a person without giving the written or web-based source, the names and identities of the persons concerned have been changed.

(1) *Contemporary Witnesses*: At the final profession of a group of young sisters in Tamilnadu, the provincial was worried about sending them to some other parts of India, where nuns had been attacked and raped, and at least one sister killed. This newly professed group told the provincial. “You are not responsible for our decisions, and for our death. We have committed our life to God and the service of the poor. If this commitment implies suffering and even death, it is our decision.”²

What makes a group of normal young women ready to move into the unknown and face threats and poverty with this sort of courage and serenity?

Some years ago, in a part of North East India, violent divisions split up two warring ethnic groups. The situation was so dangerous that even government officials were afraid of touring the place, though accompanied by policemen. There was widespread looting, maiming, killing.

As soon as Father Mathai SDB, Provincial of the Salesians (later Bishop), heard of the violence, he rushed there, to be with the people and try to bring peace between the two hostile camps. Some of us asked him later, “Were you not scared? Even the officials were afraid of approaching the place.” His answer was simple, direct and deep. It touched us profoundly. He said: “I am willing to die for my people.”

This is celibacy, too—to see the people as your very own, and to love them to the point of being ready to lay down your life for them.

You and I know such celibates—men and women who really treat the people they work for as “their own,” and do not hesitate to make any sacrifice for them.

Loving and dedicated human beings like them help us understand what celibacy means; for life’s core decisions are not understood or made through abstract theory, but through experience and moved by example, as is the case of marriage and parenthood.

As Father Paul Anthony McGavin, an Australian priest, writes, “For me, celibacy is a ‘holy exchange of gifts’ that God asks of me and that he enables. In my life, to be celibate is not to be lonely, but to be intimate with our Lord, and through that intimacy, as a man with a capacity for love, to give myself to the church and the world as a ministerial priest of Christ the High Priest. (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 12). It is a priestly relationship with Christ that picks me up and sees me through struggles and loneliness, that sustains the self-denial and that, even in tribulation, brings fulfilment.” (McGavin, p. 35)

This deeper, mystical, meaning of celibacy comes through in the following statements by two young women religious.

Martina, a young missionary from the West working in India, was much liked for her love for people and evident zest for life. On hearing that she was going to be transferred from the village, some of the poor women for whom she had worked wept openly. The source of her sparkle is something which Martina does not flaunt. “I know that marriage and sex are good things. God will not love me any less if I choose a different path. But I want to belong to God in every corner of my being.”³

Isn’t that a great definition of celibacy coming straight from the heart? “I want to belong to God in every corner of my being.”

That definition becomes flesh in the awareness of Gertrude, another young woman religious: “Christ’s love for me is not something I know from books or from others’ ideas. I know it by experience. Even as I am writing these lines, I am aware of His love for me... He will give me everything I need, because I am His.”⁴

² Oral communication

³ Private written communication. For more real life examples of celibates today, see Mannath 2000, Mannath 2000c, Mannath 2000d and Mannath 2006.

⁴ Private written communication

Such celibates do not claim to be above others, not seek privileges over married persons. They are happy in their commitment, based on the heart's free surrender to an invisible but very real Love. This love is the centre of their life, and it sustains them, even when the human reality around them may be disappointing, and the tasks daunting.

(2) *A Gift, rather than a Burden*: In this sense, celibacy is called a “charism,” that is, a gift from God (Schneiders, pp. 117-159). No one has the right to force or pressurize anyone to be celibate. Marriage and parenthood are lovely, holy, God-given calls, and we have no right to coax anyone to give them up.

Keith Clark, a US Capuchin, wrote a book called *An Experience of Celibacy*. In the last chapter of this honest and experience-based book, he comes out with this statement: “There is one more thing I want to say. It seems to be the most important thing there is to say about the celibate life...It's this: Celibacy is a gift...I am grateful for the gift of it all...Tonight my thankfulness is to God for his fidelity in giving me through all the people and events of my life the gift of a celibate call and the gift of a response to that call” (Clark, 171-172).⁵

(3) *Making Space for God*: Henri Nouwen, one of the most widely read spiritual writers of our times, and a celibate priest himself, likes Thomas Aquinas's simple definition of celibacy—*vacare Deo*, a vacancy for God. “To be celibate means to be empty for God, to be free and open for his presence, to be available for his service.” (Nouwen, 164). Nouwen insists, however, that this “being empty for God” is not a special privilege of some people; he sees it, rather, as an essential aspect of all forms of Christian life. (Nouwen, 164-165). Celibates and married people are a support for each other. “Precisely because marriage and celibacy are in each other's service and bound together by their common witness to God's love as the love from which all human relationships originate, celibate and married people can be of invaluable help to each other by supporting their different life-styles.” (Nouwen, 168) “They both say in different ways that without giving God his rightful place in the midst of the city, we all die in the hopeless attempt to fabricate peace and love by ourselves” (169).

Nouwen insists on a right understanding of celibacy. Celibacy is much more than mere sexual abstinence. “Not being married and not being involved in a sexual relationship does not constitute the celibate life. Celibacy is an openness to God of which sexual abstinence is only one of its manifestations. Celibacy is a life-style in which we try to witness to the priority of God in all relationships. This involves every part of our life” (169-170).

Challenging a merely legal or technical understanding of celibate chastity, Nouwen reminds us of two essential components of the celibate life—*contemplative prayer* and *poverty*. In contemplative prayer, we “waste time” with God; we show the priority of God in our lives. (170-171). What about poverty? In this, Nouwen's radical criticism of comfortable life-styles is both stern and practical. “A wealthy celibate,” he says, “is like a fat sprinter” [a contradiction in terms]. (171). If we celibates find that our life-style is more comfortable than that of the people whom we serve, that means we have not taken our celibacy seriously. In fact, he adds, many lay people do not take our celibate life seriously, because they find our lives more comfortable when compared to their daily struggles. “Whenever the church is vital, it is poor.”(172).

According to Henri Nouwen, therefore, “contemplative prayer, voluntary poverty, and sexual abstinence are three elements of a celibate life-style that together witness to the necessity of creating a vacancy where we can listen to God's voice and celebrate his presence in our midst.” (174)

(4) *A Definition, and More*: For US theologian and respected Biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders, whose writings on religious life are well-known, “Consecrated celibacy is the freely chosen response to a personally discerned vocation to charismatically grounded,

⁵ Since this book is aimed at formators, I would recommend the personal statement Clark writes about his understanding of celibacy (pp. 139-140). It is a direct and honest statement, looking at the different aspects of our celibate commitment. I have found it useful to make formees or seminar participants read it, and discuss it.

religiously motivated, sexually abstinent, life-long commitment to Christ that is externally symbolized by remaining unmarried.” (Schneiders, 117). She insists that all these aspects must be present, if one is to understand consecrated celibacy correctly. The elements Schneiders considers essential are the following:

It is a charism, a free gift, a vocation. It cannot be imposed by an authority, or acquired by one’s efforts. Hence the need of discernment, and of a free response to the call.

A genuinely religious motivation is required for consecrated celibacy. One may remain unmarried (or choose to marry) for very many reasons. Without a true religious motivation, there is no consecrated chastity.

One must abstain completely from all forms of genital sexual activity, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

One’s commitment must be for life. (Schneiders, 117-119)

Schneiders, a woman religious herself, adds further clarifications. While the celibate renounces genital activity, consecrated celibacy is not first of all about one’s sexuality. “It is about what one chooses to love, or more exactly, who and how one chooses to love.” (p. 127). God is the ultimate love for all Christians. All other commitments are mediations of our ultimate quest for God. The celibate, instead, chooses a God-quest in a direct way, excluding all mediating primary commitments. This is the radicality of the choice religious make, and what gives religious vocation its specificity in the church (pp. 127-128).

Another aspect Schneiders highlights is often forgotten. This is the only vow that must be taken in absolute terms. Poverty and obedience cannot (and should not) be absolute. Absolute poverty will kill us. Absolute obedience to human authority is unethical and dangerous. (Think of the extreme evil done by the Nazis under the name of obedience to authority.) Celibacy, instead, makes absolute demands. Our renouncement of marriage and of all genital activity must be absolute (p. 129).

A final trait Schneiders highlights is the “unnatural” character of celibacy. This is not a “normal” or ordinary choice that most people make. Statistically, only a few people make this vow. It is not unnatural or harmful, but it is meant for a few, and requires special training and effort (pp. 129-130). Hence the need of celibate communities where people with the same commitment help each other to grow in this way of life. Companionship is the not the main reason for joining a religious congregation, but community life is needed as support to be faithful to this call and charism (p. 130). Today, with the questioning and confusion in so many areas of life, religious need a stronger motivation, greater clarity and better formation if we are to live this life meaningfully. But, precisely because of the questioning and the more sexualized society we live in, celibacy can be a more powerful and more challenging witness today than earlier (pp. 130-131). Right motivation is much more crucial today, since the supporting systems are weaker and the questioning from different quarters is stronger (pp. 132-151).⁶

(5) *An Indian Study*: The weak and inadequate nature of the motivation of those joining religious life came out forcefully in a doctoral dissertation by Montfort Brother Pavul Arul Raj, completed at the University of Madras. While the Indian church has a large number of women and men religious, the question of motivation is not adequately faced. There are grounds for serious doubts about it. (Pavul Arul Raj)

(6) *A Caring Critic’s Contribution*: One of the most quoted authors currently in matters of sexuality and celibacy is Richard A. W. Sipe, who spent eighteen years as a Benedictine Monk, ten of them as a priest, and is a lay professional and married man today. He became well-known in church circles through a study on the practice of celibacy by American priests. (Sipe 1990). Sipe believes in the positive value of celibacy, but finds that the church does not provide adequate training in celibacy (Sipe 1992a, 1992b, 1996 and 2004). (His writings are

⁶ Schneiders’ views can well be complemented by those of another US nun, Barbara Fiand, who sees the central role of celibacy a little differently. (Fiand)

about the practice of celibacy by American priests. He did not study women religious or members of Brothers' institutes.) In a book called *Celibacy in Crisis*, Sipe gives his own definition of celibacy, which is strikingly comprehensive. His definition includes seven elements:

“Celibacy is the freely chosen dynamic state, usually vowed, that involves an honest and sustained attempt to live without direct sexual gratification in order to serve others productively for a spiritual purpose.” (Sipe 2003, p. 32).

He explains each of these elements with convincing theory and inspiring examples. Interestingly, the person he quotes with the greatest admiration to illustrate the positive value of a life of celibacy is Mahatma Gandhi.

The seven elements are these: (1) freely chosen; (2) dynamic state—since each of us changes over the course of our life; (3) usually vowed—since public commitments help the person concerned, and has an impact on society; (4) an honest and sustained attempt—since self-knowledge is not easy, and human weaknesses are many; (5) to live without sexual gratification: this is possible, but not easy; (6) in order to serve others productively: since any life would be meaningless without social or community goals, and we all need worthwhile goals to be committed to; (7) for a spiritual motive: since celibacy is not chosen for a natural motive, and since only a spiritual motivation can sustain it, as Gandhiji himself found. (Sipe 2003, pp. 32-41)

(7) *When It Makes Sense*: To put the same idea in the convinced words of a young priest, “celibacy makes sense only if God is real.” (Connolly, p. 139).

We must remember, too, that celibacy is not an end, but a means. There is no point in just “being celibate,” or asking anyone to give up marriage and parenthood, as if that giving up itself would be virtuous. It wouldn't be, by any means. A celibate choice makes sense if it is my way of becoming a more loving, more human, more Christ-like person—if, in other words, I discern it as my way of responding to God.

(8) *Dangers in Celibacy*: There are also dangers in this choice, as Melannie Svoboda, an American nun who has been a novice-mistress, reminds us. “To enter into a lifelong committed relationship with another, to express love in a genital way, to have children—these activities are not only good and natural, they are ordinarily integral to the development of the human person. To deliberately exclude oneself from these activities (as we celibates do) is a risky business.” (Svoboda, p. 68)

Svoboda shares this bit of practical wisdom with us from her experience with novices. She told them, “You can fail against celibacy by going too far in relationships or by not going far enough. The first way makes headlines, but the second way is probably more common and more deadly.” (Svoboda, p. 69).⁷

(9) *Celibacy, Not Bachelorhood/Spinsterhood*: This is why celibacy is not at all the same as bachelorhood or spinsterhood. Just to stay unmarried is a largely meaningless or selfish or cowardly choice, or, to stay the least, not an ideal to propose to anyone. Both marriage and celibacy are commitments to love. This is why the church speaks of “celibacy for the Kingdom,” an expression that may not mean much to most young people who hear it today. The Kingdom stands for the kind of human family that Jesus asks us to construct—a network of relationships based on truth and love and justice, where human beings treat one another as God's children.⁸ Isn't that what we should be doing with our life? Celibacy for the Kingdom means that I am so gripped by Jesus' life and ideals that I want to stake my whole life on that. I want to live as He lived; I want to do what He asked us to do. And I trust God will give me the strength to do it. This is why celibacy is neither contempt for sexual love, nor simply a refusal

⁷ For a celibate man's point of view, see: Manuel.

⁸ Hence some would use the term kinship rather than kingship or kin-dom rather than kingdom. It is about right relationships among God's children, not about kings and conquests.

to marry, but rather the openness to live one's life cultivating another type of love—a love rooted in our faith in Christ, a love that extends itself to all, a love that comes through in those who live it as transparent goodness and a joy that this world cannot give. No wonder friends of Francis of Assisi asked him, “Why is the whole world running after you?” Seeing Don Bosco one day, a boy could not control his joy, and dashed with all his energy to be with him, smashing the glass partition in between, which he had not noticed. Such is the fascination of a person radiating God's love. It need not be the prerogative of celibates alone, of course; but celibacy without a sincere attempt to be God-centred would not make sense.

(10) *Consecrated Chastity*: Another expression for celibacy is “consecrated chastity.” This terminology should not lead to spiritual elitism, as if only a group of people in the church were special, or “consecrated.” The basic consecration all of us have received is our Baptism, by which we were made children of God. Our religious profession is only a way of making that commitment more explicit. It not higher or holier than the call to holiness we received at baptism. In this sense, all of us are consecrated persons. No one is a thing to be used or a person of no worth. Thus, if I speak ill of you, or refuse to respect your rights, I am committing sacrilege. We, celibates and lay persons together, must work for a world where everyone is treated with love and respect. Claiming a special dignity for ourselves, or considering lay persons as lower than ourselves would be inhuman and contrary to the spirit of Jesus.⁹

3. Church Documents on Celibacy:

The *Code of Canon Law* makes the legal obligation implied in celibacy clear: “The evangelical counsel of chastity assumed for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, as a sign of the future world, and a source of more abundant fruitfulness in an undivided heart, entails the obligation of perfect continence in celibacy.” (*Code of Canon Law*, 277:1, quoted in Sammon, 108-109)

Here are the rights and obligations implied: “Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift of God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and can more easily dedicate themselves to the service of God and humankind.” (*Code of Canon Law*, 277:1)

This implies four things: developing non-genital ways of loving; being rooted in the spiritual life; being connected to one's community and ministry; not being married.

Basing ourselves on this document, we can look at celibacy in four different ways: as a law, as a discipline, as having functional value, and as a gift or Gospel value. All four aspects are true. There is a law to be observed, a discipline to be taught and acquired, a functional value (e.g., availability or mobility for mission) to be found. But the heart of celibacy is its nature as God's gift, and a Gospel value. It means that I see celibacy as part of God's plan for me. (Sammon, 113-116)

The *Programme of Priestly Formation* says, “the celibate commitment remains one of the most fundamental expressions of Jesus' call to radical discipleship for the sake of the Kingdom. From a Christian point of view, there is no more positive, stronger witness to the kingdom than a willingness to live without wife and family as Jesus did.” (N. 64). That last sentence is, of course, problematic, since not everyone agrees this is the strongest witness to one's faith.

Celibacy and its requirements must be distinguished from the general virtue of chastity, which is for all. A 1991 document of the US Catholic bishops defines chastity as a way of “guiding the sexual instinct to the service of love and of integrating it in the development of the

⁹ The danger of a “higher than thou” attitude among celibates, and how that promotes secrecy and abuse, see: Wills.

person...Chastity truly consists in the long-term integration of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions in a way that values, esteems, and respects the dignity of oneself and others. Chastity frees us from the tendency to act in a manipulative or exploitative manner in our relationships and enables us to show true love and kindness always." (USCCB, N. 19, quoted in Coleman, p. 101)

Speaking of the celibacy of priests, Pope John Paul II said that it is "the gift of self in and with Christ to his church, and expresses the priest's service to the church in and with the Lord. For an adequately priestly spiritual life, celibacy ought not to be considered and lived as an isolated and purely negative element, but as one aspect of a positive, specific and characteristic approach to being priest. Leaving father and mother, the priest follows Jesus, the Good Shepherd, in an apostolic communion, in the service of the people of God. Celibacy, then, is to be welcomed and continuously renewed with a free and loving decision as a priceless gift from God, as an incentive to pastoral charity, as a singular sharing in God's fatherhood and in the fruitfulness of the church." (Quoted in Sipe, 1996, p. 117).

Other church documents (which religious formators will certainly know) are: *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* (Paul VI's teaching on priestly celibacy), *Perfectae Caritatis* (the Vatican II document on religious life), *Optatam Totius* (on the formation of priests), *Vita Consecrata* (the post-conciliar document on religious life). In addition to these basic documents, religious orders will have wise guidelines on celibacy in their rules and in their formation plans.¹⁰

When we speak of the church teachings on celibacy, we need to be clear about one point. The issue of compulsory celibacy for Catholic priests (of the Latin and some other rites), is different from the issue of celibacy in religious life. The latter is essential to religious life. Religious life is a radical choice to follow Christ more closely, as a response to a personal call. Celibacy, the choice of a simple life, and availability for mission are essential to it. The celibacy of the diocesan priest is, instead, a different issue. (For a priest's experience of the issue, see: Bleichner, esp. Chapter 6: "The Challenge of Celibacy.")

Let me summarize the main points of the discussion on the law of celibacy for priests:

Celibacy was not imposed on priests or even bishops in the New Testament era, as is clear from the fact of St. Peter's having a mother-in-law, and Paul's directions on the qualities needed in a bishop. There was no such insistence or law for the first four centuries, although there were many bishops and priests who opted for celibacy. The custom developed differently in the Eastern (meaning, Greek) and Western (Latin) churches. In the West, the first discussion was in the Council of Elvira in the year 305, which legislated on this issue. The law was enforced only by the twelfth century, after both edifying experiences of great celibate lives and scandals in the lives of the clergy. Celibacy for priests is not a Catholic *doctrine*. It is a church *law*, and, as such, can be changed. In fact, there are a few married priests in the Latin church. These were Anglican or Luther pastors (who were married) who joined the Catholic church. If they wanted to become priests, they could. They are, of course, married men. (For details, see O'Mally and Johnston.)

The debate on celibacy regards the compulsory celibacy expected of Catholic priests. Arguments have been offered for both views—for maintaining the present rule, and for making celibacy optional for diocesan priests. (Cozzens 2006; Crosby. Both are for changing the present rule.)

We return to the role of celibacy in the lives of religious.

The documents of the church and the explanations given by the authors quoted above show that celibacy is much more than the state of being unmarried, or the renouncement of leading a sexually active life, or of simply being a member in a religious community.

¹⁰ See, for instance, *The Formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco*, a book that other congregations too have found useful. (Available at Don Bosco Renewal Centre, Bangalore).

“Religious celibacy is a love affair, or it is nothing. It is a way of loving Life and all life. It provides the core relationship around which all other relationships and friendships revolve. Celibacy is essentially an encounter with Divine Reality unmediated by sexual love or involvement.” (Sipe, 1996, p. 53). Because of this, it would be wrong and disappointing for a celibate to expect the type of support and rewards that marriage offers. The two ways of life are really different. They are both ways of loving, but the basic support systems are very different. (Sipe, 1996, p. 53).

4. The Difference Celibacy Makes:

(1) *Prayer Life*: Melannie Svoboda, whom we have quoted earlier, mentions two of her delights as a celibate. One is *personal prayer*. She makes these honest and sensible comments on her experience: “Daily prayer, this time of special intimacy with God, is for me one of the chief blessings of my celibate commitment. I am not implying that non-celibates cannot have a deep, rich prayer life. Nor am I saying that I go to prayer every day with eagerness and enthusiasm. I am merely saying that, since my celibacy is largely nourished and sustained by my personal intimacy with God, prayer is for me both absolute necessity and privileged delight.” (Svoboda, 69-70).

(2) *Freedom for Mission*: The other advantage she sees in a life of celibacy is *freedom for mission*, something most celibates would agree with. Let me quote from an unlikely source—a reporter of the world’s most famous and influential newspaper which has often been very critical of the Catholic church, *The New York Times*. The writer, Nicholas Kristof, is not a Catholic. He is aware of the dislike, distrust and even contempt a number of well-placed and educated Westerners have towards the church, and the current hostility to the church because of the highly publicized cases of clerical sexual abuse of minors. Writing from Sudan, where he went to report on the tragedies of that nation, he wrote movingly about the Catholic priests and nuns he met there.

I came here to impoverished southern Sudan to write about Sudanese problems, not the Catholic Church’s. Yet once again, I am awed that so many of the selfless people serving the world’s neediest are lowly nuns and priests — notable not for the grandeur of their vestments but for the grandness of their compassion....overwhelmingly it’s at the grass roots that I find the great soul of the Catholic Church.

...I met Father Michael [an American missionary] in the remote village of Nyamllell, 150 miles from any paved road... He runs four schools for children who would otherwise go without an education, and his graduates score at the top of state-wide examinations. ..To keep his schools alive, he persevered through civil war, imprisonment and beatings, and a smorgasbord of disease... Father Michael may be the worst-dressed priest I’ve ever seen — and the noblest...

I met Cathy Arata, a nun from New Jersey who spent years working with battered women in Appalachia. Then she moved to El Salvador during the brutal civil war there, putting her life on the line to protect peasants. Two years ago, she came here on behalf of a terrific Catholic project called “Solidarity With Southern Sudan.”

Sister Cathy and the others in the project have trained 600 schoolteachers ...They are also establishing a school for health workers, with a special focus on midwifery to reduce deaths in childbirth. At the hospital attached to that school, the surgeon is a nun from Italy. The other doctor is a 72-year-old nun from Rhode Island. Nuns rock...

There are so many more like them. There’s Father Mario Falconi, an Italian priest who refused to leave Rwanda during the genocide and bravely saved 3,000 people from being massacred. There’s Father Mario Benedetti, a 72-year-old Italian priest based in Congo who fled with his congregation when their town was attacked by a brutal militia. Now Father Mario lives side by side with his Congolese congregants in the squalor of a refugee camp in southern Sudan, struggling to get schooling for their children.

It's because of brave souls like these that I honor the Catholic Church. (Kristof)

We know such heroes and heroines among our own priests and religious in India. Once, when I was giving a programme for the staff of the Christian Medical College, Vellore (who themselves are noted for their commitment and service), the director told me, "We would like to learn from Catholic priests and religious your dedication."

While there certainly are many dedicated persons among married men and women, and we would be wrong to identify commitment or sacrifice with any group, it is a well-known truth that celibates have rendered extraordinary service in some of the worlds' harshest and least accessible places, working among people unrelated to them by family ties, or marriage or nationality or race or culture. Such availability to serve anywhere, among any group, doing any type of work, and do it with enthusiasm and initiative, has been one of the great badges of celibate women and men.

This availability belongs to the heart of the celibate choice. We do not have a family to call our own, or a spouse, or a fixed place from which we cannot be transferred. Our community is not our family, in this sense. We are always on the move, in service of the mission, according to the needs of people, or, of the Kingdom. Sandra Schneiders reminds us: "the meaning of celibacy, as we have stressed repeatedly, is not primarily that one is not sexually active. It is that one's whole heart is invested in the relationship with Jesus Christ in a way that excludes any other primary life commitment. The only 'place' that is non-negotiable of the Religious is union with Christ. And that makes the fostering of the Reign of God her only real work. No particular place or ministry, however deeply invested she may be in it, is absolutely necessary for the Religious." (Schneiders, p. 258). Hence our readiness to go anywhere, take up any apostolate, work for any group of people, quit any post we may be holding, work along with persons we did not choose. Others notice and admire these traits, and wonder how we manage it.

Go to the most remote areas of our country, the poorest villages, the neediest communities, the most despised social groups—and you will find priests as well as religious sisters and brothers working among them. This is what God's grace does in the lives of ordinary men and women, who put their hand in God's hand, and are led to see and serve all human beings as their own sisters and brothers. Celibacy, based on a person's heart-felt response to God, has played a great role in these forms of service.

I think of an IIT lecturer, an upper caste Hindu, who became a Catholic. He shared his reason with a Catholic friend. "I made a study, and found that 95 percent of the leprosaria in our country are run by the Catholic church. That is why I decided to become a Catholic." What makes men and women reach out and serve people others would do everything to avoid? ¹¹

(3) *Friendships with Many*: Another great benefit of celibate life is the possibility of *wonderful friendships* that cross barriers of nation and race, tribe and caste. A good religious community is often made up of persons from different places, countries, castes and language groups. What a witness to see them live together as true brothers or sisters! So, too, because of our life and the trust people have in us, many of us have friends belonging to different places, religions and backgrounds. Isn't this the way God wants human beings to relate and live?

(4) *Joy*: No wonder true celibacy is marked by deep joy. In a recent TV production on Catholic women religious by Oprah Winfrey and her team, the producers were impressed by the joy and good sense of the nuns they met in these convents. The sisters, young and old, really came across as *alive and joyful*, very aware of what they were doing, and why. They were neither out of touch with life, nor childish. They are grown-up women, charged with a faith vision, who have found something much deeper and more satisfying than fashion, money or the rat race.

¹¹ For the role and contribution of nuns down the ages, see: McNamara.
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Father McGavin explains this joy as follows. It is the joy that comes from following Christ; hence it is neither cheap, nor easy. He admits his struggles in living a chaste life. Then he goes on to say, “It is my struggle—more than my achievements—that bears fruit in my ministry and my own life. This is because a priest [or religious—*brackets added*] does not choose celibacy as an end in itself. We choose celibacy because it is integral to our vocational intimacy with Christ and his church. Christ is our life, and life in Christ is a life of joy.” (McGavin, p. 37)

5. Issues To Look at Today:

There are, as in all other areas of life, some matters which are of permanent interest and others which are more time-bound and culture-based. The church documents we quoted and the authors we looked at are of value beyond the boundaries of space and time.

There are other issues affecting human sexuality and the celibate choice which are more closely linked to particular times and settings. Here are some of them, which bishops, religious superiors and formators will need to keep in mind.

(1) *Vocation Promotion and Discernment*: Celibacy is a very happy choice, if one feels deep down, “This is my personal truth. This is what I am meant to be. This is where God wants me to be.” Such a decision needs discernment, of course, that is, reflection, prayer and openness to competent guide who knows me in depth.¹² India right now has the largest number of young people in seminary and religious formation. Many seminarians and young religious, however, do not seem to receive adequate formation. This is a complex matter, which cannot be easily summarized here. I have written about this in greater detail elsewhere. (Mannath 2000, 2000a, 2000b, 2003 and 2009)

(2) *Helps for Psycho-sexual Integration and Celibate Maturity*: The desire to be a priest or religious, and even the awareness of a call to celibacy does not mean that the person has no sexual attractions or doubts. It is normal men and women who are called to celibacy, not abnormal persons with no attraction to sex and marriage, or no love for family and children, or frightened individuals who stay in because of fears, while their heart really longs for the “grass on the other side.” Unwilling celibates will be unhappy bachelors or spinsters. They will easily become a counter-witness through cruelty, unhealthy compensations, love of luxury and power games.¹³ Women’s formation issues have to be faced with particular care, since most of the books are still written by men, and women’s experiences have not been given equal attention in this, as in other areas of life.¹⁴

(3) *Following Jesus, as distinct from choosing celibacy*: The two issues are hugely different. There are many good, spiritual, apostolically oriented young people today—think of the Jesus Youth movement, for instance, or the young people involved in retreat ministries—who are drawn to Jesus, take the Gospel seriously, have a deep prayer life and do ministry, who are not attracted to, or challenged by, organized religious life as it exists today. The future seems to lie—although no one can predict the future—not in looking for large numbers of celibates to do all the apostolate in the church, but in training of lay leaders. For most ministries, and for a deep and responsible Christian life, celibacy is not needed. Everyone knows this in practice, but few are ready to think or act in new ways.

¹² We will look at discernment more in detail in the chapter, “Helps for a Happy Celibate Life.”

¹³ An important issue we (especially formators) need to keep in mind is that men and women experience sexuality differently, and hence look at celibacy differently. Their needs, self-awareness and problems are not the same. Many books on celibacy—like books in other areas—have been written by men, and take the male experience as the norm. We need to look at the different ways men and women experience their identity, as well as the different types of help male and female formees need. I found the perceptive comments of Sandra Schneiders on this point helpful. See Schneiders, pp. 166-173.

¹⁴ There are justified worries about the relative immaturity of formees in India. See Parathazham. Joe Mannath: Celibacy: Meaning and Challenge

In the Christian tradition, the ultimate criterion for the rightness of any doctrine or for the authority of any practice, is Jesus' life and teaching. That Jesus himself was a celibate, is a given. He did not have a sexual partner, nor set up a family of his own. His centre was the person he referred to as Abba. On a day-to-day basis, he belonged to everyone, especially to anyone in suffering and need.

Yet, when it came to discipleship, celibacy is not central in Jesus' teaching. He did not insist on it as a condition for discipleship, or even for leadership. In fact, Peter, the designated head of the church, was evidently married. His core group apparently included both married and unmarried persons.

(4) *Need of loving community life*: There have been groups of voluntary celibates from the beginning of the church, such as consecrated virgins. The large numbers of celibates living together in communities are found since the founding of religious orders, beginning with St. Benedict and organized monastic life. Men and women formed communities of celibates who lived, prayed and worked together, in same-gender communities, with precise rules. This continues even today. Organized religious life has changed in many ways, from the nuns and monks of the middle ages, up to the active religious orders and secular institutes of today. Celibacy has always been an essential requirement of organized religious life. In fact, one of the striking things about celibate communities in the Catholic church is this. There have been many forms of voluntary associations in history. Of all these, Catholic religious orders have proved to be one of the most lasting forms. Something must be perennially valid in this form of life, and answering some deep need and aspiration of the human heart, if this form of life has survived and thrived over so many centuries, in such diverse cultures and political settings. Listen to Sandra Schneiders, who herself bases her assertion on earlier and more detailed studies:

“History testifies that, paradoxically and amazingly, Catholic religious community is one of the most stable and long-lasting forms of voluntary community in the history of the Western world, even though it lacks a sexual, blood, economic, or political base and is not created with community itself as its objective. Perhaps community, like friendship and happiness, is something most likely to happen when not sought in and for itself. In any case, this history suggests that people looking for Religious Life today should seriously question and be questioned about whether they are primarily seeking God or seeking community. If it is not the former, as St. Benedict said fifteen centuries ago, they are well advised to look elsewhere.” (Schneiders, p. 288)

(5) *Compulsory celibacy of diocesan priests*: Quite different from the identity of religious, is the question of the mandated celibacy of diocesan priests in the Catholic church. This, as we have seen, is not a church dogma, but a church law, which is not from the beginning of the church. It applies to priests of the Latin rite, as well as to some other rites in union with Rome (e.g., the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara churches in India). This church law concerning mandatory celibacy for all priests is a church legislation that came to the church centuries after Jesus. There were several reasons for this law. These reasons included: a fuller belonging to God as an undivided twenty-four-hour commitment, greater freedom to serve the people in ministry, and financial abuses in the church caused by married clergy who would give church money or property to their family. Another advantage of having celibate priests and religious was their greater mobility, especially to work in far away or difficult mission territories. (For first person accounts of how priests live their celibacy, see: Butler. For arguments in favour of changing the present ruling, see: Crosby.)

(6) *Holiness, not ones' state of life, as the key issue*: The most venerated persons in the church are the saints, beginning with the martyrs of the first three centuries. These martyrs and other saints came from all strata of society—rich and poor, scholars and illiterate peasants, kings and commoners, men and women, adults and young people. This is a powerful reminder

to all Catholics that what matters most in the church is holiness, and not the post one holds, or whether one is a pope or bishop or nun or lay person.

Even in periods of church history when celibacy was presented as higher than marriage, and those in celibate states of life—like bishops, priests and members of religious orders—acted as if they were superior to the rest, marriage was never looked down upon. It was always seen as a sacrament, and hence holy and a path of holiness. In fact, even while listening to conferences on the higher call they had, many religious knew from experience that their parents and married siblings were often more God-centred and virtuous than those in the monastery or convent.

(7) *Greater mutual support and interaction between celibates and married people:* Both marriage and celibacy are strong and demanding support systems. Human beings cannot survive without support even for a day. The commonest, the most lasting and the most close-knit support system is the family. Even for us celibates, with our long formal training, our family remains the most influential formation house. I once asked a nun who was happy working among leprosy patients how she developed this love for leprosy patients; I would find it such a difficult and unappealing kind of work. She told me she learnt this from her mother. “How? Did she work among leprosy patients?” “No,” she said, “But she treated beggars so well. She would make them sit down and serve them a meal, and talk to them.”

Marriage and celibacy are, therefore, not two competing professions, but two holy vocations, each having something to learn from the other. We, celibates, can learn from our parents and married siblings and friends or parishioners to make sacrifices willingly, to show warmth and tenderness in our dealings, to adjust to difficult situations without too many complaints, to be faithful to our vows at the cost of pain. They can learn from the missionary who walks for days in Arunachal Pradesh or from the nun caring for abandoned babies with disfigured faces how to love beyond our families and our attachments. Both Mother Teresa and our mothers at home have much to teach all of us. Maximillian Kolbe, who volunteered to die for a married prisoner, and many parents going without comforts to bring up their children, teach us something of Christ’s love. The world would be poorer without the witness of heroic parents and totally self-giving celibates serving those for whom no one else cares.

(8) *Celibacy as closeness to the people, not distance from them:* Celibacy, far from cutting us off from people, unites us more closely and more responsibly to them, not through sentimental attachment or preferential affection for a few, but through a genuine faith-commitment. This was the experience of the brilliant Jewish convert, Edith Stein. Her mother was devastated when Edith became a Catholic. To become a nun was something even harder for her family to understand. Edith’s own view comes through in a letter she wrote to a friend, “Whoever enters Carmel is not lost to her own, but is theirs fully for the first time; it is our vocation to stand before God for all.” (Humphreys, p. 429. For a compassionate and honest look at celibacy from a laywoman’s perspective, see: Mahoney.)

(9) *Meaningful symbols and language needed:* To exalt celibacy in unrealistic images would not help people. Thus, for instance, to recommend celibacy to today’s young people saying that it makes us like the angels in heaven, or that we become signs of the eschatological state, pointing to how the human race will be at the end of time, would make very little sense to today’s youth. (I do not know whether it made sense to celibates of by-gone times!). Sister Patricia Wittberg, a US nun and sociologist, whose much-quoted studies on religious life have shed light on many issues in religious life, had this to say about this reference to the next life, “It was not always clear how chastity witnessed to these concepts, and some authors vigorously denied that such were sufficient reasons to choose the lifestyle: ‘Frankly, I am not impressed by being told that I am an eschatological sign because I am a celibate. I really do not think that men and women who come into contact with me are going to experience a love that is redeeming simply by being aware that I can point to a way they will love one another in heaven.’” (Wittberg, 250-251).

(10) *The importance of good human formation*: So, too, to try to live one's celibate life without warm and genuine human relationships would lead to disastrous results. To quote Wittberg again, "As the director of a psychological treatment center for members of religious orders puts it: 'We find that many of the neuroses we treat are aggravated by styles of spirituality and community life that encourage religious...to try to be happy without giving and receiving genuine affection and warm love.'" (Wittberg, 250).

(11) *Feminist movements and the right role of women in the church and society*. The recent CBCI document on women is just one indication of the greater role women can and should play in the church and in society. There are still many injustices to be addressed, and much to be done for the promotion of women, by both women and men. We can learn from the writings of feminist thinkers, both Indian and international. (See, for instance, Chittister, Coate, Collins and Conn).

6. Motives: Bad, Poor, Good, Best:

A person may remain unmarried for one or more of the following reasons. (I am not talking about persons who want to be married, but cannot, because of circumstances, such as illness or poverty, or family pressures, or people who are widows and miss their deceased spouse deeply. I am talking about why a person may choose not to marry.) Here are the reasons that may lead a person to remain unmarried or even join a religious community of celibates. Most of them would not be adequate motives for religious life.

- (1) *Good versus bad*: If I tend to see sex and marriage and something dirty or not spiritual and holy, then I will see the very fact of remaining unmarried as something virtuous. My very abstention from sex may be something I see as a merit.
- (2) *Higher and lower*: I may see, or be influenced to think of, celibacy as higher than marriage. I may then think that I will get closer to God by joining religious life than if I were to remain "in the world" (forgetting that the "world" exists within each of us, in the form of our egoism, and sins and weaknesses). I may seek the "higher" status that priesthood or religious life brings me.
- (3) *Fear of marriage and childbirth*: A number of women, particularly in days gone by, feared dying in child birth, since such deaths were much more common then. Hence their fear of marriage. So, too, a number of persons, especially women, were not attracted to the sexual intimacy of marriage, which frightened them, or put them off.
- (4) *Escape*: Some abstained from marriage because marriage and family life came across as very hard, with nothing much to look forward to. Some seminarians and religious who come from difficult family situations (abject poverty, abuse at home, etc) would see celibacy as a good, respectful way to "run away from home."
- (5) *Protecting church property*: One of the reasons the medieval European church insisted on the celibacy of priests was the rather widespread corruption. Priests and bishops would pass on church property or money to their wife, children or other relatives.
- (6) *Upward mobility*: Some may choose religious life and especially the priesthood as a way of climbing socially, of becoming a more important person in one's community. The family too was happy when their son became someone important, especially if he would help them financially. Such abuses, sadly, are a big temptation in particular groups and places. Celibacy then becomes not a choice to belong to God, or to serve the people, but simply a requirement for ordination or for belonging to a powerful religious order, and something one tolerates rather than wants. Fidelity to it becomes then a problem.

- (7) *Better opportunities*: Some others choose religious life or the priesthood not so much for becoming a VIP, but to get opportunities to study. A novice told a counsellor: “I wanted to become a nurse. My family could not afford to send me to study. So, I joined the convent. Here I will get chances to study.”
- (8) *Mobility for mission*: It has often looked easier to provide personnel for remote missions (think of Francis Xavier coming to India, travelling for six months, or a young Indian sister today being sent to Africa or Mongolia) if the person was celibate. This rationale needs to be re-thought, since the fastest-growing churches are the Pentecostal churches, in which the pastors are married. They are willing to be posted to remote areas to do mission work.
- (9) *Commitment to a task*: e.g., doctors or social workers who remain unmarried.
- (10) *Response to an inner “call”* (like Clara’s): this is what the church means by “celibacy for the Kingdom.” Celibacy is not a stratagem for finding cheap labour for the church, nor for sparing money for the order. Its meaning is what we have explained above. We, who belong to the clergy or religious orders, especially those involved in recruitment and formation, need to really help the young to discern their vocation before God, and choose celibacy (or marriage) as a response to God’s grace and call, and not pressurize them to “join,” because we want personnel for our institutions, or are under pressure to show that we have numerous candidates, or other not-so-worthy reasons.

So, it is not enough by any means for a diocese or religious order to see how many candidates or young members they have, but why they are joining this group. A badly chosen celibate life will do harm, both to the person making this choice, and to the group they are meant to serve. Without a serious inner journey, there is no meaningful religious life or priesthood. We are not mere social workers, not cheap labour! This whole way will be a happy one, and a path of goodness and loving service, together with others who are similarly motivated, only if we choose it for the right reasons. The real reason for choosing celibacy cannot be for doing some work, or for escaping a difficult life outside, but a genuine sense of being called to this by God, and the desire to do God’s will in our life.

7. Three Signs of Genuine Celibacy:

When can celibacy be considered genuine? When is it really consecrated chastity, not just a situation of being unmarried?

When Jesus (or the Gospel way of life) is the main attraction.

How do we know whether this is the case? Three of the surest tests for this are: a simple way of life, openness of heart to everyone, and interest in personal prayer.

When a person is gripped by Jesus and/or Gospel values—some are fascinated by the person of Jesus, while others are attracted to the values and way of life presented in the Gospels—one of the first changes is love for a simple way of life. The person sees through the bluff of consumerism and the false or passing joys that the world can offer. *Simplicity of life* means for this person greater joy and freedom, not a greater burden. A person’s motivation is not best known from their explicit statements (“I want to be a religious. I want to give myself to God”) but from the concrete choices they make in real life. When we see a candidate happy to make sacrifices, ready to serve the poor, keen on keeping their life-style simple, it is a good indication of right motivation. People for whom Jesus and the Gospels mean very little, will see no sense in choosing simplicity over luxury, or detachment over possessions. (In the New Testament, what is referred to as the root of all evil is not sex, but love of money. See I Timothy 6:10; see also Hebrews 13:5).

The second sign that a person is touched by the spirit of Jesus is that the *heart expands in love*. In the place of selfishness or narrow group loyalty, we see the person open to people different from oneself—different in race or language or caste or tribe or rite or whatever. Without such openness, celibacy is likely to become meaningless, or be a cover for power games. In fact, some of the scandalous divisions in the Indian church on the basis of these criteria are sadly led by clergy and religious. I cannot accept Jesus as the centre of my life, and exclude (or, worse still, hate) persons from other groups.

This universal love, which attempts to exclude no one, has some preferences, however. The preference goes—if we are serious about following Jesus—to whoever is the “least” in our setting. Joyful service of the least (the poor, the handicapped, leprosy patients, prisoners, AIDS patients, those from disadvantaged social groups) is one of the surest marks of believing in Jesus, and one of the best marks of a true celibate.

Celibacy makes sense only if we are persons with big hearts and big dreams. If so, our normal conversations and our real passion will be about the good of the people, not about petty gossip or the small, often silly, problems of community life. A married person grows in love by being committed twenty-four hours of the day to spouse and children and parents. This is not our journey. A good celibate’s life make a huge difference in the lives of very many people. This is, in fact, one of the main attractions of celibacy. A good celibate truly becomes a loving—and often much-loved—father, mother, sister or brother to many.

A parish priest who had done much for the people, and was trying to raise funds to build a new school building for slum children in the place of the dilapidated old school, told me what sustains him: “It is God’s work. He will send the money. But we should have big dreams.”

Conversely, a person who is concerned mostly about personal glory or advantage, or is mostly interested in promoting people belonging to “one’s own group” (language or caste or whatever), cannot really call oneself a disciple of Jesus. To call such a way of life celibacy would be a sad misnomer.

A third sign of true celibacy is interest in a *life of prayer*. As we saw earlier in this chapter, celibacy makes sense only to the degree that God is real for us. God can be met, of course, all through the day, in our work, in our service, in the faces of the people we meet, in our joys and hardships, in the newspaper we read. But, like all relationships, this central relationship needs cultivating, or God will slowly become a stranger, and the religious side of our life will become a faint blur, while more “serious” matters (power and money, work and plans, our likes and dislikes) will take centre stage. Once our vision shifts from our first love to the many interesting (but ultimately trivial) matters of life, we will lose focus, and neither celibacy nor religious life as a whole will hold its charm for us. We may sink into the pitiable state of being disgruntled bachelors or spinsters.

Prayer, for a convinced celibate, is not an obligation, nor simply a part of the timetable, but a need of the heart, and an inner space where one finds refreshment and peace, and the strength to love and to forgive. When a priest I admire much was calumniated by students and humiliated for not yielding to their requests, showed great calm in facing this trial, I told him I admired his serenity. His reply: “When someone speaks ill of me, I pray extra for that person. I have never lost my peace of mind.” Such people show us what prayer is, and what it means to be close to God.¹⁵

8. Celibacy’s Other Expressions:

¹⁵ On how we can pray about our sexuality, see: Ulanov.
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A good marriage or a meaningful celibate life can be seen and felt by ourselves as well as by those who deal with us every day. A mother does not need a psychologist's help to sense whether her daughter is happy in her marriage. There are so many signs, big and little, that will show that. So it is with our celibate life. Here are the signs of a good celibate life.

- (1) *Joyful spirit*: If we are in the right place, and this is what our heart really wants, we will be joyful persons. Our normal facial expression will be a warm smile, not a scowl. One of the main things a superior or formator or spiritual director should check is whether a candidate looks happy. Unhappy people will not really work for others, or do humble service readily. They will make others suffer. All of us have our difficult days, and our low moods now and then, of course. But it would be a serious matter if one is regularly sad or grumpy. As we read in the moving diary of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who perished in a Nazi concentration camp, "we can be at home anywhere, if we carry home within us." Her relationship with God kept this bright and passionate young woman a vibrant, loving presence until the end. (Hillesum)
- (2) *Warm and caring dealings*: Our universal love does not make us impersonal or distant. It is easier to "care for the human race" than to relate lovingly to a few people. The true celibate is attentive to each community member, listens to them, looks after the sick ones with love, remembers birthdays, welcomes the visitor. I think of a wonderful sister superior of a college community. She was the first one any of the lecturers or students—of different faiths and places—would go to when they faced a problem. Sick and elderly sisters in the province would ask to be transferred to her community, feeling sure they would be looked after with love.
- (3) *Happy communities*: The joy of the individual celibate, combined with genuine love and a well-nourished prayer life, builds communities of love, marked by evident happiness and enthusiasm. In such communities, mutual affection and spontaneity are evident. You can sense the joy people feel in each other's company, the easy teasing, the readiness to share time and things, the absence of divisions and power games.
- (4) *Positive energy*: Love and a sense of purpose give human beings tremendous energy. It is not work that really tires us, but tension, worry and other negative emotions. People who love each other, and are attached to God rather than to their own comforts, exhibit exceptional energy. Much more work gets done in such settings than in unhappy or bitter settings. In negative settings, much of the energy is dissipated in jealousy, hatred, anger and negative talk.
- (5) *Simple life*: As we saw earlier, celibacy without a simple life does not make sense. One of the first and most evident results of a person's growing closeness to God is the desire for a simple life, not because things are bad, but because one's heart is full. We do not need things to find happiness. A happy person would rather share something with others and see them happier, than hoard things. Greed and jealousy are great sources of unhappiness.
- (6) *Enthusiasm for the mission*: The people and their needs, the sufferings of the poor, the future of our students—these things really grip us. Thus, in our spontaneous chats and community meetings, there will be real interest in how to help the people or educate the poor, how to serve the destitute who are sick or how to fight for justice. We will then have no time or interest in gossip or petty politics, or watching who is doing what.
- (7) *Creativity*: A loving, happy person is creative. She is at her best thinking up new ways of serving, big and little schemes to make others' lives brighter.

- (8) *Continued Growth*: Celibacy, like marriage or friendship, is a process, not a stagnant stage. We listen, we read, we attend useful courses to learn more. We welcome corrections, since others see us often more objectively. We see criticism as a sign of interest and love, and thank the persons who point out our defects.
- (9) *Close ties of affection to our family and friends*: In choosing to be a priest or religious, I do not give up my love for my parents, brothers and sisters and other relatives. What I give up is being mixed up in the running of their families, or making their needs and problems my main concern. My main commitment is my mission. Thus, when we get money, we use it for charity, according to our mission. We do not give it to our relatives and friends. A good celibate has deep ties of affection to family and close friends. We need this love, to become good and loving human beings, but, just as my married brother has to put his wife and children in the first place, I have to put my religious community and our mission in the first place.
- (10) *Respect for boundaries, and avoiding all abuse*: While we show warmth and love, and are at ease with people, we celibates should respect boundaries, avoiding physical or verbal or any other expressions of affection or closeness that would be inappropriate. We show our love through our life of impartial attentiveness and care, through our sacrifices, through wise guidance and spiritual direction, through good teaching and coaching—not through undue attachments or partiality, and never through sexual involvement with anyone in our care. We “neither kick nor kiss,” neither beat nor fondle. When our love is sincere, and we are true to ourselves, both we and the people we serve know where we stand; they will recognize true love and respect when they see it. (See: May and other chapters of this book.)

9. Brief Summary

Celibacy is very different from just being unmarried. The Catholic tradition does not look down upon marriage or sexuality, nor encourage people to stay unmarried. Married love and raising children in the faith are noble and holy paths. We have no right to present that call as a second class choice, or coax anyone away from it. Celibacy is, evidently, for a few, not for the majority. It is the response of the heart to an inner call from God which a person has experienced. It does not mean the loss of one’s sexual nature or normal feelings, desires and capacities. In fact, the best candidate for the priesthood or brotherhood would be a young man who would have made a good husband and father; the ideal candidate for the convent would be a woman who would have made a great wife and mother. Very similar qualities are needed to succeed in both. Celibacy as a way of life is a free commitment of one’s life to the Gospel way of life—a way of love without boundaries, of forgiveness, of trust in God, of simplicity and inner freedom, of a search for God’s will rather than one’s likes or ambitions—which makes a person want to be totally God’s in a way that would make it impossible to share one’s life in a day-to-day manner with another human being, as in marriage. It is not a “step up” from marriage, claiming to be superior for the fact of being unmarried, nor a way of getting hands for work to maintain church institutions. It is a loving response of the heart to a God discovered in personal experience, which does not preclude struggles, search and the awareness of one’s normal longings as a man or a woman. Celibates, like married people, need prayer, sacrifice, effort and realism to walk on this path joyfully; we need human support in the form of loving community, the sacraments, spiritual direction, fraternal support, mutual correction, and the love and challenge from our family members and the people we minister to. Celibacy is not a solitary

achievement completed in isolation from other human beings. Lived well, it is one of the most engaged forms of life, lived in constant contact with others, in service of the neediest, open to the ever new needs of human beings. Don Bosco or Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero or Rani Maria, were by not solitary individuals cut off from the daily struggles and pains of people. In fact, they are among the most lovingly engaged human beings we can think of. The fuel for their love without borders, however, is neither a temperamental inclination, nor a social theory, but a heart responding to God's loving heart in surrendering trust. Without that heart-to-heart contact, celibacy would not make sense.

10. Conclusion:

As we said earlier in this chapter, celibacy, to be meaningful, must be a love-affair. Let me end with three short quotations along the same line. The first is from a Canadian writer's influential book on spirituality; the second is a short poem by a celibate woman; the third is from outside the Christian world. See how far they speak to your experience.

This is the connection Ronald Rolheiser sees between human passion (including sexuality) and our spiritual journey:

"Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros...It has to give us energy and fire, so that we do not lose our vitality, and all sense of the beauty and joy of living. Thus, the opposite of the spiritual person is not a person who rejects the idea of God...The opposite of being spiritual is to have no energy, is to have lost all zest for living." (Rolheiser, 11).¹⁶

Are we really alive? Are we helping others—including our formees—to be fully alive?

In a short poem called, *A Lighted Taper*, Mary Higgins describes her (our) inner journey in touching images:

*Your face blooms like a lighted taper
in the shadow of my solitude.
Your breath fills my being
with exquisite tenderness.
Around my shoulders rests Your yoke
like warm white wool.
I could gaze at You for all my life,
for evertime... (Higgins, p. 433)*

Unless we find that loving Face, celibacy will have little meaning. We all need to find a face we love to look at. This is true of marriage; it is doubly true of celibacy.

The third quote is from outside the Christian world. Hear what Poet Rumi has to say: "Wherever you may be, in whatever situation or circumstance you may find yourself, strive always to be a lover, and a passionate lover. Once you possess your heart in love, you will always be a lover, in the tomb, at the Resurrection, and in Paradise forever and ever." (Harvey, 137)

Happy celibates have found that loving Face, or are at least making a sustained effort to keep their focus on that Face. In looking at that Face, they learn to channel their inner fire, which really is all about the love they receive from Him, helping them to walk through the world as passionate lovers.

11. Activities Recommended:

- (1) Interview a few celibates about why they chose this way of life, what helps them to be happy in it, who has inspired them most, and what tips they would have for a young religious or seminarian who is embarking on this journey.

¹⁶ For current discussions on what constitutes an integral spirituality, see Dorr 1984 and Dorr 1990. For his views on a Christian spirituality of sexuality and celibacy, see Dorr 2007.

- (2) Arrange a panel on celibacy during which one or two women religious, a religious brother, a religious priest and a diocesan priest shares their experience of choosing this way of life, what helped them, what difficulties they experienced, how they find meaning and happiness, etc.
- (3) On the same or a different panel, ask two married couples to share their experience of marriage—hopes, dreams, difficulties, spirituality. Ask them also to tell the group how they see celibates and what they expect from celibate women and men.
- (4) Encourage the participants to do journalling—about their dreams, experiences, questions, inspiring encounters, and, if they wish, to share it with someone they trust.
- (5) Ask each candidate to write their own understanding of celibacy.
- (6) Ask them to write and share their joys and frustrations in this type of life, who or what encourages them, what helps them to find enthusiasm, and what meaning they find in celibacy.
- (7) Ask them to see how mature or immature, how loving or non-caring they find themselves compared to their peers and family members.
- (8) As a mentor, be prepared to share significant moments of your journey—why you chose this way of life, what helps you, what attracts you about this way of life, as well as some of your struggles. This will help them more than quoting famous authors from the past.
- (9) Use suitable movies. Movies can be a very interesting and powerful means of communication. They need to be chosen well, introduced, and followed by a discussion.
- (10) Get candidates to write what they like about marriage and about celibacy.

12. Questions for Discussion:

- (1) How would you define celibacy in your own words?
- (2) What makes you happy in this way of life?
- (3) What difficulties and frustrations do you experience?
- (4) What practices help you to be faithful to celibacy and live it joyfully?
- (5) What suggestions would you make to your formators?
- (6) What meaning do you find in celibate life?
- (7) From your experience, what do lay people (adults and youngsters) like about celibates?
- (8) What do they not like about us?
- (9) Recall a celibate who inspires you. Why do you look up to this person? What does his/her life teach you?
- (10) Recall a married man or woman you admire. What can this person's life teach you about living your life well?
- (11) How can celibates and married persons help each other (in their religious life, personal growth and mission)?

13. Inspiring Movies:

Groups have enjoyed the following films, and found them inspiring and useful. Each movie must be preceded by a suitable introduction, and followed (the same day or the next morning) by a cineforum style discussion. Without that, movies can easily become just empty pastime.

Karol, Don Bosco, Sophie Scholl: The Final Days, Molokai, Les Miserables, Dead Man Walking, Love Comes Softly, Keys of the Kingdom, Joshua.

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