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Dimensions of Priestly Celibacy

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Priestly celibacy has become the topic of numerous debates in the Church today and is often looked at with suspicion and pity outside the Church. In this kind of atmosphere the very word “celibacy” evokes the idea of an unresolved problem, of a “burning” issue, rather than evoking the idea of a freely accepted commitment and a gift of grace. Today, celibacy is not lived out tranquilly, and all its spiritual fruitfulness fails to be realized because of all the fuss around it or perhaps because it is thought that one day—who knows?—Church law about it might change.

What is needed, therefore, is a complete reversal of our mind-set, and this can happen only through renewed contact with the biblical and theological roots of this state of life. We are now living in a social environment in which one can no longer rely on external kinds of protections and the detailed precautions with which traditional asceticism and canon law used to

surround the observance of celibacy. The facility of communication and of travel has created a new situation: television, the Internet, advertisements, and newspapers flood our homes with the world and force us to look at it. Maintaining chastity is now entrusted to the individual for the most part and cannot rely on anything except firm personal convictions drawn from the Word of God.

I would like the reflections I was asked to prepare to further this end. The topic assigned to me allows me to speak about ecclesiastical celibacy in completely positive terms, because perfect chastity for the sake of the kingdom was, is, and always will be part of Christ's intentions. I leave to other writers the problematic aspects of historical, canonical, and pastoral issues that are also being addressed.

Mandatory celibacy for priests is one of the many forms that the evangelical proposal of perfect chastity for the kingdom of heaven has taken in the history of the Church. Consequently, we need to begin again from the original text to understand the meaning and value of chastity. That is the reason I will often speak simultaneously of priestly celibacy and consecrated virginity, or the vow of chastity. One text from the Second Vatican Council, *Prefectae caritatis*, summarizes this evangelical value:

Chastity "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12), which religious profess, must be esteemed as an exceptional gift of grace. It uniquely frees the hearts of men and women (see 1 Cor 7:32–35), so that they become more fervent in love for God and for all humanity. For this reason it is a special symbol of heavenly benefits, and for religious it is a most effective way of dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to the divine service and the works of the apostolate. Thus, for all Christ's faithful, religious recall that wonderful marriage made by God which will be fully manifested in the age to come, and in which the church has Christ alone for her spouse.¹

This text highlights the various dimensions of celibacy and consecrated virginity explored in this chapter: the prophetic dimension, the apostolic or missionary dimension, and the

spousal dimension. To these three dimensions, I will add a fourth one, the charismatic dimension.

PROPHETIC DIMENSION OF PRIESTLY CELIBACY

The prophetic or missionary dimension of celibacy is the one that emerges the most clearly from Christ's saying about those who are eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven:

The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife [that he cannot divorce her], it is not expedient to marry." But he said to them, "not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. (Mt 19:10–12)

The word "eunuch" was harsh and offensive at that time, as it is for us today. If Jesus uses it in this context, it is probably because his adversaries were accusing him of being a eunuch because he was not married, the same way they accused him of being a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of publicans. In taking up what his adversaries were saying, however, he conferred a wholly new meaning to that word, a spiritual meaning instead of the physical one. Christian tradition has always understood the word "eunuch" in this text that way, except for the famous case of Origen who, contrary to his habit of explaining everything spiritually, interpreted this passage literally and mutilated himself, paying a high price later for his error.

Jesus established a second state of life in the world, and this text is its "Magna Carta." In fact, before Jesus no state of life comparable to this existed, at least in terms of motivation if not in practice, even among the Essenes. This new state of life does not nullify the alternative state of marriage, but it makes marriage relative. It is analogous to what happens to the idea of a state in the world of politics. Marriage is not abolished, but it becomes relativized by the presence in history of the kingdom

of God; it is no longer the absolute and supreme norm for living. Perfect chastity does not require the disavowal of marriage in order for its validity to be recognized. On the contrary, it has no meaning apart from a simultaneous affirmation of marriage. If marriage were something negative, renouncing it would be not a free choice but a duty. It is precisely the institution of this second state of life that now makes marriage itself a "vocation" and not simply a natural obligation.

To understand the inner logic for this new state of life, we need to start with the motive presented by Jesus: "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of God (which Matthew calls the kingdom "of heaven" according to Jewish custom) has a dual characteristic that theologians today generally express by using two adverbs for time: "already" and "not yet." It is "already" here; it has come and is now present. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus proclaims, is at hand; it is in your midst. But in another sense, the kingdom of heaven has not yet come; it is still on its way, and it is for this reason that Jesus invites us in the "Our Father" to pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Mt 6:10).

Since the kingdom of heaven has already come and in Christ ultimate salvation is already at work in the world, it is possible that some people, called by God, may choose to live, here and now, as people will live in their ultimate state in the kingdom. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus describes that ultimate state:

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. (Lk 20:34–36; see also Mt 22:30)

The *prophetic dimension* of virginity and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom lies precisely in this. This state of life, through its very existence, shows what the ultimate state of human beings will be, and it is destined to last forever. This prophetic state of life, far from being opposed to married people, is instead to their advantage. It reminds them that marriage is holy, beautiful,

created by God, and redeemed by Christ. It is an image of the marriage between Christ and the Church, but that is not the whole story. Marriage is a structure tied to this world and is therefore transitory. When people can no longer die, they will no longer need to marry. There will be no need to “complete oneself” with another human being at the time when “God [will] be everything to every one” (1 Cor 15:28).

We know how easy it is to make a good marriage an ideal and the ultimate goal in life, considering its success to be success in life itself. The first thing that suffers from making marriage unduly absolute is marriage itself, which becomes nearly crushed by these disproportionate expectations that can never be fulfilled, and thus it can enter into crisis at the first sign of difficulty. That is why I say that the alternative state of life created by Christ is a help to married people themselves. It frees up marriage and each of the two spouses from the unbearable burden of having to be everything to each other and to take God’s place.

In light of this prophetic character of virginity and celibacy, we can understand how misleading and false is the thesis that this state of life is contrary to nature and hinders men and women from being fully themselves, that is, from being a real man or woman. This concern weighs terribly on the minds of young people and is one of the reasons that holds them back the most from responding to a religious or priestly vocation. People do not always take into account that this thesis was established by the founders of modern psychology on the basis of a materialistic and atheistic view of the human being. What psychology has to say on this issue may carry a certain weight for someone who does not believe in the existence of God or in the immortality of the soul, but it has no weight at all for the person who sees human beings from the perspective of faith or at least from something other than a completely materialistic point of view.

Virginity and celibacy do not deny nature but rather fulfill it at a more profound level. To know what a human being is and what is “natural” for a person, human reasoning (especially when influenced by Greek philosophy) has always based itself

on its analysis of human *nature (physis)*, meaning, according to the etymology of “nature,” what a person is by *birth*: a *rational animal*.

The Bible does not recognize the concept of nature in this way. According to the Bible, an individual is not only what he or she is determined to be through birth but also what he or she is called to become through the exercise of freedom in obedience to God. To be a human being is a “vocation”! Existential thinking came close to this vision, making freedom and self-determination the meaning of human existence. Unfortunately, many of its representatives (except Søren Kierkegaard who was its founder) eliminated an essential element found in the biblical definition: “in obedience to God.” For example, a character in one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s plays says the following: “There was nothing left in heaven, no right or wrong, nor anyone to give me orders. . . . I . . . am a man, and every man must find out his own way.”²

If nature were all there were to deal with, there would be no valid reason to resist natural tendencies and impulses; however, there is also vocation. In a certain sense, we could say the most “fulfilled” state of a human being is precisely to be “single for the sake of the kingdom,” because people are “called” not to live in an eternal relationship as a couple but to live in eternal relationship with God.

There has been much discussion in the past about whether or not virginity and celibacy are a more perfect state than marriage and, if so, in what sense. I believe that celibacy is not *ontologically more perfect*: each of the two states of life is perfect for the person who is called to it. It is, however, a state in life that is *eschatologically more advanced*, in the sense that it more clearly approximates the definitive state toward which we are all journeying. St. Cyprian, a married man, wrote to the first Christian virgins, “What we shall be, already you have begun to be.”³