

# **PRIESTLY CELIBACY**

## 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.

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' (page 26), 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. The words of Isaiah apply in a special way to those who accepted Jesus' invitation to live celibate love:

Lift up your eyes all around and see; they all gather, they are coming to you  
... Then you will say in your heart, "Who has borne me these? I was bereaved  
and barren, exiled and put away – so who has reared these? I was left all alone  
– where then have these come from?"

– Isaiah 49:18,21

Those who exercise organisational authority in the Church see it as fitting that an ordained priest should love in this way. The Congregation for the Clergy in *The Priest and the Third Christian Millennium* (1999) writes:

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, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.22) and to make his entire life an offering for her. 'Priestly celibacy, then, is the gift of self *in* and *with* Christ to his Church and expresses the priest's service in and with the Lord (PDV n.29)' (page 54).

The current law of the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church is that ordained priests be chosen only from among those who have the charism of celibacy (Canon 277.1); that is to say, from among those who have shown that they are so graced as to be able to love in a mature and Christ-like way without an intimate sexual companion. The official Church position has not changed since Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* (1967). Having listed certain objections raised against the insistence of clerical celibacy, he concluded:

We consider that the present law of celibacy should today continue to be firmly linked to the ecclesiastical ministry. This law should support the minister in his exclusive, definitive and total choice of the unique and supreme love of Christ; and uphold him in the entire dedication of himself to the public worship of God and to the service of the Church. (n. 14)

We do not wish to debate here the wisdom of restricting the sacrament of Order to celi-

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bate men. Rather, let us examine the motives Christians have had over the centuries for choosing to love in a celibate way, and the appropriateness of celibate love in one who is graced to be the sacrament of Christ the Head of the Body. Before doing so, however, let us list a number of definitions and statements presupposed in what follows.

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.
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.
4. Whereas genital sex is not for celibates, human beings 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* (June 1999), which stresses the importance of a priest 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.
6. 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. 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.

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

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.

- In the Name of Jesus, page 60

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

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. (page 32)

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There is abundant evidence from the early centuries that the Church had a high regard for consecrated celibacy. The Council of Trent (1563), reacting against certain reformers who denied its value, 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.’

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.

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

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. 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.

– 1Corinthians 7:7, 32-35

This motivation for celibacy is repeated in Church documents:

Towering among the counsels is that precious gift of divine grace given to some by the Father to devote themselves to God alone more easily with an undivided heart in virginity or celibacy.

– LG, n. 42

There are many ways in which celibacy is in harmony with the priesthood ... Through virginity or celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven, presbyters are consecrated to Christ in a new and special way; they more easily hold fast to him with an undivided heart; they more freely devote themselves in and through him to the service of God and men; they more readily serve his reign and the work of heavenly regeneration; and thus they become more apt to exercise a paternity in Christ and do so to a greater extent.

– PO, n.16

Seminarians should recognise the greater excellence of virginity consecrated to Christ, so that they may offer themselves to the Lord with fully deliberate and generous choice, and a complete surrender of body and soul.

– OT, n.10

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift from God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and can more freely dedicate themselves to the service of God and mankind.

– Canon 277,1

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.

– LG, n. 40

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.

– GS, n. 48

It 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.

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Jesus' way of loving is celibate. The person who loves in a celibate way is a sacrament of Jesus' way of loving

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 calls others to join him in this mission and with the same urgency and commitment.

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

– Matthew 19:12

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.

– Luke 18:28-30

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The fact that in the equivalent passage in Mark (10:29) and in Matthew (19:29) the word 'wife' is absent, may point to this being a personal interpretation by Luke of Jesus' words, influenced, perhaps, by the celibate example of Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians:

Have we not the right to take a Christian woman around with us, like all the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?  
– 1Corinthians 9:5)

Early Christian writers witness to the invitation to Christians to embrace Jesus' celibate way of loving:

If anyone can remain in continence to the honour of the flesh of the Lord let him do so without boasting.  
– Ignatius of Antioch, beginning 2nd cent. Epistle *To Polycarp* V,2

You wish to be a Christian? Imitate Christ in everything.  
– Pseudo-Clement, Syria 3rd century, *Ad Virgines* 1.6

Henri Nouwen writes:

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.  
– *Celibate Loving*, page 159

Listen, too, to recent church statements:

Priests have, of their own free choice, accepted consecrated celibacy after the example of Christ.  
– PO, n. 16

They intend not only to participate in Christ's priestly office, but also to share with him his [celibate] manner of living.  
– Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 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.  
– *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*, 1974, n.14

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Celibate love is 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 chapter seven. 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). Paul's whole-hearted commitment to Christ and his mission required of him that his only children would be those he fathered in Christ:

Though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

– 1Corinthians 4:15

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

– Galatians 4:19

'We were gentle among you like a mother feeding and cherishing her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. For you remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, that we might not burden any of you, while we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses and God also how reverent, and righteous, and blameless was our behaviour to you believers; for you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you, and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

– 1Thessalonians 2:7-12

Let us listen to recent Church statements:

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.

– OT, n. 10

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.

– Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 26

The renunciation of marriage is a form of life through which the priest's total dedication to the ministry, without any reservations, gains a particularly clear and explicit expression.

– Declaration of the German Hierarchy, 1970

## Celibacy

Jesus' love flowed from his consecration to his Father. Anyone could approach him, knowing that they were not intruding into his private space. He was for the person he was with, witnessing by his love to how special each person is to God. A celibate is graced to be a sacrament of this same kind of loving.

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

Those who follow Jesus are called to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness'(Matthew 6:33). Their first love is to be for God. The celibate leader is a sacrament of this virginal love of the Church for Christ. We find this idea repeated in recent church statements:

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

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.

– Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 26

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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. In Psalm 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.

– M.Pable, op.cit. page 69

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.

– John XXIII, Allocution to Seminarians 22/11/59.

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.

– LG, n. 42

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

– Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 24. See n. 31-32

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.

– Guide to Formation in priestly celibacy [1974] n.51

Chastity is a virtue of sharing and conquest. It is not a school of restriction and flight. Purity is often presented to us as a fragile crystal which will shatter unless it is protected from every shock and from the light. But it is more like a flame which devours all things as it burns.

– Teilhard de Chardin . *L'évolution de la chasteté*, 1934

Celibacy is a sign and witness challenging those who assume that one can mature in love only through sexual encounters:

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 cannot long remain hidden; on the contrary, it will effectively proclaim Christ to the human race, even in our time.

– *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*, 1974, n.9.

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Celibacy is a symbol of and a witness to the transcendent

Renunciation of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven bears witness to a dimension existing beyond worldly things and finding its full consummation in the act of faith in Christ.

– Declaration of the German Hierarchy, 1970

In the world, 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.

– Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, n. 34

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## Celibacy

Celibacy is a symbol and sign of the promised resurrected body

The children of this world take wives and husbands, but those who are judged worthy of a place in the other world and in the resurrection from the dead do not marry, because they can no longer die, for they are the same as the angels, and being children of the resurrection, they are sons of God.

– Luke 20:34-36. Mat 22:30 = Mark 12:25

The expression ‘same as the angels’ does not mean disembodied, non-sexual; rather it means standing in God’s presence in power and glory attentive to doing the Lord’s will. The celibate, drawing the energies of love directly from the heart of Jesus, and attentive to carrying on Jesus’ mission, is a reminder of the life that will be ours in heaven.

By means of celibacy, priests are made a living sign of that world to come, already present through faith and charity, a world in which the children of the resurrection shall neither be married nor take wives.

– PO, n.16

Celibates bear witness to the resurrection in a future life.

– OT, n. 10

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We are all longing for something that no one woman, no one man, no particular children, no job, no situation, can satisfy. We want to belong, and we are drawn towards the centre, 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 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.

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, 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. 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.

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, 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 he did not 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 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.

## Celibacy

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, 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 dissuade a person who is so graced from attempting 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, 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. Love is like that. Love is not a matter of changing people into what we would like them to be. It is more contemplative. The one who loves sees what the other person already is and gives the appropriate attention and nurturing for the 'hidden self to grow strong' (Ephesians 3:16). Love is committing oneself, dedicating oneself, to work with the other person to bring about that nurturing.

This is what husbands and wives are attempting to do in their relationship. This is what parents and teachers are attempting. 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).

All true love is a sacrament of this. In its own special way, so is celibate love. In the current discipline of the Roman Rite, the normal pattern is for priests to be chosen from amongst those who have shown that God has gifted them with this delicate grace. They are encouraged to remain faithful to this privileged commitment throughout the years of their ministry in the Church.