21.

Celibacy under Siege

After the attack on New York in September of 2001, many Americans were reluctant to board an airplane. Some hesitated to visit a restaurant or theater, and nearly everyone experienced a heightened sense of apprehension and need for vigilance. Civic leaders reminded us that by succumbing to the fear of stepping outdoors, we would be conceding to the terrorists.

Given the grave sexual abuse crisis in which the church in North America and elsewhere found itself, those of us who are celibate may be experiencing a similar sort of nervousness. We need to remind ourselves, therefore, that despite the collapse of trust we have witnessed, the people of God will not be well served if clergy and religious lose the spontaneity and imagination, the capacity for affection and sacrifice, and the zeal for mission for which celibacy has set us free. We have realized that we need to be cautious and alert, attentive like Americans everywhere to anything unusual or suspicious in our public space, but we cannot let ourselves be paralyzed by fear of how society may be looking at us or by a loss of confidence in our vocational choice.

In the present social context, then, I feel some reticence about advocating that now is not the time to give up on the value of the celibate way of life, but I believe that clergy and religious should not surrender their vision in the midst of emotional and ideological confusion. In times of desolation, Ignatius of Loyola counsels, one should not make changes in former decisions.
Has celibacy become an ambiguous sign?

A number of students in my theology courses have been raising questions, voicing their concerns, and even speaking of their sense of betrayal at the hands of the official Church. It was always understandable to me that young people should shy away from celibacy on account of the sacrifice it calls for, but at least until now they were able to grasp the motivation and religious rationale behind it. Today, however, many of them suspect that celibacy may be downright unhealthy; a few have started to associate it with a disorder that is potentially criminal.

I have heard several commentators argue that celibacy itself has been either the cause or at least a contributing factor to the scandal of sexual abuse. In some cases, that might very well be true. But to draw a parallel, failures with respect to Christian marriage do not mean that we should renounce as unworkable, or out of touch with modern culture, the gospel ideal that lies behind this sacrament. After all, the fact that human beings are not perfect all at once does not excuse us from trying to live like God’s children as best we can.

The great commandment of Deuteronomy 6:5 (“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”) expresses the call to perfection in the clearest and simplest terms. “All your heart” means that we are to hold nothing back—absolutely nothing—in this business of centering our hearts on “the LORD alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). None of us complains that the commandment is impractical or that God is unreasonable because of the patient effort that fulfilling the commandment requires. Why? Because we recognize that the Great Commandment is less a matter of divine legislation than of divine invitation. Such great love could not be commanded unless the human heart was
capable of it. In other words, the value of celibacy is not lessened because there have been failures.

As a gospel ideal, celibacy has nearly always been seen as part of a religious package. Centering our lives fully on God is what we aim at, and celibacy, like poverty and obedience, becomes a means. Now in describing poverty and celibacy as means or instruments in seeking and finding God, I don’t mean that the vows should be lived in a mechanical way. Literal or mechanical observance of a community’s legislation does not automatically bring a religious to the spirit of evangelical life. Paul’s words “For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6) have a particular relevance for religious. All of us know that good actions are easier than good thoughts, that outward behavior is not always a trustworthy indicator of how things truly stand between God and us. But we also know that faithfully living out our absolute dependence upon God (which poverty represents), having our affections totally centered on God and his people (which chastity represents), and becoming free of all the distracting desires of the false self (which obedience represents) assume a “three-in-one” character.

The vows stand together; one vow does not stand without the others. Together, they comprise an evangelical whole. For us, Jesus is the revelation of what God-centered living means. He is the one who, though rich, became poor for the sake of his people; the one who emptied himself so totally that there was never any trace of the false self in him. And Jesus prayed in keeping with the way he lived. When faced by incomprehensible evil he would say to the Father, “Not what I want but what you want” (Mark 14:36). Poverty, chastity, and obedience become our way of naming and embodying the essential features of Jesus and his mission.
Society can only judge us on the basis of our actions; after all, what else is there for it see? But for those who are striving to be totally God-centered, actions do not guarantee much. True, Jesus says, “Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matt 7:20). But perhaps more important to religious are his words: “If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matt 6:23) If the light of divine innocence were to render the secret thoughts and desires of our hearts transparent, would we be able to stand such exposure? And yet, such transparency of spirit is exactly what religious life aspires to. Celibacy becomes an ambiguous sign only when celibate living is not fully transparent. The people of God have to be able to perceive in us, clearly and distinctly, the whole package of a life centered fully on God.

Why commend celibacy?

Each religious probably has her or his own reasons for embracing celibacy, but I think all of us would agree that any talk about one vow takes places in the shadow of the others. We did not choose celibacy by itself; we elected a way of being human. In the same way, clergy would want to frame their reflections on celibacy in terms of their call to ministry, their experience of belonging to a believing, worshiping community, and their prayerful efforts to appropriate the mind and heart of the one who lays down his life for his sheep.

Many thoughtful Christians simply do not believe that being married would compromise the dedication and effectiveness of their clergy. The perfect following of Jesus hardly precludes disciples being married, as we realize very well. What makes celibacy attractive, therefore, is not that it is evangelically superior to marriage but that, like Christian marriage, celibacy creates a distinctive set of relationships
between the person who is called to it and the rest of the world. It is not that we are single that makes our living distinctive, but that our being single is measured by the mission of Jesus. We do not embrace celibacy as an ascetical practice, the way someone might take up lifelong fasting or abstinence from meat. It is not a self-imposed penance. And we do not embrace it because being single allows us more time for spiritual pursuits. In the end, I think, we choose celibacy as one part of a total response to Jesus’ words to come and follow him; we want to be as open and available to other human beings as Jesus was. Celibacy represents an intensification of the human thirst for God—“the Lord alone”—a thirst that cannot separate itself from the heart’s need to find room within it for every member of the human race. Precisely why this intensified desire occurs in some lives but not in others is perhaps best accounted for by appealing to the Spirit. The Spirit calls some to be prophets, others to be teachers and missioners; some to be married and others to be celibate. And so on. For Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, the point was elementary.

Obviously, no one should choose celibacy out of a fear of intimacy, or to escape the responsibilities of family life, or to avoid dealing honestly with issues of sexual identity. A healthy celibate is someone who has “married” God’s people, just like Jesus did. Celibacy creates the possibility of a lifelong availability towards other men and women. Perhaps this is what accounts for its mysterious attractiveness and is the reason why the Church esteem it so highly. Celibacy is the virtue of those who walk through life with the single-heartedness we associate with Jesus as he proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of God. Celibacy appeals to those women and men who feel themselves drawn to a solidarity with others that both nourishes their prayer and makes their desire for God concrete. Whether
they realize it early in life or later, whether because of native disposition or graced inspiration, some Christians just know deep inside that they belong to the entire human family, and they feel called to live out that belonging. They declare who and what they are before the people of God. “I am, I exist,” they are saying, “for you.” For its part, the Church intuits in this openness and belonging to others the profile of the Good Shepherd.

Not a matter of law, but of Spirit

Celibacy, of course, is a charism, a particular manifestation of the Spirit within the life of the Christian community. The sad experience of the Church today confirms what religious life has known for a long time. The Church runs a grave risk in requiring celibacy as a precondition for ordained ministry if at the same time it does not insist that the one being ordained embrace poverty or make an option for the poor.

Sometimes a person does not discover until after ordination that he does not possess the charism to lead a celibate life. Maybe the individual was responding, not to the Spirit’s prompting to lead a celibate life, but to a holy desire to serve the people of God and accompany them on their journey of faith. The strong desire to assist people in sacramental and pastoral ways (which we have no reason to doubt comes from God) was resting unsteadily on the requirement to be celibate.

It can happen, of course, that a charism can be lost because one has not taken steps to safeguard and nurture what is essentially a gift of the Spirit. Visions, for example, are important inner events. One “sees” or “beholds” some aspect of the mystery of God and its connection with daily life or with human history. Visions structure and guide our imagination, our decisions, and our actions. But without prayer visions fade; if
they do not permeate our practice, they lose their energy and their capacity to animate and excite us.

In the same way, individuals can lose the charism of celibacy by growing out of touch with the gospel story, or by ignoring the connection between celibacy and poverty, its evangelical twin. Celibacy can also be lost because a person’s commitment to mission is not exercised and stretched, or because one has stopped facing the challenge of becoming a spiritually and emotionally integrated adult. A person can continue to choose celibacy only if he or she has a life-sustaining vision. A celibate is someone irresistibly drawn by Jesus’ words, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt 8:20). This particular calling is not for all, which may be why Jesus had to say, “Let anyone accept this who can” (Matt 19:12). The harsh phrase “eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” calls attention, not to the freely chosen deprivation of sexual relationship, but to the supreme beauty and importance of the kingdom of God, the pearl for which one is prepared to pay any price. The question that we need constantly to keep before us is, “To whom do I belong?” We cannot answer simply “I belong to God” because that is the answer every Christian should give. But so long as we can truthfully reply “I belong to God’s people,” then we are sharing in the charism of celibacy.

“Lord, it is good for us to be here”

Do the people of God need the witness of celibate living? I sincerely believe so. For me, the very fact that in the Church there were women and men who chose not to marry led me to ask myself, “What is it about our faith that brings some believers to choose such an untypical, even puzzling way of life?” And then I intuited an answer, although several years
passed before I was able to put that answer into words: we—the people of God—are worthy of such focused dedication! What had impressed me was not just that the religious women and the priests I had come to know were single; it was also that they lived simply and their affection was blind to social class and all the other things that separate the poor from the privileged.

I grew up in a large, loving, deeply Catholic family; family has always been the dominant category from within which I approach the world. In meeting people for the first time, my initial impulse is to wonder about their families; within minutes family life is what we are talking about seriously. Later, when we meet again, I listen to them against the invisible background of my mental reconstruction of their family experience.

My early contact with religious women and clergy had stirred my imagination to contemplate a way of access into more homes, more lives than I could ever count. The world family to which all of us belong because we are human was far larger than the household into which I had been born, and my love for that wider family became stronger and clearer as the years went by. Eventually a gospel passage would capture my experience and elevate it to the level of Jesus’ own experience of the world: ‘‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’’ (Mark 3:33-35). This may not be the text to which most people would turn for a reflecting on celibacy, but it has greatly helped me to understand who I am and what I am looking for.

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