

Celibacy ... To Love as Christ Loves

by Father John Regan



In an informal survey of high school seniors and college students I conducted, I asked what they felt were the two greatest fears a young man must overcome if he is to consider priesthood today. Two-thirds of the students identified celibacy as one of the fears. The other fears, including fear of being unworthy, fear of unhappiness, fear of parents' responses, and fear of friends' responses were all far behind.

Using this information we can develop responses that might help young people understand the nature of celibacy. I realize we cannot immediately change the whole culture towards a positive appreciation of priestly celibacy, but I think we can change some hearts of young men who feel the call to consider a life of priestly service. The following thoughts are offered to give a renewed understanding of celibacy from understanding priesthood as sacrament.

Think for a moment about your first reaction to the word "celibacy". For many people celibacy simply means not being married, not having sex, and not having children. When viewed in this way, a logical question is, "Why would anyone in their right mind choose that for themselves?" Good question. But celibacy cannot be defined merely by a series of negations (no spouse, no children, no sex) anymore than love can be defined only by negation (not hating, not stealing, not abusive). Love is much, much richer than that, and so is celibacy!

Celibacy, like marriage, is intended to be a way of love. In some ways it is a more demanding way of love than marriage. The person who truly embraces celibacy recognizes a call to love that goes beyond the unique and faithful love of husband and wife. For celibacy is a choice to love all people without exclusion. This love is not easy, but when lived well it is very rewarding.

Why is celibacy important within the context of priesthood? In our Catholic faith priesthood is a sacrament, a grace-filled sign of God's love instituted by Christ. So is marriage. This means that we believe that there is something integral to the experience of priesthood and marriage that helps us encounter God. For example, in marriage a couple agrees to share life with each other in a permanent, freely-given, faithful, and life-giving love. When a couple truly shares that kind of love, we know that they experience God, whose love for us is permanent, freely-given, faithful, and life-giving. When we look upon a married couple, we can offer a prayer of thanks because in marriage we are given a grace-filled sign that shines forth God's love.

Well, what about priesthood? In priesthood, a man accepts a call to be a sacrament of Christ in a profound way. When we look upon the priest, we ought to see the love of Christ reaching out to everyone. We ought to see a forgiving and healing presence of Christ. We ought to see a presence of Christ who is not afraid to speak the truth in the midst of a disbelieving world. We ought to see the Christ who single heartedly works for the Kingdom of God. We ought to see the sacrificing presence of Christ who gives his life for the sake of the many. To be the profound sacrament of Christ that is intended in priesthood, the Church believes a man should also love in the state of life Christ loved, as a celibate.

Because of the various attitudes about sexuality in our contemporary society and the many misconceptions about celibacy that people have, it is common for people who consider priesthood to have fears regarding celibacy. They have met grumpy pastors and seen materialistic priests, and they wonder if celibacy did this to them. They look at their own families, and they wonder if they could ever be happy without a wife and children of their own to love. They have read about priests who have committed serious sexual misconduct, and they hear people claim "celibacy was the reason."

A man who wishes to embrace celibacy must face not only any inner voices of fear but also the chorus of voices from outside telling him that celibacy has lost its meaning. Some people claim celibacy is not normal. It is not normal in the sense that it is not the choice of the majority of people. The vast majority of people choose a path of love within marriage. But this does not mean that Christ's way of celibate love should not likewise be revered and upheld as important. Just as marriage witnesses important aspects of God's love for us and the love we must have for each other, so celibacy witnesses important aspects of Christ's presence among us and the commitment we must have for the Kingdom.

What about the issues of spouse and family? This is a great struggle for many of us who strive to follow the less trodden path. We have seen the great value of marriage, especially lived in our own families. We speak of the beauty of conjugal love at weddings. We look into a neighbor's yard filled with children and see the greener grass on the other side. Wanting to share life with another person is natural; it comes with being human. Wanting to pass on life to future generations is equally natural. The grace and challenge for priests are to share life with others and to pass on life to future generations in spiritual, non-physical ways. We are privileged to touch people at the depths of their being. Because we are human beings, we have needs for emotional support and to know that we are cared for and loved. Each priest needs to build his own network for emotional support which includes his family, friends (both priests and lay people), coworkers, and parishioners. Because we are celibate there is a certain amount of sacrifice and emptying out that takes place. But these remind the priest that *we are always empty until we are filled with God*. For ultimately celibacy helps a priest empty himself not so that he can be more available to people, but so that he might be more available to God. Then in God's grace he might be of loving service to God's people.

Some Questions and Answers about Celibacy

Is celibacy better than marriage?

Celibacy does not make anyone "better" than any one else. Neither does marriage make a person better than a single person. Every person is called to share himself or herself in a commitment to love, whether that is through the vows of marriage or celibacy or as a single person.

Does living as a celibate mean you don't love anyone?

Absolutely not! We would be terrible celibates and priests if the reason we were priests was because we decided we didn't love anyone, and we were celibate because we couldn't find anyone to marry. True celibacy as Jesus lived it requires a great capacity and desire to love.

I think I'm falling in love. Does that mean I shouldn't be a priest?

Falling in love is natural and human. We wouldn't have very many priests if we only ordained people who have never fallen in love. If a man feels called to priesthood and finds himself falling in love, this does not necessarily mean he is no longer called to priesthood. It could very well be an opportunity to look at the deeper aspects of love and commitment and ask the question, "In what way is God asking me to love others."

Since many clergy in Protestant churches are married, why can't priests be married?

There are many different Protestant denominations, many of which allow married men (and women) to be clergy. A complete answer embracing all forms of Protestant belief is not possible here. The Catholic Church, with its unique emphasis on the sacramental nature of priesthood, upholds a priestly life modeled after Christ himself. For Catholics the priest must be "another Christ." Most Protestants would not view their clergy in the same way. Since they don't see their clergy as sacramentally "another Christ," celibacy is not seen as an important value in their ministers.

What happens if a priest discovers that he cannot remain celibate?

There is a fairly long process of formation for a man preparing for priesthood, and there is plenty of opportunity to discover whether one can live as a celibate or not. Most men who discover that they cannot live a celibate life discover this before ordination. Occasionally a man who is already a priest will discover that the celibate life is not possible for him to maintain. There is a process by which he can withdraw from priestly ministry and petition to be dispensed from his commitment to celibacy and be married in the Catholic Church. Leaving active priesthood is obviously a very serious decision and is done in consultation with the bishop.

If I have been sexually active in the past, can I still make a commitment to celibacy?

A person who has been sexually active in the past can make a commitment to live as a celibate. Whether he could be admitted into a priesthood formation program would depend upon the nature of the sexual activity. Generally a person needs to live at least two years of sexual abstinence and a celibate life before he can be accepted as a seminarian.