

Helps for a Happy Celibate Life

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I. The Need of a Support System

Common sense and the experience of others who have gone before us teach us many means for constructing a more mature and happier life, whether in marriage or in the celibate state. Thus, a young couple already knows a number of things that will help to make a marriage work, and other things that are likely to destroy it. Similarly, celibates can learn from their own experience and by observing other celibates' lives. After all, isn't this how we all learn to manage life?

In addition to these trial-and-error methods (which certainly have a value), there are persons and experiences and research findings we can all learn from. Based on these writings, I want to propose the following ten helps as the most essential for leading a happy and well-integrated life. All the helps mentioned are valid for both marriage and celibacy. The examples we will look at, as well as the specific interpretation given to these steps, refer to the lives of celibates.

We start with a well-known contemporary author, Richard A. W. Sipe. In his otherwise critical appraisal of the practice of celibacy by American priests (Sipe, 1990), psychologist (and former priest) Sipe has a chapter called, "The Achievement of Celibacy" (Sipe 1990, pp. 263-280) in which he speaks of a small group of priests who really impressed him. According to him, only about two percent of the priests seem to reach what he called "celibate achievement." From these inspiring men, he tried to learn their secret of a happy and inspiring celibate life. None of them claimed to have any special secret. But by observing how they live, and learning from interviews, Sipe became convinced of ten helps needed to lead a happy and faithful celibate life.

He first identified four elements found in all celibate achievers he studied: *prayer, work, community and service*. (Sipe 1990, p. 266). Each of them had a regular and meaningful system of prayer, was busy in some productive work, belonged to a specific group to whom he was devoted, and was engaged in meaningful service. Later, he found six other elements that these achievers shared.

In the model structure of celibate achievement he presents (p. 269), he groups these ten supports under three heads—physical, psychological and spiritual. To the physical belong: work, order and care of physical needs; to the psychological belong: learning, community bonding and security in relationships; the spiritual includes: prayer or interiority, balance and beauty. Service, the tenth element, was in a category by itself. That makes the total ten.

Sipe takes up the same material again in his 2003 book, *Celibacy in Crisis*, which, in many ways, is an update on *A Secret World*. In fact, its subtitle is: *A Secret World Revisited*. The elements he sees as essential for celibate achievement are the same ten. (Sipe 2003, pp. 306-316). A word on these ten elements may not be out of place.

Work, prayer, community and service are self-evident. What do the other six mean? *Care of physical needs* means taking reasonable care, without neglecting one's health and one's legitimate needs. *Order* implies a plan for the day, the month, the year, with time for different types of activities, and following it not rigidly, but flexibly. *Balance* means the inner equilibrium to cope with different types of demands. *Security* refers to having a few relationships where one is safe and can be oneself, with chances to share what is confidential. Without security intimacy is not possible. *Learning* includes love for learning and intellectual curiosity; priests need to be in the know of things. *Beauty* includes openness to art, music, architecture, etc, as we see in monasteries.

These ten elements are certainly helpful. There are other supports, too, that a happy celibate life needs. Let us see what they are, by going through others' writings and by looking at our own experience. What I have culled from my readings, from the personal witness of other celibates, and from my own experience as a formee and as a formator is summarized in the following pages.

Church documents speak of natural and supernatural helps for a mature celibate life (*Optatam Totius*, n. 10, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 16, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 74). The importance of spiritual means is particularly stressed (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 75).

As US theologian Richard McBrien writes in his very appreciative foreword to Sipe's later book, "It is a matter ...of human wholeness, of health and well-being, of psychic as well as spiritual integration.

Successful celibates are persons who have a noble cause to which they are strongly committed, effective bonds with a supportive community, vital intellectual and social interests, and a prayer-life that grows out of their personality and ministry rather than one imposed artificially, and in some traditionally stylized form, from the outside.” (Sipe 2003, p. xii)

II. The Ten Best Helps

We want to look at these support systems more carefully. The helps we consider most important for healthy psycho-sexual integration in the celibate life are the following: Prayer, relationships, work, care of physical needs, confidential help (counselling, spiritual direction, confession), mental enrichment, asceticism, honesty, responsibility and having models. Here they are in greater detail.

1. Prayer:

This is the one requirement all writers on celibacy seem to agree on. A happy celibate life is not possible without a faithful and heartfelt prayer life. Sipe would go so far as to say that he did not find even one exception to this rule: Any priest who achieved the celibate ideal spent one-and-a-half to two hours every day in prayer. (Sipe 2003, pp. 306-307). Without an active prayer life, celibacy is very likely to fail. In fact, Sipe found that a priest’s prayer life is a good indication of how the rest of his life is going.

I remember a panel on celibacy at Don Bosco Renewal Centre, during which a diocesan priest, a religious priest and two women religious shared their experience of celibacy. Personal prayer was the strongest common element. In fact, the religious priest, administrator of a large school in a city, who first wondered—given his very affectionate nature, and love of fun and sports—whether he would fit into a celibate life, surprised us by saying that he spent about four hours a day in prayer. When asked how he found the time for it in such a busy life, he said, “When we consider something important, we find the time for it.” In his case, he found time by cutting down on something he was fond of, namely, watching televised cricket matches. He came across as a happy man.

Prayer includes, of course, both personal prayer and community celebrations, especially the Eucharist. I remember a young priest saying he was ready to be sent to the most remote missions, away from family and friends, if he was needed there. “After all,” he said, “I will have the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament for company.”

Prayer in the life of celibates is not only a support for personal strength and happiness. It is a strong expression of one’s apostolic commitment. This was the case of Father Stephen, parish priest in one of the developing areas of a North Indian city.

The Sunday Mass was at 8 am. I used to get up just in time for Mass. Then I reflected: My people spend so much time in preparing for their Sunday Mass. Many are poor. They wash their best clothes on Saturday to get ready for Mass. They get their children ready. It takes some of them one hour or two to reach the church. Still, they come. It is not right that my people spend so much time and effort for the Mass, and I, their priest, don’t. So, I started getting up early, to pray for my people. I would be in the church from 6 am until 8, praying for my people. I would think of them family by family and recall their faces, their needs, their difficulties. My prayer became so much more meaningful. It gave me a deeper sense of belonging, and made my priesthood more meaningful.¹

British Bishop Crispian Hollis writes what he learnt as a young priest when he went to Oxford University, where the famous Father Michael Hollings was chaplain. He learnt from this very inspiring priest who helped so many people through his ministry that you cannot be an effective priest unless you pray. His experience is worth quoting: “For three years I lived with this guy ...He taught me by example...that prayer and the priesthood are inextricably linked...it’s actually about being alone and one-to-one with God...I’d hear Michael getting up early every morning and I knew he would be in the chapel for two hours before Mass started. I also knew he had gone to bed after midnight before and that his bed was a sofa....He had given up his room to someone who needed it more.” (Butler, p. 40)

In the *Los Angeles Times* study quoted by Greeley (Greeley, p. 54), Catholic priests turned to be a happy group with a very high morale. The reasons are found in the answers they wrote to this question: “What are the greatest joys you receive in your life and work as a priest today?” Helping others came first.

¹ Personal sharing
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All the other reasons priests listed were religious activities they did as priests (saying Mass, administering the sacraments, strengthening the faith of the people, doing God's work, etc).

A famous theologian put the matter more poetically, and at the same time realistically. In an open letter to diocesan priests on the issue of celibacy, German theologian Karl Rahner wrote, "Remember, this is a chapter of theology that cannot be dealt with by the lecturer's logic or widespread discussion or desultory talk at a meeting of parish priests. It is a part of a theology on its knees, at prayer. I hope there is still such a thing among us priests." (Rahner, *Servants of the Lord*, quoted in Mahoney, p. 43).

Prayer is a source of deep joy and tremendous inner strength. A sister working in extremely demanding and physically tiring ministry, with very little sleep and rest, longed for some days of prayer. Her eight-day retreat provided for her, she says, not just help and support, but "some of the happiest days of her life."

You will know such persons; better still, you will know the truth of these statements from your own experience.

Celibacy can humanly be a solitary journey; but it is not a walk alone. Its inner core and greatest support is a personal and sincere relationship with God that is assiduously cultivated.

2. Relationships:

As a support for celibacy, our relationship with God comes first. But God is not the only one present to us; or better, God meets us through so many people, in so many ways. Just as having a Father in Heaven does not erase our human need for an earthly father and mother, a celibate's God-centred quest does not exclude our need for human companionship and support.

This support comes to the celibate in different ways. The main human support systems for helping a celibate to live a meaningful and loving life are: community life, relationships with one's family, good friends, contacts we have through our ministry, and the experience of intimacy. A short explanation of each follows.

(a) *Community Life*: One of the best supports for a healthy celibate life is a happy and loving community. In fact, for some people, the most attractive aspect of religious community is loving community life. In a world of divisions and power-games, closed groups and rivalries, we can create loving communities which are based not on family ties or ethnic sameness, but on faith and a commitment to the mission. In fact, when young people join a seminary or religious community, what influences them more than conferences and nice theories is the experience of a loving community. Without this, people will feel lonely, and tend to become cynical. Not only is community life a necessary support for celibate life; it is the best training for ministry, since ministry basically is to build a world of love according to the example and teachings of Jesus. The main ministry of a priest or religious is not teaching or doing social work; it is to bring God's love to people in effective ways. The quality of our relationships—open, inclusive, genuine, compassionate—is our main contribution to the world.

Community building takes vision and effort, but it is worth investing time and energy in it (Mannath 2000). Without it, celibacy can easily be reduced to coldness, work-based relationships and mutual indifference or power-games. Then, far from being a witness to the gospel, priests and religious become counter-witnesses.

For celibacy to work, the religious community has to be the person's prime centre of affective belonging. We can love our families and have friends, but our congregation and community have to be our prime affective centre. (Schneiders; O'Connor, pp. 207-210)

(b) *Family*: In presenting the helps for affective and sexual maturity, the Salesian Formation plan speaks of one's family ties very positively: "[the Salesian] loves his own family. A serene and mature relationship of love for his family has very positive implications for formation. On entering the Congregation he loses none of his love for his relatives, and especially for his parents; he gives it expression by his prayers, letters and visits." (*Formation of Salesians of Don Bosco*, N. 65).

What the celibate gives up is not love for his family, but direct involvement in family affairs, or putting the needs and interests of one's relatives above one's mission. It would, of course, be wrong to take the money belonging to the diocese or parish or the religious order and give it to one's relatives, or be more concerned with "settling" one's relatives than with serving the people who form the mission of the order or

of the diocese. In fact, historically, one of the reasons for the insistence on clerical celibacy was the financial abuses caused by married clergy.

So, too, our family should be not become our main focus of attention, leading us to neglect affectionate relationships with the members of our religious order. If a religious knows his/her nephews and nieces and does not get to know the younger members of one's congregation, that is not a good sign (Murphy-O'Connor, p. 211).

Avoiding financial involvements with one's family and neglect of one's religious community, we can learn to relate to our family members in a loving and transparent way. In fact, we can learn much from them. We need their love and nearness, their prayers and example. They are our first and more effective formators. We avoid effective involvement in their day-to-day life; we do not avoid an affective and warm presence to them, nor they to us. Nowadays, more and more celibates are blessed to have family members who are involved in ministries, and who are active in the church at many levels. We celibates and married persons have much to learn from each other. I was struck by the experience of a Jesuit called Mathew Linn who gives retreats together with his brother and sister-in-law. They have also written books together. (Linn, p. 31).

(c) *Friends*: Friendship means a relationship of mutual affection. I love you, and I know you love me. This is friendship. Loving and sincere people tend to have many friends. Whether one prefers to have a few deep friends, or keep in touch with many, is a matter of personality and preference. The simplest test for a healthy friendship is to check whether it offers both support and challenge. Support means I can count you; you will not let me down. I can disturb you in the middle of the night. I am sure of your willingness to help. Challenge means you will tell me your views, including your criticism, directly. You will not stab me in the back. I can count on you to confront me if you think what I am doing is wrong. True friendship requires a foundation of genuineness and of respect. Only genuine people can have lasting friendships. If you are genuine, and respect people—you will not, for instance, talk ill of them behind their back—you are sure to have friends.

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the much-loved archbishop of Chicago, had these words for his priests, "If we are truly comfortable with ourselves and have a deep appreciation of our celibate commitment, we should not fear opening ourselves to others in love and lasting friendships. Like everyone else, the priest needs affection." (Quoted in Mahoney, p. 98)

Father Timothy Radcliffe, former Master General of the Dominicans, and a much-respected speaker and writer, says, "The greatest joy for me has been friendships. They've been of immense importance, not just because I enjoy them, but because they are one of the ways in which I meet God... Sometimes we don't see that at the centre of the Gospel is God's utter pleasure in us. Do you meet that and do you know it when you laugh with your friends? I think that the mystery of the living God is present in the friendships we have. It's there that we meet, if you want, the laughter of God and the friendship of God; it's there that we meet God's pleasure in us." (Butler, pp. 23-24).

We would do well to listen to sensible feedback from caring and responsible lay persons. Here is one example. The writer, John Garvey, is a married lay Catholic and much-published author:

"It is important to realize that one danger of celibacy is the myth of self-sufficiency. The celibates I know who live it well are, not at all coincidentally, the ones who are capable of forming deep friendships, and who never give the sense of having erected protective emotional barriers. Many of them are members of religious orders, who come from communities human enough to provide the members with the mutual support and companionship which all of us must receive from our families and friends. I point this out because of the chilling barrenness too often encountered in rectories and convents, and in individual celibates whose inability to deal with the simplest heartfelt emotion is pitiful. A sour celibacy is at least as scandalous and hurtful to the community as a bad marriage. (Garvey, pp.149-150.)

For a number of wonderful celibates whom I know, one of the major attractions of the celibate life is the opportunity it gives us to meet and make friends with people from so many different backgrounds, without jealousy and rivalry, without power-games and fights.

(d) *Ministry*: Our ministry offers us wonderful chances to relate to people. In fact, as we have already said, our mission is mainly to relate to people in loving ways, so that they can experience something of God's goodness through us. A good priest or religious has more opportunities to

meet more people in the ministry than most lay people have. How many warm, happy memories we can have as we grow older, if we have worked sincerely for the people—for our pupils, for the sick, for the poor. When we are sincere in our love for our people, most of them understand us correctly, and love us in return. We will, of course, experience a certain degree of ingratitude—that is part of every human life—but we will receive more love than most lay people ever get. I remember the way students and kitchen girls weep when a loving nun is transferred; the sorrow of pupils, teachers and parents at the departure of a sincere principal; the evident affection of parishioners for their priests. I have heard repeatedly, particularly from priests, how much love they receive from parishioners, students and poor people. One elderly priest, chaplain to a Catholic youth movement, often tells me, “The young people taught me how to love.”

Ministry helps us in other ways, too. It helps us find meaning. In helping other people to manage their life, we find meaning for our own life. In the process, our personal problems appear small in comparison. I remember the words of a woman religious who finds time to be with poor refugees, a work no one forces her to do. After visiting their camps, and sharing their tough battles and sad stories, she would say, “My own problems and the things we worry about in the convent appear to be just pin-pricks.”

(e) *Intimate relationships:* Father Thomas Merton was in his fifties and a world-famous spiritual writer when he fell in love with a nurse who was some thirty years his junior. He really fell in love, like any young man. He missed her, wanted to meet her, phone to her, write to her. Later, they both realized that there was no future in this relationship, and went their separate ways.

This is one form of intimacy—falling in love with someone.

But intimacy does not have to be romantic or sexual. Intimacy is an issue all adults would do well to face consciously. Intimacy means a transparent relationship where I can really be myself, where I am known and accepted as I am. It need not include physical closeness or sexual expressions, but people who get closer to each other emotionally will have to deal with issues of physical expressions and sexual attraction. Intimacy is “the characteristic of a relationship of loving closeness, familiarity and friendship that is marked by mutual disclosure, struggle with differences and trust.” (Crosby, p. 200).²

People who choose celibacy are not persons incapable of intimacy or afraid of it. In fact, a good question to ask ourselves is: Is there anyone who knows me completely, as I am? Or am I hiding something in my relationships?

True intimacy is difficult, even frightening. We prefer to make a good impression on others, rather than be transparent. But we discover true freedom and inner strength, and a refreshing sense of our worth when we can truly say that someone knows us as we are, warts and all, even the areas of our life we are ashamed of, and still loves us. Such persons help us to see our true face, look at ourselves without fear and false claims, and gives us a glimpse of what God is like.

We need to be realistic. A few times in our life, we are going to meet someone about whom we feel: “It would be wonderful spending my whole life with this person.” We may ache for that person. We may find it painful to be parted from this individual. All this has to be faced. Such an experience can help us grow, if we handle it honestly, and can talk about it with our friend, and with a good counsellor or spiritual director. One woman, writing anonymously about her love for a man, says that it has been, without doubt, the most growth-producing experience of her life. She also warns us that not everyone is ready for it. We need a strong sense of our identity and commitment if such a close friendship is to turn out positive. She also insists that Christ and community must come first.

Going by my experience and what I have learnt from others, I see that closer man-woman friendships among celibates work well on condition that both are happy in their vocation and enthusiastic about their ministry. If one or both are unhappy or in crisis, and are looking for something more interesting to come along to rescue them, such a friendship will not work. They will become a burden for each other.

So, too, I have found these three criteria useful in checking whether a man-woman celibate friendship is healthy: (a) Is it making me more loving in my other relationships, or cutting me off from

² For a new and rather unconventional, but insightful discussion of intimacy in the life of celibates, see: Crosby, Chapter Seven: “Intimacy: The Only Healthy Way to Live Celibately” (pp. 169-198).
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people? (b) How is it affecting my work and prayer? (3) Am I open about it in spiritual direction? Such questions need to be asked by celibates when they experience strong sexual attraction or deep feelings towards someone.

Intimacy is a powerful experience that may come our way. It is not something we can plan or make happen. But when we do find ourselves getting closer to someone, we need to know what we are looking for, and how we want the relationship to develop within the setting of our celibate commitment. There will be cases, too, of celibates who discover through such an experience that celibacy is not their call; that they will be better (and happier) persons in a deep one-to-one relationship (such as marriage) rather than in the setting of the typical religious community or parish. Prayer, reflection and spiritual direction are needed in such cases to make the right decision.

Sister Sandra Schneiders comes up with some wise reflections on intimacy in the life of celibates: “The concern with affectivity in the life of the consecrated celibate must not degenerate into strategies for avoiding sexual relations or rigid catalogues of what is and is not permissible. Our task is not to get through life without having sexual intercourse, or to eke out enough human warmth to survive without incurring paralyzing guilt. It is to find the authentic celibate way to adult intimacy and therefore to adult maturity.” (Schneiders 1986, p. 221).

We end this short discussion of relationships with this sensible comment from John McGoey:

Before undertaking the celibate life, a candidate must be sure of the same three things which assure a happy marriage. First, that he...is certainly going to love personally and deeply. Second, that to do so successfully, he...must have an appreciable emotional security, some adequacy as a person and a real awareness of manhood...Third, that celibate love, like married love, is quite within the competence of a really good person and requires understanding, purpose and discipline.” (McGoey, p. 100).

3. Work:

Don Bosco, generally noted for his gentleness and compassion, had these tough words about the life of priests, “A priest dies either of work or of vice.” He himself died exhausted, his body worn out, according to doctors, by years of unremitting toil.

It is not celibacy that makes a person work hard, or do much. Love and hardships make people work more than structures or rules.

We must remember that the reason for our joining a celibate community is not to get more work done. If a congregation or diocese “promotes vocations” mostly to get some work done, this is neither vocation promotion, nor a good way to help people to get closer to God.

Many lay people work hard, some of them doing extremely tiring or difficult or even dangerous work. Most do it to earn a living and provide for their family. Many professionals—such as surgeons, physicians, researchers, athletes—and business people put in longer hours of work than many of us do. Many shop keepers and IT professionals and sales people have longer working days than most priests and religious. It is not that we work more or harder than lay people, or that celibacy makes a person work hard.

We are talking about meaningful activity as one of the supports of a well-ordered celibate life. Life needs some structure, and one of the normal ways we structure our day is through work.

The work we celibates do is different from profit-seeking ventures. Our work is more in the line of service.

One of the happy things we can say about our celibate life is this: Our days are well spent if we come to the end of our normal day tired from work, having spent our energies doing the good we can, for the people entrusted to us, especially if these people would find it hard to get the services they need, because of poverty or social exclusion. We will know religious and priests who literally spend themselves in service, who are available beyond the call of duty, who can be approached any time for help.

Being busy and working hard is, however, different from workaholism, which is unhealthy. Anything can become an addiction, and cut us off from people, from our religious commitment and from our own real needs, if it becomes something compulsive or mindless. We work, not because we do not know what to do with our time, but because we have found worthwhile tasks to do. We keep busy, not just to keep busy, but because twenty-four hours are not enough for all the good we long to do.

4. Care of physical needs:

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For a balanced and happy life in any setting, an adult should take reasonable care of one's health. In case of celibates, we do not have a life-partner who checks our eating and sleeping habits, our exercise regime, our hygiene and medication. We need to do this ourselves.

India is becoming the diabetes capital of the world. Heart disease, too, is a strong killer here. There is both malnutrition among our poor people and obesity among our well-to-do citizens. (Priests and religious will never be malnourished, or die of starvation; our danger is wrong eating habits, over-eating, or developing addictions.)

Physical exercise is something we need to find regular time for. Exercise not only helps our physical health; it releases endorphins into the blood stream, which give us a natural high.

Those who do yoga or some other exercise regularly say how energized they feel. And they look it.

I used to tell seminarians: "In the seminary, you are playing and doing manual work every day. You are trim and fit. Don't come back after five years with a huge paunch and a bag full of medicines! You must keep physically fit!"

Unhealthy eating habits and lack of exercise will affect our health, our moods and our general discipline and work habits. A reasonable care of our body and our physical fitness is part of our fidelity to our call, and being responsible for ourselves. It is also part of our commitment to our congregation or community and to the mission. We should "serve God" by giving our best. To give our best, we need to be fit. If we neglect our health, we will do much less work, and we may become a burden for others.

Healthy relaxation and recreation—chatting with good friends, joining in a birthday party, going for a picnic with the community or with one's students or parishioners—belongs here. For a life to be human, we need also times of fun and relaxation, not just work and prayer. Play—activities we do for the mere fact that we enjoy them, e.g., parents playing with their children or friends teasing each other and having a great laugh or watching a funny movie together—is important for a balanced and happy life.

5. Confidential Help:

Even if we live in a reasonably good community and have good friends and loving family members, there will be occasions when we need to unburden ourselves in strict confidence to someone in whom we have full trust. Or we have a very deep experience which we want to sort out. Or we come to a fork on the road of our life, and need greater clarity. Or we fall in love and feel confused about how to go about it. Or someone very close to us dies, and this death affects us deeply. We feel lost.

All these are occasions when we would do well to sit down for a frank and relaxed chat with someone we trust. The three ways in which we can get extremely useful confidential help are: counselling, spiritual direction and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. All three share some common elements, but they differ in meaning and purpose.

If you are distressed, and you are looking for solution to a personal problem—relationships, fear, anger, sexual difficulties, painful family situations—what you seek is counselling. In it, by talking things over with a caring and reasonably competent person in whom you have confidence, you learn to manage your life much better. Why carry burdens in your heart and miss out on much in life when you can talk things over and lead a happier life? Going to someone for help shows greater maturity, not greater immaturity.

If, instead, what you are looking for is to deepen your God-experience, or to come closer to God, or to understand that relationship better, you need spiritual direction or spiritual accompaniment. It helps a person to see more clearly the working of God in one's life, find one's unique gifts and path better, and enjoy one's journey of faith more fully.

Confession, the third help, is a celebration of God's forgiving by two sinners (the one sitting in the confessional is a sinner, too!). I have known people experiencing peace of heart and, at least in a few cases, extraordinary happiness after a good confession.

For a meaningful celibate life—which is about doing with our life what God wants us to do, and cultivating this central relationship carefully—we need confidential help. The chit-chat at table and the conferences we hear are not enough. Just as keeping physically fit requires regular exercise suited to one's age and health, we need to look after our emotional and spiritual health. Counselling, spiritual direction and confession are powerful helps for that.

Like exercise or eating good food, people will believe in the usefulness and necessity of these three helps only if they have had good experiences of them. If not, they will be jettisoned as unpleasant burdens or

as adolescent practices meant for the very young. Those who have had good experiences of being accompanied, will enjoy getting such help again.

One setting in which the celibate minister will need spiritual direction or counselling is when we experience sexual attraction or intense attachment in our ministry, especially in one-to-one ministries. In this case, the counsellor or spiritual director needs spiritual direction (May).

One more thing to add here: The best way to learn counselling and spiritual direction is to receive it. Without the experience of getting help, and growing through it, and experiencing the freedom and joy that come from inner growth, a person will not become a good counsellor or spiritual director (or confessor).

So, too (since this book is aimed mainly at formators and superiors), all formators would do well to get some training in counselling and spiritual direction. Formation work involves individual accompaniment. Assuring general discipline and giving conferences and classes to the group and giving generic advice are not enough for helping formees. They need to be understood and helped on their private, personal journeys.

6. Mental Enrichment:

What we have in our mind affects our feelings, decisions and actions. A happy celibate life requires adequate knowledge of relevant material.

To begin with, celibates (like all human beings) need properly given sex education at different stages: before joining, during initial formation and at later stages, like mid-life.

Religious and priests need to be aware of what is happening in the world and in the church, especially in areas more closely related to one's mission. Thus, a Salesian should know the situation of youth, and a sister working with AIDS patients should know the problems facing such patients and the most effective means of treatment. Knowledge is a must; good will alone is not enough.

When we have weak intellectual interests, one of the damaging consequences is the focus on silly or negative matters. Thus, for instance, if I have no reading habits, or if I have no interest in learning anything new, I will more easily be interested in gossip or in silly matters. My interests may be restricted to "who is doing what," "who is getting transferred where," or the latest cricket scores.

One of the results of mental openness is the ability to situate the small problems of community life within the larger problems of people. Otherwise, the tiny issues we face in religious life and priesthood will be blown up to gigantic dimensions, and we will lose perspective. We become religious and priests to serve the people, to create a better world, not to get lost in the small (and often silly) matters that affect us in our communities or church circles.

A pleasant consequence of a larger mind is a good sense of humour. We develop the ability to laugh at our own blunders, not to take everything too seriously, to be willing to be teased and to have fun.

7. Asceticism (Discipline)

Nothing worthwhile can be achieved without discipline. Marriage and celibacy both require discipline and sacrifice. In fact, only a man ready for the sacrifices required for marriage and fatherhood would make a good priest. Only a woman with the qualities of a good wife and mother would make a good nun. Both paths are demanding, involving sacrifice and discipline. This needs no proof. It is enough to look at our parents and married siblings and at the life of any dedicated priest or religious.

What is the asceticism required for a happy celibate life?

The best asceticism or discipline in any walk of life is what is demanded by that way of life. Thus, a mother and a monk practice different types of discipline. Hers is one of constant availability, the total lack of time and space for oneself, and adjusting to the needs of spouse, children, elderly in-laws, etc. The monk's penance may consist in frugal eating or getting up in the middle of the night to pray or longer fasts in Lent.

As we saw in the chapter on celibate chastity, the choice of celibacy makes sense as a response to a God-experience, or to being gripped by Gospel values. The logical result of this is love for a simple life. Today, when we are aware of the gross inequalities and injustices in the world, the exploitation of the weak, the waste of high consumerism, we cannot be a witness to God's love if we lead luxurious lives, or seek comfort and consumer goods rather than a simple life.

There is an asceticism of duty: being faithful to our duty even when it costs.

There is the asceticism of availability: being ready to serve anyone who needs us, without making a fuss.

There is the asceticism of acceptance: accepting difficulties, ill-health, the hardships of ministry, the adjustment needed when living with people of different types and backgrounds.

There is the asceticism of self-control: in food and drink, in the use of the media, in the ownership and use of gadgets.

A diocesan priest once wrote that what he understood about celibacy from the explanations he received in the seminary and from the lives of those who taught him was this: All pleasures are allowed, except sex. As a priest he found how absurd such an understanding is. If we live more comfortable lives than the people we serve, it is they, not we, who give better witness to the Gospel. (Sipe 1996, p. 104)

So, too, it does not make sense to claim that I have complete mastery of myself in the area of sexuality, and I indulge myself and let go in every other area. This will not work, nor is it convincing to those whom we serve. (Sipe 1996, pp. 104-105)

8. Facing Solitude:

Even with good friends and good communities, we need to face our basic aloneness. We need to face moments of loneliness without trying to escape into noise and addictions. Solitude faced well is creative and life-giving. It need not deteriorate into loneliness or isolation. Being alone (not sharing our life with a partner) is different from being lonely (Mannath 2000).

Celibacy involves having to live without a life-partner. It means, too, that we have to be ready to move from one place to another, from one community to another. We cannot cling to a place or to a particular person or group. This involves facing our solitude. It need not usually mean loneliness if we cultivate good friendships, and have a meaningful inner journey, but it will mean that we know what to do with our time and how to structure it meaningfully. If our religious life is over-organized, and we are at a loss when there is no organized activity, we will find it hard to fill our hours and days, and feel empty.

Solitude is something all grown-ups need to face. Without solitude, we do not grow-up, nor do creative work. (For instance, to write this book, the writers had to spend many, many hours and days at the desk, reading, thinking, writing, checking details. This cannot be done while chatting or having group recreation.)

Linked to this issue, but different from it, is the experience of *disillusionment*. All commitments go through three stages—romance (unrealistically high expectations and dreams), disillusionment (the painful realization that my marriage or religious life or priesthood is not what I had expected or imagined) and re-decision (a conscious decision to be loving and to do one's best, in spite of feeling badly let down). All adults have to face disillusionment. No life-setting—whether marriage or parenthood or religious life or church ministry—will turn out to be exactly as we imagined it when we started out. It is good to realize, too, that the disillusionment in marriage is harder than the one in celibacy, since the married person's options are more limited.

Whichever life we choose, we need to keep in mind that there are no ideal partners or communities, perfect religious orders or flawless superiors. Each of us needs to face our life and learn to build something beautiful with it, without ideal living conditions or perfect people to live with. The only companion we can always count on, one hundred percent, is God. This aloneness needs to be faced.

A big mistake—for celibates and for lay people—would be to try to escape loneliness in unhealthy ways—drinking or drugs, excessive dependence on the media (Internet, TV, cell phone) or sexual acting out (pornography, casual sex or unhealthy relationships). Friendship, prayer and spiritual direction will help us when rowing our boat becomes too tough and lonely; addictions and adolescent escapes will only make the problem worse.

Celibate life need not be lonely, nor is it harder than marriage. The loneliness within a marriage can be much harder than the solitude we celibates face. Loneliness is the experience of being unconnected, unloved or unloving. Solitude is the human reality of being alone. Ultimately, in our decisions, in our suffering, in the core values we want to live, in the way we respond to God, in the way we face death, we are alone. No one else can love in our place, suffer in our place, become holy in our place, or die in our place.

9. Responsibility

Adults need to take responsibility for themselves and for the life they lead.

Because of the highly structured life that religious and seminarians lead in early years—where most decisions are taken by others, and the day is tightly structured—there is the danger of over-dependence on authority. We may not take responsibility for ourselves. As adults, each of us is responsible for how we live and for the person we want to become. Remaining in the same religious order or church setting, one person can become a saint and another a crook. No one can make us good or loving, God-centred or dedicated. This is our personal responsibility.

If we do not face this, we will tend to make “superiors” or “the church” or “religious life” responsible for what we are. We will find easy villains to blame for our blunders and for our mediocrity.

A young priest I met illustrates this point. He said:

I used to go around saying, “These superiors do not understand me. They do not take my plans into account.” This became a slogan with me. I complained a lot—until, one day, it dawned on me that the real problem lay somewhere else. The real problem was: I did not try to understand God’s plans for me. I was waiting for superiors to understand my plans. When I changed, and tried to fit into God’s plans for me, my life changed. I am very happy now.” Quoting Psalm 34 to me, he said, “Father, the Bible tells us: ‘Look towards him, and be radiant.’ That is true. If we keep our eyes on him, we will be radiant. It is up to us to do that.”

He looked radiant.

This change of outlook is not something others can force on us. How we see life, how we want to live, whether we turn into loving human beings or self-centred manipulators, whether we will speak well of people, or pull them down—these central attitudes are our responsibility. My superiors or religious order cannot make me a good human being or a convinced religious or a dedicated priest.

As Jerome Murphy-O’Connor reminds us, “celibacy is not freedom from responsibility. It is just as much a commitment to responsibility in community as is marriage.” (Murphy-O’Connor, p. 213).

Once, talking to a young priest who had been my student, I said, “I have heard very good things about you. Keep it up!” He replied, with evident conviction, “It is not our work. It is God who works through us. One thing that always helped me was this: Already when I was in the seminary, I knew that you superiors cannot form us; we form ourselves.”

This is the heart of responsibility. No one can “form” us, or make us good or holy. Others can help us, certainly. They can be inspiring examples. They can make our path easier or harder. But two things they cannot do for us are: to make us good, and to make us happy. The decision to love and the decision to be happy are basic decisions that each of us needs to take.

10. Models

One of the greatest helps for growth is to have good models. As we have just finished saying, what we want to do, how we want to live and whom we will imitate is a personal choice. But having good models is a wonderful boost.

One of the things formation settings should provide is to put the young formee in touch with inspiring people, and to expose them to challenging and good lives through books, movies, talks, etc.

Young people are moved and helped more by models than by theories. We learn marriage or celibacy not mainly by reading a book, but by getting to know good couples and celibates.

The models can be well-known persons, such as canonized saints or public figures. When Father Timothy Radcliffe wanted to illustrate the religious vow of obedience, the person he spoke about was not a vowed monk, but Nelson Mandela. He commented on Mandela’s tough decision to put the needs of his people above his own comfort and career—and he ended up paying a very heavy price.

Mahatma Gandhi, Medha Patkar, honest politicians and social activists, courageous writers and compassionate citizens—there are many inspiring examples to imitate. We will do well to present their lives and convictions to our formees.³

One Don Bosco or Father Damien or Mother Teresa illustrates the meaning of celibacy better than much theory and many arguments.

³ Excellent movies are available with gripping and inspiring life-stories. See the small selection I have included at the end of the chapter on celibate chastity.

Some of the best models for leading a good, God-centred life are our own family members. Marriage and celibacy are not two competing professions, but two valid ways of doing God's will and of growing in love. There is much we can learn about holiness from our parents and married sisters and brothers (and they from us). Most of us will agree with this statement: If we were to live our religious life and priestly vocation with the faith, dedication and sacrifice that many of our family members bring to their marriage and parenthood, we will be much better religious and priests. Healthy contacts with one's family and with ordinary people will put us in touch with real saints.

As I have heard from priests repeatedly, "I meet so many good, holy lay people. I learn much from them. Many of them are real examples of prayer and sacrifice and generosity."

At times, powerful inspiration for celibacy can come from unlikely sources. Here is a case of a young religious priest whose commitment to celibacy was challenged and deepened by his ministry among the poor. This is how it happened, in his own words:

When I was a theology student, I used to read whatever I liked, see any movie I wanted, organize my free time as I liked. I used to think: What do these superiors know about life? I did not find their teaching connected to life, and I pretty much lived my life as I felt like. I was not really committed to anything, and did not know it.

All this changed during one summer when I was sent to a very poor village. The plight of the poor really shook me. Not only were they poor; they were powerless against the landlords and politicians. The police would not protect the poor from the politicians. If a politician or a rich man wanted to get a girl from a poor family, the police would not help the girl. So, to protect their daughters from these men, poor families would send the girls to live with other relatives in remote villages. This meant being away from their parents, and also missing school. This is when I woke up. I realized: These poor people make much bigger sacrifices for their chastity than I am making. I am not serious about life. I decided to change.⁴

God normally speaks to us through people. God shows us how to live, mostly by putting good people on our path. The Bible itself is the story of God's dealing with all types of people.

If we want to tread the celibate path meaningfully—that is, live a God-centred, loving and self-giving life—one of the best helps we have is to look at the lives of good people who put God and conscience in the first place, who reach out to the needy rather than wallow in luxury or idleness, and who show the rest of us how champions run the race. The ancient Greeks used to have a saying that is pertinent here, "A thousand mediocre geometers do not make one Euclid." A thousand mediocre priests do not equal one John Mary Vianney or Francis Xavier. A thousand comfort-loving religious do not add up to one Therese of Lisieux or Martin de Porres. Religious life makes sense if it appeals to the idealism in the young and seeks to create heroes. This is what the young are looking for. This is what religious and priests should show them. As Cardinal Mercier used to say, "Young people are a strange lot. You ask them for little; they give you nothing. You ask them for much; they give you everything."

Celibacy is for those who want to give everything. The best help is to meet men and women who give everything. The next best help is to hear about such men and women. This is where models play a key role.

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⁴ Personal communication