

Priestly Celibacy

In this reflection we will **not** treat the following topics

- 1. The history of clerical celibacy, including the complex economic considerations that caused lay princes to insist on celibacy in order to keep control of the benefices in their own hands.
- 2. The negative reasons for upholding celibacy:
 - fear of the feminine
 - insistence on cultic purity (from the Jewish law)
 - the idea that sex is somehow impure

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- 3. The wisdom of the current Church law that insists
 - that only males be ordained,
 - and only males who are judged to have the charism of celibacy.
- 4. The wisdom of the discipline that will not allow to continue in ministry a man who discerns that he does not in fact have the gift of celibacy and that to continue struggling to be celibate is destructive of himself and dangerous to those to whom he is ministering.

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Priestly Celibacy

The central love of Jesus' life was his loving communion with God. His choice not to marry and have a family led his opponents to make fun of him, accusing him of being a eunuch. He made this choice, however, 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'(Matthew 19:12).

His celibate love cast into sharp relief the mystery of his communion with God. It also gave a special power to his witness of God's special, personal and unconditional commitment to each person.

3

As disciples of Jesus each of us is invited to let Jesus love through us. From the beginning, Jesus invited some to love, like him, in a celibate way.

They gave up the intimacy of having a sexual partner and a family of their own, not, in the words of Tony Philpot, to live 'a grim resentful bachelorhood with lots of built-in compensations', but to be in the community a sacrament of the total and undivided dedication of Christ in love to the Christian community and to each member of the community without distinction.

4

The Priest and the third Christian millennium 1999

‘The call to become, like Jesus, a *‘hostia’* underlies the compatibility of the commitment to celibacy with the priestly ministry in the Church. It implies the incorporation of the priest in the sacrifice with which “Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her so as to make her holy”(Ephesians 5:25-26).

The priest is called to be “a living image of Jesus Christ, Spouse of the Church”(J-P II PDV [*I will give you shepherds*] n. 22) and to make his entire life an offering for her.

5

Some definitions and presuppositions.

1. A celibate is committed to remain unmarried and to endeavour to forego all directly wilful indulgence in genital sex, whether with others or alone.
2. Devaluation of celibacy is linked to a devaluation of sexuality. Both stem from a divorce of sexuality from the sacred.

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Some definitions and presuppositions.

3. There is a lack of wisdom in casting celibacy as a scapegoat for all the intra-personal and inter-personal tensions in clerics and religious. In fact, unless personal agendas other than sexuality are attended to, ‘genital encounters’, whether in or out of marriage, will not alleviate the tensions. They may even compound them.

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4. Whereas ‘genital sex’ is not for celibates, they are human beings and so celibates are necessarily sexual and relate as such.
5. Celibacy should be a way of loving: an authentic way of promoting one’s own and other people’s spiritual growth. This is excellently presented in Integrity in Ministry: a document of principles and standards for Catholic Clergy and Religious in Australia, which stresses the importance of a celibate being close to the people, calling this closeness ‘one of the strengths of the Australian Church’. At the same time it contains much good advice concerning the respecting of appropriate boundaries.

8

- Mature persons are generative. That is, they are able to spend their life in creative communion which is life-giving both to themselves and to those to whom they relate.

- To be generative, a person must have experienced intimacy: the kind of loving and being loved which is experienced as being the fruit of being deeply known and accepted by another whom we intimately know and accept.

9

- To be truly intimate one must have a sense of one's personal identity: a sense of self that is experienced as being affirmed by another who is significant to us.

- A so-called celibacy which avoids these stages of maturing will never become generative, and so will never become a way of loving.

10

7. Henri Nouwen warns us of the dangers of the exercise of power by a person who is frightened of intimacy:

Celibate Loving

'The temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat.

Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead.'

11

He also reminds us that people whose consecrated love for God is lived out in a celibate way of loving can make good leaders.

In the name of Jesus

'When we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative.'

12

There is abundant evidence from the early centuries that the Church had a high regard for consecrated celibacy.

The Council of Trent (1563), reacted against certain reformers who denied its value, and condemned those who maintain that 'the married state is preferable to that of virginity or celibacy and that it is not better and more blessed to continue in the state of virginity or celibacy than to enter on the state of matrimony.'

13

Obviously the best thing for any person to do is the will of God. Central to discerning this will is the discernment of the way in which we are gifted by grace. In practice, therefore, the better and therefore the preferable state for an individual is found by discerning his or her own gift and acting accordingly.

However, the Council of Trent upheld ancient Christian tradition in defending the special closeness to Christ experienced by the celibate person. If a person is given the gift of celibacy, it is a better thing to live it than to marry.

14

1Corinthians 7:7, 32-35

'I wish that all were as I myself am [celibate]. But each has his or her own special gift from God, one of one kind [marriage] and one of another [celibacy] ... I would like to see you free from worry.

An unmarried man can devote himself to the Lord's affairs, all he need worry about is pleasing the Lord; but a married man has to bother about the world's affairs and devote himself to pleasing his wife: he is torn in two ways.

15

In the same way an unmarried woman, like a young girl, can devote herself to the Lord's affairs; all she need worry about is being holy in body and spirit. The married woman, on the other hand, has to worry about the world's affairs and devote herself to pleasing her husband.

I say this only to help you, not to put a halter round your necks, but simply to make sure that everything is as it should be, and that you give your undivided attention to the Lord.'

16

‘give your undivided attention to the Lord’(1Corinthians 7:35).

This does not mean that there is something in married love which distracts from the Lord.

All are called to the perfection of holiness and therefore to an undivided heart.

‘All Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love’(Vatican II, Lumen Gentium, n. 40).

17

The statement by Trent does highlight the special communion in love offered to those who forgo the intimacy of marriage to devote themselves to Christ and to his mission.

19

Vatican II Gaudium et Spes, n. 48

‘Just as of old God encountered his people with a covenant of love and fidelity, so our Saviour, the Spouse of the Church, now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage. He abides with them in order that by their mutual self-giving spouses will love each other with enduring fidelity, as he loved the Church and delivered himself for it. Authentic married love is caught up into divine love, and is directed and enriched by the redemptive power of Christ and the salvific action of the Church.’

18

Motives for celibacy

- i. The person who loves in a mature way as a celibate is a sacrament of Christ, whose way of loving was celibate.

Matthew 19:12

‘There are eunuchs who have made themselves that way because of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.’

Jesus is celibate by choice and because of the all demanding presence of God in his life and the mission he has concerning the kingdom of God. He called others to join him in this mission and with the same urgency and commitment.

20

‘Peter said: “What about us. We left all we had to follow you.”

Jesus said to them: “I tell you solemnly, there is no one who has left house, wife, brothers, parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not be given repayment, many times over in the present time, and, in the world to come, eternal life.”

[‘wife’ not in Mark/Matthew]

21

‘If anyone can remain in continence to the honour of the flesh of the Lord let him do so without boasting’(Ignatius of Antioch To Polycarp V,2).

‘You wish to be a Christian? Imitate Christ in everything.’(Pseudo-Clement, Ad Virgines I.6)

‘By giving a special visibility to the inner sanctum [that sacred centre in our lives where only God may enter], the celibate man or woman wants to affirm and proclaim that all human intimacy finds its deepest meaning and fulfilment when it is experienced and lived as a participation in the intimacy of God himself’(Henri Nouwen *Celibate Loving*).

22

‘Priests have, of their own free choice, accepted consecrated celibacy after the example of Christ’(Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* n. 16).

‘They intend not only to participate in Christ’s priestly office, but also to share with him his very manner of living [celibate].’(Paul VI *Priestly Celibacy* n. 23)

‘Priestly celibacy is a communion in the celibacy of Christ ... There arises a desire in those exercising the priesthood to reproduce the same conditions and outlook of life as Christ experienced, in order to effect the closest possible imitation of him.’

(Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy, 1974, n.14)

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Motives for celibacy

2. Celibate love is also a symbol and witness of Christ’s complete commitment to his mission to ‘draw all to myself’(John 12:32).

John the Baptist states:

‘The bride is only for the bridegroom;
and yet the bridegroom’s friend
who stands there and listens
is glad when he hears the bridegroom’s voice.
This same joy I feel and now it is complete.
He must grow greater, I must grow smaller’(John 3:29-30).

24

This seems to be the meaning of Paul's statement in First Corinthians. Paul commends celibacy for the same reasons that it was lived by Jesus: the ultimate demands made by a life given over to the service of the reign of God.

The ultimate nature and urgency of this mission persuaded Paul that it was better to avoid all other commitments to be fully available to go wherever the Spirit of the Lord took him to carry out his mission as herald of the gospel - a mission that meant a 'daily anxiety for all the churches' (2Corinthians 11:28).

25

Paul's whole-hearted commitment to Christ and his mission required of him that his only children would be those he fathered in Christ (1Cor 4:15; Galatians 4:19).

(1Thessalonians 2:7-12)

'Though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a mother feeding and cherishing her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

26

'You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.'

27

Vatican II, Optatam Totius, n. 10

Celibates 'obtain the most useful assistance towards the constant exercise of that perfect charity by which they can become all things to all men in their priestly ministry.'

Paul VI, Sacerdotalis Caelibatus, n. 26

'The consecrated celibacy of the sacred ministers actually manifests the virginal love of Christ for the Church, and the virginal and supernatural fecundity of this marriage, by which the children of God are born.'

28

Motives for celibacy

3. Celibate love is a symbol and witness of the Church's commitment to Christ:

'By means of celibacy, presbyters profess before men their willingness to be dedicated with undivided loyalty to the task entrusted to them, namely, that of espousing the faithful to one husband, and presenting them as a chaste virgin to Christ. They recall that mystical marriage, established by God and destined to be fully revealed in the future, by which the Church holds Christ as her only spouse'(PO n. 16).

29

Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 26

'Made captive by Christ Jesus unto the complete abandonment of one's entire self to him, the priest takes on the likeness of Christ most perfectly.'

30

Motives for celibacy

4. Being a sacrament of Christ's love, even of the very manner of his loving, and a sacrament of the response of the Church whose first love is Christ, celibacy is a sign of love and an impulse towards it.

'Have you been told not to love? Certainly not. Idle, dead, detestable and unhappy will you be if you love nothing. Love, but look at what it is you love'(Augustine).

31

'One who freely chooses celibacy is affirming that nothing is more important in life than 'the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus'(Romans 8:39).' Similarly, nothing is more important for the human person than to respond to that love. The celibate says by his choice: I want to be single-hearted - all for God and all for his people'(Pable).

32

Priestly celibate love

John XXIII 1959 to Seminarians

‘Purity of heart is an atmosphere of serenity ... an indispensable condition for disinterested service of one’s neighbour in the sacerdotal ministry.

It is purity of heart that prepares one for the incomparable joys of long colloquies at the foot of the altar, which feeds fervent thoughts of apostolic charity, which breathes unbroken serenity ...

It attracts souls by the very charm of Jesus Christ.’

33

Teilhard de Chardin The Evolution of Chastity 1934

‘Chastity is often presented to us as a fragile crystal, which will shatter unless it is protected from every shock and from the light. Rather, it is more like a flame that devours everything as it burns.’

34

Vat II, Lumen Gentium, n. 42

‘Virginity or celibacy, this perfect continence for love of the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in high esteem by the church as a sign and stimulus of love, and as a singular source of spiritual fertility in the world.’

Paul VI, Sacerdotalis Caelibatus, n. 24

‘Celibacy is and ought to be a rare and very meaningful example of a life whose motivation is love.’

35

Guide to the Formation in Priestly Celibacy 1974

‘Celibacy is a vocation to a special kind of love.

It must be lived in a climate of friendship and, above all else, in friendship with God in Christ. The priest must live a life of love which can only be found in God as its highest source. He must exercise this life in imitation of Christ, extending it to all without exception and with that sense of responsibility which is an indication of a mature personality.’

36

Celibacy is a sign and witness that one can mature in love without sexual encounters:

Synod on Priestly Ministry 1971

‘If celibacy is lived in the spirit of the Gospel, in prayer, vigilance, poverty, joy, the shunning of honours, and in fraternal love, it becomes a sign which will effectively proclaim Christ to the human race, even in our time.’

Celibacy aids the psychological-sexual maturing of the celibate and is experienced by others as a way of loving. When a celibate is truly a sacrament to others of Christ’s love, they can experience how special they are, for they are loved for themselves, free of any desire to possess.

37

We are all longing for something that no one woman, no one man, no particular children, no job, no situation can satisfy. We long to belong, and we are drawn towards the centre and the unity and the love that holds everything together, the one we call ‘God’. Furthermore, we know that our longing is not just wishful thinking, for when we partially fulfil this longing in an encounter of love, our whole being rejoices.

39

Motives for celibacy

5. Celibacy is also a symbol of and a witness to the transcendent

Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 34

‘In the world of man, so deeply involved in earthly concerns and too often enslaved by the desires of the flesh, the precious divine gift of perfect continence for the kingdom of heaven stands out precisely as a singular sign of the blessings of heaven.’

38

We can indulge in wishful thinking, whether in marriage or in the celibate state. We can be out of touch, dreamy, unrealistic. No state of life leads automatically to maturity in loving. But if, whatever our place in this world, we dare to depth reality, dare to make connection, dare to respond authentically to reality, we discover a release of energy that we call grace and know that we will be satisfied with nothing less than infinite love. Celibate love can be, for the celibate and for others, a sacrament of this divine longing.

40

Reality is one. There is only one God and everything participates in the being of God. Everything is inter-connected at the deepest level of being. When we are in touch with ourselves, we are in touch with everything and everyone. A celibate is 'single' at the level of sexual union, but a celibate who loves experiences profound communion.

41

Many of us live broken lives, experiencing broken relationships, broken marriages and broken homes. Perhaps one special grace of the celibate is to experience empathy with us, for he or she is also living an 'unfinished' life. A celibate has a heart trained to console, trained to be with others in their aloneness, without pretending, without hiding the brokenness and the hurt and the incompleteness. A celibate who is able to be alone and know peace can help another lonely person come to know that to be abandoned is not to be alone. No one can take God from us.

42

We make mistakes in love. We have to live with the knowledge that we have hurt others, certainly unintentionally, and probably at times intentionally.

I was moving into a rented house on one occasion. The shade on the lamp stand needed replacing as it was covered in black stains. Having failed in an initial attempt to find a second-hand replacement, I returned to find that a friend had touched up the shade with a paint brush. The same marks were there; the same black blotches.

43

Now, however, thanks to some well-placed strokes, the marks had been transformed into a garden path, and the black spots had become the centres for daisies. What had yesterday obscured the light, today radiated colour and life and joy. What a symbol for forgiven sin! We cannot pretend that our lives are not stained. But the stains can be transformed, by love, into centres of radiating compassion, humility, and forgiveness.

44

When we find ourselves in trouble over love, the temptation is to back off, to love less. The art, however, is to love, not less but more. I do not mean more of the same, but more love. To love more, sometimes we have to discipline our love, to lift our love, to love more clearly and more honestly and more truly. The art of life is the art of responding appropriately and truthfully and lovingly to what is real.

45

What is real may be delightfully attracting; it may be as repulsive as the Agony in the Garden or the Crucifixion. The fact is that certain people did decide to betray Jesus and have him put to death. This cut right across Jesus' hopes and put an abrupt end to the mission of love that he was carrying out in response to his discernment of the will of God. He knew that such unjust decisions were directly contrary to God's will, even though those who cried out for his death did so in God's name. What was he to do? How was he to respond to a situation that made no sense to him?

46

Jesus could not pretend it away. He could not deny that it was happening. But neither did he allow it to distract him from his chosen path. He did not retaliate. Rather he kept believing in his heart, he kept believing in his longing, he kept believing in God. He remained faithful, and prayerful and loving. He could not avoid death, but he did make of his dying an act of love, and in so doing showed us how to give meaning even to the most absurd situations.

47

We have to learn that the truth will indeed set us free. We have to believe that reality is always the best thing to cope with. When we are out of touch with reality we are out of touch with everything. When we dare to face the real, we find the presence of God, we find grace, we find a way of taking the next step of love.

48

A celibate is firstly a man or a woman, needy of love and longing for companionship. A celibate, like every other person, has to live within the limits of real commitments, made to the community, made in the light: commitments that are real and that have come from the deep place where we are most truly ourselves. To do otherwise is to attempt to escape the real. To love in ways that are contrary to a celibate commitment is to use oneself and others as distractions. To love more, then, is to love as a celibate loves, with all the incompleteness of such a love, but with all its particular mystery and attraction.

49

If the celibate fails to grow in an adult and nurturing and generative love as a celibate, he or she can be caught in a self-centred existence, and can end up in distracting substitutes that do not satisfy and that do not lead to maturity.

51

It is dangerous to attempt celibate love. For love to be real it must belong to the whole person: the psyche, the emotions and the body. Experiencing oneself as a sexual person in the committed relationship of marriage thrusts one into the demands of intimacy and often also of parenting: demands that may be avoided, but not easily and not without failure staring one in the face. The celibate, in transcending such intimacy with its consequent demands upon the whole person, runs the risk of living in an unreal world.

50

This is not to suggest that some who are so graced should not attempt celibacy. No life lacks risk. There is a price for anything of value. And celibate love is very precious, for to be truly loved by a celibate is to be loved just for what we are, with respect and admiration and affection, free from the kind of desire and the expression of need that rightly belong to a sexual relationship. Risky, but refreshing and liberating.

52

It is said that Michelangelo used to contemplate a piece of marble till he could see in it that which he would cause to emerge through the craft of sculpturing. He then chipped away at the stone to release what he had already seen hidden in it. This is an image of love. Love is not a matter of changing people into what you would like them to be. It is more contemplative. The one who loves sees what the other person already is and could be shown to be with the proper attention and nurturing. Love is committing oneself, dedicating oneself to work with the other person to effect that nurturing.

53

This is what husbands and wives are attempting to do in their relationship. This is what parents and teachers are doing. This is the art in which celibates, too, are involved, for they are committed to being sacraments in this world of the way of loving to which Jesus witnessed, sacraments of the love of God which is open to all, available to all, and delights in all. Celibate love aims to release in this world the sacred mystery of human love that respects and encourages, but that transcends sexual union. Celibate love, lived in a generative way, reminds us that the deepest communion to which we are all called is communion with Jesus 'in the bosom of the Father'(John 1:18).

54

All true love is a sacrament of this, as is celibate love. As a general rule, in the Roman Rite, priests are chosen from amongst those who have shown that God has gifted them with this delicate grace. They are encouraged to remain faithful to this commitment throughout the privileged years of their ministry in the Church.

55