

Religious Chastity

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.

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.

From the earliest centuries through to the present time, the main motive for a voluntary life of sexual abstinence has been expressed in terms taken from Saint Paul:

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.

1Corinthians 7:7, 32-35 (continued)

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.'

‘give your undivided attention to the Lord’(1Cor. 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).

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

‘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’(Vatican II Gaudium et Spes, n. 48).

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

Paul is highlighting the special communion in love offered to those who forgo the intimacy of marriage to devote themselves to Christ and to his mission.

Religious Chastity : Motives

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

‘There are eunuchs who have made themselves that way because of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who has space for it’(Matthew 19:12).

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.

‘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 [‘wife’ not in Mark/Matthew], 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”” (Luke 18:28-30).

Religious Chastity : Motives

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).

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 'daily anxiety for all the churches'(2COR. 11:28).

Religious Chastity : Motives

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.

1 Thessalonians 2:7-12 (continued)

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.'

Religious Chastity : Motives

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

Religious Chastity: Motives

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).

‘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’(Vat II, Lumen Gentium, n. 42).

‘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).

Religious Chastity : Identity, intimacy, generativity

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 with 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.

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.

Most people find themselves and experience intimacy through a graced sexual union. Some are graced to find themselves and experience intimacy as celibates. It is the virtue of chastity which, both for the married and the unmarried (including the celibate), keeps pure the experience of being sexual.

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.

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.

Reality is one. There is only one God and everything participates in the being of God. Everything is interconnected 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.

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.

We make mistakes in love. We have to live with the knowledge that we have hurt others, even unintentionally.

A lampshade 'redeemed'

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.

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?

He 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Contemplative Chastity

(The Wound of Love: Carthusian Miscellany)

- ‘I am the Lord’s handmaid. Let it be done to me according to your word’(Luke 1:38).
- That which truly and finally counts, we must receive from God and from God alone, by pure grace.
- Wherever we are and whatever we have we must let go when Love calls us to closer communion.

‘Surrender and joy in the pure receptivity of an absolutely gratuitous love, shaping our deepest being and transforming our heart of flesh in Christ into a heart that can finally love: this is the attitude that should mould our prayer.’

Images of contemplative chastity

- Freshness
- Virgin snow
- A ray of morning sun across the shadow in a sanctuary
- A prayer, clothed with a simple melody
- The song of the stars
- Infinite space
- Magdalen's tears
- Limpid water
- A mother feeding her child at her breast
- A cheerful nun
- A joyful cascade

Images of contemplative chastity

- A child's gaze
- A flower's mute adoration
- Depth of eyes that love
- A trusting smile
- An old stove in summer idleness
- A word floor, welcoming the feet of strangers
- Cut stone - single, defenceless

Celibate with Christ

Hosea 2:19-20

‘I will betroth you to myself forever;
I will betroth you with integrity and justice,
with tenderness and love;
I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness;
and you will come to know YHWH.’

I. The clarity (purity) of holy love

‘Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God’(Matthew 5:8).

‘Beloved, we are God’s children now;
what we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this:
when he is revealed, we will be like him,
for we will see him as he is.

And all who have this hope in him purify themselves,
just as he is pure’(1John 3:2-3).

‘The monastic emphasis on purity of heart is generally explained in terms of

- singleness of purpose,
- inner undividedness,
- freedom from radical inconsistency,
- not having mixed motives,
- single-mindedness.

To progress towards this goal is understood as growth in simplicity.’

- ‘being true to one’s essential nature.’

- ‘a pure heart is a heart which is fully alive, with all its energies directed to a single end.’

‘He was a child. He was nine years old. But he knew his own soul and he guarded it as the eyelid guards the eye’(Tolstoy).

- Feelings of isolation, alienation, loneliness indicate the need for inter-personal relationships.
- We can, however, expect too much of other human beings.
- Disappointment can lead to being desperate, resentful, bitter, revengeful, even violent.
- Truly enriching inter-personal relationships are possible only where there is respect for the holy

Henry Nouwen: Celibacy and the Holy

‘Celibates live out the holy emptiness in their lives by not marrying, by not trying to build for themselves a house or a fortune, by not trying to wield as much influence as possible, and by not filling their lives with events, people, or creations for which they will be remembered.

‘They hope that by their empty lives God will be recognised as the source of all human thoughts and actions.

‘Especially by not marrying and by abstaining from the most intimate expressions of human love, the celibate becomes a living sign of the limits of interpersonal relationships and of the centrality of the inner sanctum that no human being may violate.’(Nouwen)

That which truly and finally counts, we must receive from God and from God alone, by pure grace.

Wherever we are and whatever we have we must be ready to let go when Love calls us onward to closer communion.

Religious chastity and contemplation

Sandra Schneiders

‘A solid grounding in contemplative prayer and a firm commitment to its development is absolutely necessary for a meaningful celibate life.’

G.Aschenbrenner

‘A profoundly personal involvement with God in prayer is absolutely critical for effective celibate living.’

‘More than all else attend to your heart for from it flow the springs of life’(Proverbs 4:23).

James McAuley (1917-1976)

from A Letter to John Dryden

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives
Among us, men who walk within the fire
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land:
Distracted men that sow their hopes in sand
Will sometimes feel an evanescent sense
Of questioning, they do not know from whence.
Prayer has an influence we cannot mark,
It works unseen like radium in the dark.

You gentle souls who sit contemplative
In the walled garden where the fountain flows,
And faint with longing have desire to live
But the brief flowering of the single rose,
Knowing that all you give
Into the keeping of your tender Lord
Shall be enriched and thousandfold restored:
Before the herons return
Abide the sharp frosts and the time of pruning;
For he shall come at last for whom you yearn
And deep and silent shall be your communing;
And if his summer heat of love should burn
Its victim with a sacrificial fire,
Rejoice: who knows what wanderer may turn,
Responsive to that fragrant hidden pyre!

Finding our full sexual identity and living it in a creative, love-giving, life-giving and self-giving way is something that takes all our life. We cannot achieve it on our own, of course. We need others to love us well and to help us discover who we are. Above all we need the healing grace of God whose Spirit of pure love is constantly being poured into our hearts. It is never too late to go to him and to seek from him a share in the purity of his heart. In communion we respond to his invitation: 'This is my body given for you'. May we learn to be as loving and self-giving as Jesus in our sexual self-giving.

Teilhard de Chardin
was speaking of chastity when he wrote:

(The Evolution of Chastity, 1934, page 86)

‘Some day, after harnessing space, the winds,
the tides and gravitation,

We shall harness for God the energies of Love.

And then, for the second time in the history of the world,
we shall have discovered fire.’

MSC Constitutions

42. ‘To build up the body of Christ, the Spirit enriches the Church with different charisms. Through a gift of the Spirit, we are called to follow Jesus in his mission and to live that form of love which is consecrated celibacy.’

43. ‘By professing celibacy, we consecrate ourselves to God in order to love Him with a free and undivided heart, and to love our brothers and sisters as Jesus did. By this vow we bind ourselves, for the sake of the Kingdom, to forgo marriage and to observe perfect chastity.’

MSC Constitutions

44. 'Our consecrated celibacy is a commitment to grow in emotional maturity towards the perfection of love found in the Heart of Christ. Mindful that celibacy touches the depths of the human person, each member will recognise that he needs prudence and self-discipline, a deepening faith and prayer life, if he is to remain faithful to the commitment he has made.'

MSC Constitutions

45. ‘The community will strive to create an atmosphere in which each member can give himself more generously to the Lord in celibate love, for the building up of his Kingdom, both within the community and among the people he serves. Community life, commitment to mission and a healthy asceticism will help us to live celibacy fruitfully and honestly. Convinced of the love of Jesus, we will not be afraid to live this form of solitude which God alone can fill.’