



« FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD ! »



Bishop François Thibodeau, C.J.M.

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- I – Respecting the secret of single people
- II – Recognizing continent celibacy
- III – Discerning and supporting the single person's mission

Pastoral Letter of Bishop François Thibodeau, C.J.M.  
Bishop of Edmundston  
on the vocation to celibacy  
for Pentecost Sunday  
May 15, 2005

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### Witnesses of God's Love

My Dear Friends,

#### 1. Introduction

For the twelfth consecutive year on the occasion of Pentecost Sunday I am sending you a pastoral letter on one of the major themes of the Christian life. Recalling the commitment I made in the year 2002 to reflect on the Christian vocation with you, this year I want to write on the call to celibacy. This follows on what I developed in 2002 - the priestly vocation; 2003 - the vocation to consecrated life; and 2004 - Christian marriage.

#### 2. Total Commitments

Saint Peter writes: "As generous distributors of God's manifold grace, put your gifts at the service of one another, each in the measure he has received. The one who speaks is to deliver God's message. The one who serves is to do it with the strength provided by God. Thus, in all of you God is to be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1P. 4:10). As we consider the calls we have received, may we live them gratefully, fully committed to the glory of our God!

#### 3. The Perfect Fruit

On this Day of the Spirit, I join you in lifting our hearts in song, that in our lives we may lovingly live these calls.

Holy Spirit, God of light,  
Fill us with your radiance bright;  
Gentle Father of the poor,  
Make us, by your help, secure;  
Come, your boundless grace impart,  
Bring your love to ev'ry heart.

Lord of consolation, come,  
Warm us when our hearts are numb;  
Great consoler. Come and heal,  
To our souls your strength reveal;

Cool, refreshing comfort pour,  
And our peace of mind restore.

Light immortal, fire divine,  
With your love our hearts refine;  
Come, our inmost being fill,  
Make us all to do your will;  
Goodness you alone can give,  
Grant that in your grace we live.

Come, our lukewarm hearts inspire,  
Mold our wills to your desire;  
In our weakness make us strong,  
And amend our every wrong;  
Guide us when we go astray,  
Wash our stain of guilt away.

Give to ev'ry faithful soul  
Gifts of grace to make us whole;  
Help us when we come to die,  
So that we may live on high;  
Ever let your love descend,  
Give us joys that never end.  
(The Liturgy of the Hours)

#### **4. Millions of Single People**

4. Millions of Single People I make this prayer as I think of the millions and millions of single people, but most especially of those in our diocesan Church. On this Pentecost Sunday, may they be renewed by the Spirit of the Sevenfold Gifts! May the Spirit of Wisdom and Knowledge, the Spirit of Counsel and Intelligence, the Spirit of Filial Affection, the Spirit of Strength, Adoration, and Praise touch the deepest corners of our hearts and revive the gift he gave us at baptism and confirmation.

#### **5. Zealous Concern**

After having noted that believing families hold first rank as households of living and radiant faith, the Catechism of the Catholic Church has this to say about single persons: "We must also remember the great number of single persons who, because of the particular circumstances in which they have to live - often not of their choosing - are especially close to Jesus' heart and therefore deserve the special affection and active solicitude of the Church, especially of pastors. Many remain without a human family, often due to conditions of poverty. Some live their situation in the spirit of the Beatitudes, serving God and neighbour in exemplary fashion. The doors of homes, the 'domestic churches,' and of the great family which is the Church must be open to all of them. No one is without a family in this world: the Church is a home and family for everyone, especially those who labour and are heavy laden" (No. 1658).

#### **6. Domestic Church**

The household is rightfully called the 'domestic church,' the community of grace and prayer, a school of human virtues and of Christian charity (No 1666). My letter will therefore have three points:

- I - Respecting the secret of single people**
- II - Recognizing continent celibacy**
- III - Discerning and supporting the single person's mission**

#### **Part One: Respecting the Secret of Single People**

Without dwelling too much on the expression used in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (No. 1658), we must admit that, because of particular circumstances, a number of single people must live a celibate life which is not of their choosing... They can view these 'particular circumstances' as signs of God's call to them.

#### **7. A Unique Calling**

Not everyone is called to the priesthood, consecrated life, or Christian marriage. Each one is invited to serve the Lord according to a personal, individualized, unique calling, sometimes discovered and even often borne

amidst much suffering and questioning. Every person is priceless in the eyes of the Lord. It is not ours to judge which is the path the most indicated for such and such a person to live God's calling in a holy way. My parents living their marriage and family life in a holy way, my Aunt Valéda living her life in a holy way as a Sister of Saint-Paul-de-Chartres, and my Uncle Arthur living out his life as a single person, were all agreeable to the Lord, of this I am certain. Each in his or her own way revealed to us the kindness of God; each one gave of him- or herself without cost to God and neighbour. May they all be glorified forever!

## **8. Call to Happiness**

The call to such and such a vocation is first of all a call to happiness and holiness; it can later become a call to some specific service. Just as couples can tell why they chose to marry, singles, too, can question themselves on the reason of their particular state of life. However, it seems to me that for this, the greatest tact and discretion would be called for. No one has to expose the circumstances of one's personal choices. Health concerns, traumatic childhood experiences, love betrayed, secret suffering, hidden motives, or particular paths may have led one to choose the single state. But it can also be that, in more and more cases, the single life is more closely tied to a career choice or special commitment. I believe that it is most important for us to be supportive of our single brothers and sisters.

## **9. The Joy of Vocation**

It is untrue that the lot of single people is frustration. Such can easily be the case of those who have not made a good life choice or those who have been sorely tried by life itself. People who have a negative self-image or who have been disappointed by life can also be found in the priesthood, the religious life, and marriage. This is not easy for anyone! All the more reason for making enlightened choices so that the people around them exclaim: 'It is obvious that this person is in his/her vocation. He/She is happy, and it shows!' The best of all criteria is the joy which radiates from people who are happy in their vocation.

## **10. Impenetrable Heart**

Surveys and expressing one's opinion may be the vogue today, but the golden rule will always be to respect the inviolability of every individual. The Psalmist states that the human heart is impenetrable. This may be frustrating to the one who wants to know everything or who investigates everything. However, it is good that the heart remain hidden. No one is obliged to reveal all aspects of his or her experience, and no one can force another to reveal it. It is often a well-guarded secret. The holder of such a secret is free to reveal it to whomever he or she pleases. I must also add that everyone has the right to explain the reasons for one's life choices, out of a concern for being transparent or for demystifying. In his first letter Saint Peter writes: "Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply" (1P. 3:15). In receiving the secrets and confidences of their brothers and sisters, the Christian community can then be in deep communion with their lived experience. Saint Paul's advice is always cogent: "Make my joy complete by your unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideals. Never act out of rivalry or conceit; rather, let all parties think of others as superior to themselves, each of you looking to others' interests rather than his own" (Phil. 2:2ff).

## **11. Serious Challenges**

If it is a normal and positive thing to do, to discreetly ask the reasons that have led certain people to remain single, it is even more important to let oneself be challenged by the choice these people have made. The promise of celibacy for the Kingdom of God which the candidate to the diaconate makes and which ordained ministers must live by, the vow of chastity which every religious pronounces and strives to live, can challenge us profoundly. What can motivate such and such young person to commit to life in this way, today? What is there in the divine call, that is so radical? How is it that Jesus and his message still resonate so strongly? Who is this Jesus Christ, who can call in this way? Who is this Jesus Christ who can make his call heard daily to bishops, priests, and religious brothers and sisters? What is this call for the sake of the Kingdom of God?

## **12. In the Midst of the World**

Such questions as these can come to mind when we meet brothers and sisters who have not become priests, brothers, or nuns but who have remained single. What is it that makes Jean Vanier dedicate his whole life to those with major intellectual handicaps? What is it that leads such and such a woman to spend her whole life in a rectory, a school, a hospital, or a nursing home? Or with youth, or the sick, the handicapped, and the elderly? What draws them, what noble message have they heard, what ideal are they pursuing, who is the cause of this single state, who has accompanied him/her all life through?

## **13. A Passion with a Name**

For some, the cause of the Church has been a true passion. For others, the passion felt was for the youth who appealed to them in difficult times and as they developed. For others still, the poverty of some was intolerable, and the misery of others was a constant challenge. Each single person who wishes can name this 'passion', whether a person, group, need, or ideal. For many of our believing brothers and sisters, this 'passion' has a name: Jesus, who is seen in the sick, the poor, the defenceless, the oppressed, and the victims of violence and war. "What you have done to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done to me" (Mt. 25:40).

## 14. Testimonies

### A Work of Charity

A Work of Charity The advice I received at home from my parents on the Catholic religion, as well as the love and respect of neighbour, have helped me build my life. I have spent my life serving the public, and this gave me the opportunity to do volunteer work in various fields. If I have remained single, it was because of life's events. At my retirement, a person who had a home for the elderly asked me to help, and I did. The situation obliged us to do much volunteer work because the home was a not-for-profit organisation. Besides, I believe that Divine Providence helps us in this charitable task. I am still involved at this residence.

Charles

### Happy with This Lifestyle

I believe that celibacy is a call of God, a service to society and to our Church. Just looking at all the celibate saints, these past two thousand years, it is certain that this vocation is not meant for everyone; each person is unique and therefore, each one lives it in his or her own way. Are there particular nationalities and temperaments who will have problems, here? Why do Orthodox priests marry? Why is there bigamy and polygamy, in some countries? Why am I celibate? Life's circumstances, my character and my family education have made it so. Out of nine girls in my family, three are single, but each one has a different reason for living this vocation - if we can call it a "vocation." Pondering the question and looking at married couples, I realise that they are as involved as I who am single, without children to care for, and with no husband. It seems to me that I would never have been able to look after my family and be involved in other things at the same time. It seems that celibacy is not a "normal" vocation. I am celibate, neither married nor a nun. I thank God that I am not because I would have divorced or defrocked. Is it better to be an "old maid?" I myself am happy in this lifestyle. I have different commitments. There are needs in the family, the Church, and my milieu. I have not chosen them, it just seems that they find me, and I accept them as they are. It is in this way that I try to live my life as a baptised Christian.

Lynda

### Have You Loved?

Celibacy: a word that meets with a lot of prejudice in our society where everything focuses on sexuality, in the printed and mass media, etc. "A lifestyle that runs counter to the decadence of our contemporary world." We have problems understanding why a person would choose this lifestyle. I am certain that I could have chosen another path in life, but I freely chose not to do so. I felt a call to give myself to others. As a young person I wanted to dedicate myself totally to education. I realised that this was the path which the Lord had chosen for me, because of my happiness and self-fulfilment. Happiness has nothing to do with social status. The person alone is responsible for her happiness or sadness, whether it be in matrimony, the religious life, or celibacy. Many people think that we accomplish nothing if we remain in the world without getting married. Through celibacy, one can generate life in another way, a spiritual way. My celibate lifestyle has never seemed meaningless or lonely. The gift of self is an effective medicine to life. I have considered celibacy as a normal lifestyle. I had the chance to live in a family where I was considered equal to the others, and never was I negatively stereotyped. I have also felt myself a complete person in the eyes of God. He gave me talents which I think I have been able to use throughout my life. In my profession, with the children, I have always tried to give the best of myself. These children were "my children", and I loved them as my own. They were my reason for living, and all my energy was directed to them. In return, they gave me much. Their loving hearts, their lack of prejudice, their capacity for forgiveness, these qualities have helped me be a better human and grow spiritually. Being more free, I was able to give more time to acquiring religious knowledge and working at my personal growth. These periods of reflection made me realise once again that time given to others is a guarantee of great consolations. The hours dedicated to my parents and my brothers and sisters, in times of illness of old age have also given meaning to my life. Also, I have not counted the time given to my parish community. I believe that there will always be people who will choose celibacy and who will discover, there, a call to dedicate themselves fully to others. I can state quite firmly that in my profession I have met several unmarried teachers who never spared any effort and who enriched our society, by their quality work. Several of them have also offered their talents to the Church, as catechists or as participants in other parish projects. I am confident that when I am taken into the arms of Him whom I have loved and tried to serve as

best I could, He will not ask me, "What was your social status?" but rather, "Have you loved?"

Hélène

### **A Mastered and Fulfilling Lifestyle**

Would celibacy be a rather special vocation? We say that responding to a vocation is answering a call. One can ask whether celibacy is a vocation even if the majority of singles have never actually said: "I am choosing celibacy for life." Why is it that we find ourselves single, at 40, 50, 60... years of age? I personally think that it is because of life, and life's conditions. What is important for me is to be happy and to make others happy. When this happens, I believe that it is a sign that one is well in the lifestyle to which God has called one. Since I believe that I am a happy person, I believe that today I am accomplishing what God expects of me. Jean Vanier said that singles look at married couples and say: "How lucky they are, these married couples!" And married couples look at singles and say: "How lucky they are, to be single!" Every vocation has its own strengths and beauty, but also its difficulties and challenges. I myself believe that the most difficult part of a single person's life is most certainly the absence of a spouse and children, and solitude. To fill these important lacks, your love and affection must be directed to others, otherwise yours would be a sad life. On the other hand, the single lifestyle brings with it the freedom and availability that have allowed me to dedicate more time to my family, my profession, the Church, my community, and to become involved in a number of organisations and causes, using my talents for service to God and neighbour. I realise today that many of my professional achievements, especially in volunteer work, would have been impossible to achieve if I had had a family. I have given much love and time to youth, and the education of children has always been dear to me, although I have also been involved with youth and Weekend Jeunesse. I always gave them my best, as if they were my own children. I have a question: As a baptised Christian, how do I live the single life? As far as I am concerned, a single lifestyle focussed on oneself is meaningless. Like all the baptised, I, too, must share in the mission of Christ which is to build up his Kingdom of peace, justice, and love. I must offer my talents, energy, and time to the Church, community, and society. The more I become involved, the more I help bring happiness to others in the world and the more I make this a better world, the more also does my life have meaning, and I myself find happiness. To be a witness in the world, one must radiate inner beauty and reflect the Source which quenches our thirst, by spreading around light, joy, love, kindness, and compassion. It is these signs of happiness that point out people who are happy in their vocation, for whom "celibacy can be a special mastered and fulfilling lifestyle." In closing, I believe that celibacy is a vocation, a state of life you accept and live out on a daily basis. I also believe that "celibacy acquires its fullest human and spiritual meaning in the imitation and following of Christ."

Ghislaine

### **Availability at all Times**

I consider celibates very important and necessary in the world. By their actions, many more people are called to help our brothers and sisters in need. As Mother Teresa would say, « See the face of Jesus in everyone ». I am very blessed to be an instrument for Jesus in helping others. My mother was very generous of heart and taught me at a very young age to help others. Society will know us by our works. Many good works are only known by God, the giver and the receiver. As you prepare for eternity in heaven, you can only take with you what you have done, not what you own. Without a husband, wife and/or children, celibates have more hours to devote to helping others. As a retired person, my hours are free to be anywhere, anytime. I know many celibates who have done great work. Every Sunday, in a parish in the United States, we served meals to the homeless and I was happy to help out. Since this time, many years ago, I no longer give Christmas presents. It is Jesus's birthday, so for a present to Him, I give to charities and help out where I can.

### **Illogical Celibacy?**

I have grown up in a milieu where there were many different religions... and Catholicism was only one of them. I do remember very clearly the 'Protestant' attitude toward the ideal of 'celibacy' and one's relationship with God. To them... (and to my own way of thinking) this was an erroneous way of thinking. The two do not necessarily go together. I do not find a call of God within celibacy any more than I find a call of God outside of celibacy. Why put the two together... it makes absolutely no sense to me. It's not logical. Of course it's a choice one can make if they feel called to live that type of life. But there are those who are celibate who have no belief whatsoever in God... it's just a choice... not a call to serve God. Many of those who claim to be celibate live a secret life within the Church... and it's usually well known by the Christian community that they are not celibate... yet little or nothing is said about it. This destroys the image and the truth that is proclaimed by the Church... especially by our Protestant brothers and sisters. Does celibacy have a future? For some people 'yes'... for most... 'no'. As long as the Church continues to hold its present attitude towards celibacy and one's call to serve God it will progress very little in this informed, modern world. I don't know of any individual who has freely chosen celibacy that has left his/her mark on the church in my community. Many have left a mark... very positive marks... but they weren't celibate.

John

## Celibacy Disputed

Sadly the Church has equated the call to serve God in a 'special' way with Celibacy. In my humble opinion this is really a disservice to God. God has created us as sexual beings and very few among us are truly called to live in a celibate life. I also believe that the Church has lost out on having many talented and sincere Christians in positions of authority and leadership within the church hierarchy because of this attitude. Believing that the call to priesthood is also a call to celibacy has caused the Church many scandalous situations. This has also caused the loss of many talented men who would have become priests had it not been for the rule of celibacy. Within my own community and also drawing on my own experience in life, I can mention very very few individuals who have left their mark on the Church because of living a celibate life. This is within my definition of celibacy which means a free-will choice to live a single life for the sake of the Kingdom. If one chooses to live a celibate life... or not... has, in my opinion, no bearing whatsoever on church life. It is the individual and his/her call by the Holy Spirit that brings growth and positive outcomes to the work of the Church. As for myself, I did not chose to be celibate... it was just the way things happened in my life. I believe God had a hand in this and I firmly believe that had I been married I would have worked the same as I do now within the church. My being celibate or my being married would not have affected my relationship with God, nor my love of the Church. I do not really believe that celibacy and service to God go hand in hand, and therefore I don't see it having a future in the Church..

Peter

## Part Two: Recognizing Continent Celibacy, or Abstinence

In this section of my pastoral letter I want to study with you the question of continent celibacy or abstinence for the Kingdom of heaven, that is, celibacy as total self-giving to God to the exclusion of all sexual relations with another.

### 15. Choice and Law

Théo, a French Catholic encyclopaedia, has the following concerning celibacy: "While in the modern world the number of single persons is on the rise, society as a whole, and especially the Catholic Church, have difficulty considering celibacy on its own merits (for itself). However, men and women are born celibates! And some of them remain so. Some choose to remain celibate throughout their lives. This can have religious significance: we then talk of celibacy "for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:21). The Church calls to this form of celibacy especially all the bishops and priests of the Latin rite, and consecrates deacons in this celibacy."

### 16. Various Tendencies

Théo continues: "However, one can decide to remain single for other than religious reasons. What does Christian tradition think of this wanted and accepted celibacy? There has been little study on this subject and the question of celibacy has often been broached only as it relates to religious and priestly celibacy. This debate nevertheless shows tendencies. One such tendency does not understand celibacy or considers it evil, or at least as a lesser evil. It is true that Saint Augustine, in writing against the Manichaeans who considered sexuality evil, clearly states that marriage is superior than celibacy (although elsewhere in his writings he holds contradictory positions). In his wake, the Lutherans have often argued against clerical celibacy which pretended, among other things, that the fact of living alone promoted idleness and sexual immorality. However, an altogether different current in the Church defended celibacy. At the beginning of the Church, in the primitive community, Saint Paul asked the Christians to remain in the state they were in before their conversion. He therefore would like them to remain single. If we study closely his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7) it seems that in the community there were Christians who had contracted what today would be called 'white marriages,' in order to remain celibate at a time when there was no legal status for the single adult woman. Even if Saint Paul finds the framework of marriage inappropriate for living a celibate lifestyle, he does not reject celibacy: far from it. Altogether, his advice has prevailed through the centuries."

### 17. Three Propositions

"If we wish to summarise the thinking of this dominant current regarding celibacy, we can do so in three propositions: a) marriage is good and celibacy is not to be chosen through contempt of marriage or fear of sexuality. b) Freely chosen celibacy must also be received as a call from God. The logic of received celibacy and accepting not to have either spouse or children, demands a reason. Otherwise it is mutilation. In the school of Christ, this reason can be greater availability, the gift of self, a quest for spiritual fruitfulness, the creation of special bonds with those the Church has given me as brothers and sisters, etc. Even if it is not strictly speaking the fruit of religious commitment, celibacy finds its real human and spiritual meaning only in the imitation and following of Christ. c) The human sciences have clearly demonstrated that sexuality is a form of language. It may be very difficult for a single person to live his or her celibacy. The Church has never invited (nor condoned) the voluntary mutilation of anyone; it therefore urges single people not to repress but

to sublimate their sexual impulse. If the Church proposes sexual abstinence to single people, it is not to demean them. Rather, it is so that their whole lives be a sign of the gift of self. Sexuality must also become a form of language expressing love” (Théo, art. on celibacy, pp 822-823).

## 18. For Love of Him

In the nineteenth century Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890) wrote the following, about celibacy: “There is a form of celibacy advised by the philosophers, attested to by those in religious education, of a sad, haughty and repulsive nature, the kind represented and exalted in the pages of pagan authors or the teaching of false religions, and that only serves to harden the heart. Among the philosophers of Antiquity there were those who were led to praise a nearly Christian form of asceticism and renunciation. Among the false religions there were those which really observed celibacy under the pretext that it was higher than the common life of man. I do not know whether making celibacy its own end is more melancholy or more deadening, melancholy by its unshared desolation, or deadening by the pride and self-worth on which it is based. In the Gospels it is not marriage but virginity that has pride of place because of the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of heaven, and because its luminaries, as behoves such a kingdom, neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels. To have a virgin soul is to love nothing on earth more than loving God, or except for love of Him. The soul is virginal that always seeks its Beloved who is in heaven, and that sees Him in everything lovable on earth, and in return loving its friends most tenderly, but in their rightful place, as gifts from Him, loving Jesus alone, and willing to lose everything in order to keep him” (Histoire des saints et de la sainteté chrétienne “[History of the Saints and of Christian Holiness]”, Hachette X, p. 72. Trans. LG).

## 19. Balance and Freedom

According to Yann Fentener Van Vlissingen in his book *Approches psychologiques du célibat* [“Psychological Approaches of Celibacy”] (Les Presses de Taizé), “There is no need to consider some meritorious action or an iron discipline inflicted on oneself, to agree that the condition which celibacy implies the capacity to live without marrying. Celibacy must be a particular form of life mastered and fulfilling. This bodily and psychic balance must coincide with its social awareness, in order to be understood as a specific attitude of life. It is this balance and freedom of the celibate person that will lead others to recognise the spiritual quality of celibacy.”

## 20. Living in Chastity

“Everything leads marriage and celibacy to define themselves in opposition to each other,” Van Vlissingen continues, “because they must sooner or later come to terms with one another, otherwise they become unlivable. Then the time inevitably came when the Christian milieu declared itself either for or against. What was at first a purely personal alternative now imposed itself as a dilemma of principle: marriage or celibacy. Church history is replete with this antagonism, and not only in the last centuries.” He adds: “The finest description of celibacy is perhaps the one which Saint Ignatius of Antioch gave, in the Ancient Church : ‘Keeping chaste in honour of the Lord made flesh.’ The Greek text has the expression ‘the flesh of the Lord,’ which can be interpreted as the Body of Christ which is the Church. The expression can also refer to the extreme act of obedience of Christ taking on a body [flesh]. Celibacy would therefore glorify Christ. In both instances it is a matter of fidelity lived in our own body.”

## 21. Chosen Celibacy

In her book on the choice of celibacy entitled *Le corps bouleversé* [‘The Disordered Body’] (Desclée de Brouwer, 2002), journalist and doctor of theology Claude Plettner gives a summary account of the main stages of celibacy throughout the course of history. She debates the great authors who have tried to justify celibacy according to the categories of their times: the philosophers of Antiquity, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine, and the Fathers of the Church. Celibacy did not achieve its high status overnight! And when it did, the controversy did not immediately stop. The most contradictory theses were expounded down the centuries to justify the riches of celibacy, its ambiguities and difficulties regarding the nature of man and woman, the human body, sexuality, marriage, and virginity.

## 22. Extreme Discretion

As surprising as it is to note the number of theological works on celibacy in the course of the centuries, it is as amazing to realise the extreme discretion of the New Testament on the topic. The Gospels do not even mention the word! Only Saint Matthew has two verses on celibacy, verses 11 and 12 of chapter 19, and they can be understood as an invitation to either celibacy or marriage. Jesus has just told his disciples that “whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.” Astonished by this statement, the disciples respond: “If that is the case between man and wife, it is better not to marry.” Then Jesus says: “Not

everyone can accept this teaching, only those to whom it is given to do so. Some men are incapable of sexual activity from birth; some have been deliberately made so; and some there are who have freely renounced sex for the sake of God's reign." and he adds: "Let him accept this teaching who can!" Besides this particular teaching, there is also the life of Jesus himself: he never married.

### **23. An Epistle Revisited**

Claude Plettner invites us to re-read the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, to help us better understand his teaching which is entirely focussed on the resurrection of Jesus. The letter was written in the year 50, and is therefore older than the first Gospel which appeared around the year 70. Plettner writes: "For those interested in continent celibacy it is worth reading attentively and at one sitting the letter which Paul addressed to the Corinthian Christians, to deal with the difficulties that arose since his leaving that city. All of the conflicts boil down to one major affair: How to build the Body of Christ. The body - this key word appears forty-four times in the text - and Christ's resurrection. To read the letter today is to immerse oneself into a society whose spontaneous views of the body were strangely close to that of many of our contemporaries."

### **24. An Upsetting Call**

"In this city of Corinth where a minority of rich people and notables dominated the poor masses, the call of the crucified and risen Christ upsets all human relationships. Personhood is established by the freely accepted call and gift of God, which makes everyone equal in a society open to all. All states of life are relative. Henceforth it is the call of Christ which makes us someone and not a mere place or role in a given society. Paul is not content with this already rather considerable reversal: he even questions the cultural assumptions of the Greek and Jewish world of the Corinthians. He states loud and clear that the Christian is the one who is willing to experience folly and the indecisiveness of the language of reason, while at Corinth the Greek culture of the philosophers values the language of wisdom. He endlessly perturbs and upsets the existing codes and value systems in force in the first century. This he does by directing the Corinthians' gaze to the Crucified One: There lies the wisdom of God! This is a total cultural revolution."

### **25. Trigger Keys**

"The one who bears witness to the Risen One," writes Claude Plettner, 'and the one who speaks of his celibacy for the sake of Christ cannot argue or rely on the evidence mentioned. The resurrection and celibacy point to an absence of dazzling signs, a lack of proofs, certainties, and guarantees. The word which vouches for continent celibacy is stamped with the same folly and weakness as the word which tries to express the undemonstrable, unthinkable, and unimaginable event which is Christ's resurrection. The encounter with the Easter event and the call to celibacy - if they are experiences unique to each one - bring us both into fellowship. The bond of fellowship is henceforth as basic as the conjugal bond or the family tie. To live or to give life does not consist solely in becoming part of the biological cycle of life. In the life of the Kingdom we shall not wed and we shall not be wed. We shall be unique, individual, and fraternal. Celibacy is accompanied by the gift of fraternity and fellowship: this lifestyle has its meaning in the proximity and presence of others, in hospitality and the desire for an Other, an Other who upsets expectations and acknowledges the desire without quenching it."

### **26. A Fragile Mediation**

"For the apostle Paul, celibacy involves the entire person and compromises everything, even the body. If it is a matter of faith and spiritual experience, the relationship with Christ also involves the body. It is in Christ that God became close to humankind. Celibacy is a way of continuing to express that passion, that closeness in time; being 'one in spirit with him' is achieved through the body, the lips, face, hands, internal organs, and the weakness of our flesh, that is, through the fragile mediation of human realities."

### **27. Significant Fruitfulness**

"According to Paul, to renounce having children and surviving through them, not leaving behind offspring of one's own, to accept this loss and letting go calls for other forms of fruitfulness which are as important, and calls forth other ways of creating life now. If Christ is not resurrected in his body, if our bodies, the abode of our hearts, are not to return after death, if there is no future for us, one would be hard put to see how choosing celibacy could be a statement expressing the unity of body and spirit. For Paul, the resurrection is that from which life's centre of gravity flows. The event of Christ's resurrection is always as initial as the moment of creation, ever begun and never achieved. Resurrection - invention of bodies - and celibacy go together, according to Paul. Because it risks all of life on the sole trust in the Risen One, celibacy manifests clearly that faith consists in loving without ever seeing, and in hoping without ever possessing. One must believe that the Cross and Resurrection which Paul proclaimed to the Corinthians - with consequences



upsetting forever how we inhabit both our bodies and time itself - were truly folly and scandal.”

## **28. A Distinguished Mission**

“If we pursue Paul’s thinking, we can then say that celibacy is a special proclamation of the resurrection. What is important is to build the Body of Christ by means of all that we are, with all that we have, and everything that we accomplish. Through celibacy, a new world is proclaimed. Henceforth, all our human relationships can be signs of the future to which we are destined. New earths and new heavens open before us, through the resurrection of Christ.”

## **29. Theological Renewal**

Saint Paul’s considerations on celibacy were only seeds in the ground: it took a long time for them to be accepted and adopted in the Christian communities. We have only to recall the slow development of the different forms of religious life and of the priesthood, with their monks, hermits, virgins, widows, contemplatives, the apostolic religious life, secular institutes, etc. We even have to wait until Vatican Council II to better understand, thanks to the theological renewal, the import of celibacy in Church and society. Chapter five of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church stresses the universal call to holiness, a call which does not only concern priests and religious but also the entire laity. The 1987 world synod on the laity once again reiterated this call to holiness in the midst of daily commitments. Theologians like Jean-Marie Tillard and Leonardo Boff wrote on the main elements of celibacy. Men and women like Madeleine Delbrel, or the founders of new associations of lay faithful, draw out more and more the meaning of continent celibacy for the Kingdom of God, and point out its dignity and requirements. In the superabundant number of books and movies on sexuality, reflection on continent celibacy is gaining ground as well as credibility, if not popularity. Here are three examples of the high spirituality of single people: Dag Hammarskjöld, late United Nations Secretary General, Madeleine Delbrel, one of the contributors of the “Mission de France.” and Jean Vanier, who has dedicated his life to the handicapped. These examples indicate the reason for their choice, personal choices nonetheless inspired by a lofty vision of God and of His deep mystery.

## **30. The Union of God**

“In faith which is the union of God with the soul, you are in God and God is totally in you, as for you He is fully in what you encounter. In this faith you descend in of prayer into your innermost self in order to meet the Other. In obedience and in the light of union everything is there for you and, like you, alone before God. Every action is a continuous creative act, a conscious act because yours is a human’s responsibility; but you are also guided by this Power beyond awareness that has created man, you are free of things but you encounter them in a sensation of liberating purity and the penetrating acuity of revelation. In faith which is the union of God with the soul, everything has meaning, living like this and employing what has been put into your hands” (Diary of Dag Hammarskjöld, quoted by Yann Fentener Van Vlissingen).

## **31. The Total Christ**

“In baptism the Christian has exchanged his personal freedom for freedom in Christ. The Christian is free because Christ is supremely free. However, the Christian no longer has the right to choose a state of life other than that of Christ, to act and think differently from him. His is a state of living faith. Faith is a matter of fact to the Christian, and he has only to accept it. This state of life is to be a child of God in Christ with all his brothers who with him are Christ. To God and to the world, in God and in the world, it is with everyone else that the Christian is Christ. He is the total Christ, the Christ-Church, a matter of fact over which he has no control” (Madeleine Delbrel, *Nous autres, gens des rues* [“We the Street People”], éditions du Seuil).

## **32. A Relationship of Communion**

“Our flesh is made to dwell in God, to become God’s Temple. The flesh of Jesus is the Temple of God. We, too, are the Temple of God. Transfigured by the Word made flesh, our flesh becomes an instrument for spreading the love of God. Our flesh is no longer an obstacle to communion with the Word made flesh and with the Father. As with Mary, the flesh of Christ and his humanity are the means through which and in which we encounter God. We are not called to leave the humanity of Christ to encounter a God who transcends the flesh, but to discover and experience the flesh of Jesus as the flesh of God, his body as the sacrament which gives new meaning to our human flesh; the sacrament that reveals to us the eternal love of the Trinity where the Father and the Son, in unity with the Holy Spirit, love one another from all eternity. Our bodies are conceived in silence and love. Our first relationship - with our mother - is one of loving communion through the touch and fragility of the flesh. We are called to grow, to develop, to become productive, to fight for justice and peace, but finally everything is for the gift of oneself, for repose and the celebration of communion. Everything begins in communion, and everything ends in communion” (Jean Vanier, *Jésus, le don*

de l'amour ["Jesus the Gift of Love"], éditions Fleurus-Bellarmin).

### 33. Testimonies

#### A Useful and Agreeable Life

My life at the rectory with Mom and Dad, my brother and, very often, the assistant pastor, answering the phone and greeting people at the church office when the priest was absent, this helped me get to know many people, their problems, their weaknesses, and their illnesses. It was despite myself that I let myself become interested and love all these people, and I understood that my life, filled with all these small services, was useful and even agreeable. I regret nothing, and I know many people, men and women, who lived their celibacy in different circumstances but with the same motivation, and who are happy.

Cécile

#### A Path Drawn by God

If one looks at things the old-fashioned way, celibates are people who have never been married or separated. Today's singles are certainly more free to do good in society and to respond to the needs of those around them. Celibacy is a lifestyle equal to that of religious life or of marriage. The single person can be one of two ways, in society: he or she can be selfish, and live life with no concern for others. Or he or she can be more committed socially since there are no family obligations or commitments to a religious community. For some people, celibacy is a call of God, while for others, it is circumstantial. In my case, I see a call of the Lord who has used me to improve the life condition of several people, whether that has happened in the teaching profession or among the needy. In this path drawn by God, there are so many services to render, so many people to love and to serve. I think that in order to respond correctly to this call from God, one must feel well in oneself. The single person can witness to society by always having a special place for the Lord in all of life's situations, and in discovering him in every person met. The Lord uses our hearts and hands to carry his message and to give hope to those around us. Celibacy has a future, because people need to find, more than ever, an attentive and compassionate ear and concrete gestures of love of God and neighbour. I know several single people who gave their lives to care for aging parents or family members. These people never had the chance to develop their self-worth because they did not have the education, and they often died alone and penniless. Today, single people who have left their mark in our milieu are those who dedicate themselves to working at the diocesan or parish levels, in pastoral ministry, catechetics, in the Scout movement, with the elderly, the sick, etc. As a single person, I can assure you that this choice of life was, for me, an opening out, a gift of self, a way of serving parents and students and, by the fact itself, society as a whole. I think that I have always given my best, all my love and support to those around me, whether through Catholic Action, catechetics, parish pastoral ministry, Bible sharing, etc. The Lord has been with me throughout these years of celibacy, and this presence has made my life easier and more intense. In those great quiet moments, I truly feel his presence in my daily existence. I hope to hear his message and respond to his calls for many years to come.

Lucille

#### A Vital Role

Even though it is getting more and more difficult because of laxness and materialism, our world still needs people who live somewhat beyond themselves, and who witness to the values of self-sacrifice, whether at the sexual, moral, or intellectual levels. The world needs this kind of witness if it is to become aware of the different vocation options given us, both young and mature. The Creator diversified His work, and this gives it an infinite richness. Our world also needs people who are in a position to focus all their talents and energy to help others, the sick, the youth, the elderly, the home bound, the forgotten, and the needy. With the gradual disappearance of religious communities, the needs are more and more evident in schools, hospitals, retirement homes, homes for the handicapped, etc. Our world needs more than ever to have people totally dedicated to works of sharing, assistance, and care of others. Even in mission countries, lay people are joining the religious in their missionary work. By their availability of heart and spirit, single people are called to play an ever greater role in our society.

Sylvie

#### A Call of God

My views on celibacy are mixed. I feel in my case it enables me to do more work for my family members and for my Church and Community. I'm not sure of what place it holds in the world today. I greatly admire those persons who can be celibate and do the work of God. As for its place in society, I'm sure it probably should be so. But unfortunately it seems to be less and less of a must. Celibacy is definitely a call of God, in my estimation. I love those members of my family who have entered the married state, and produced children, with God's help. These nieces, nephews and cousins are a great comfort to me. As for celibacy having a

future, personally I'm afraid not, unless there are many changes in the way society thinks. There are certainly many single persons who are not members of religious communities, or priests who have left their mark. I have a single cousin, who is a retired nurse, she has left her mark in her love and dedication to all of the members of our family. As well as her own family and her Community.

Anna

### **Part Three: Discern and supporting the single person's mission**

In looking at all that needs to be done to promote, esteem, and support the mission of single people in both Church and world, we could easily develop a defeatist attitude before a task that is immense on the short, middle, and long terms! It seems to me that we are invited to work at the simple human level and the level of faith, at the level of future singles and those of the present, and at the level of our Christian communities. This slow work includes appropriate sex education according to ages and times, as well as adequate formation as disciples of the dead and risen Jesus. I want to explore the four following paths.

#### **34. Marvel**

It seems to me that the first attitude to develop is indicated at the very beginning of the Bible. It is written that after creating man and woman, God saw that it was very good. Being able to recognise the beauty of creation, especially that of the human body, is the ABC of the discernment and affirmation of an eventual vocation to celibacy. It is not because of disgust for creation that celibates consecrate their lives, but it is in respect and marvel for all of creation, including the wonder of sexuality and its fruitfulness, and the wonder of life and generational development; it is knowing how to respect the nature of every being and his mission and his end, and acknowledging and respecting the most intimate and powerful impulses. "Glorify the Lord with all your life," Saint Paul says, "Glorify God in your bodies!" "Faithful God, your covenant continues to unfold its wonders. Open our hearts, that we be able to see them!"

#### **35. Trust**

In a world where everything is commonplace, where we tend to do violence to everything, it seems to me that trust brings a most positive note to our modern civilisation. It helps us admire life in all its forms both in and around us; it also helps us trust - though not naively - all those who have such a life potential. Choosing trust rather than suspicion and contempt is the enlightened path to the future. "Faithful God, your presence in us is a life-giving source: may it make fruitful our actions today."

#### **36. Generosity**

The vocation call being a call of God, a call to serve others in the Church and society, it is important to educate every young person in the way of commitment and of surpassing oneself. Volunteering can be an unsuspected richness. In the family there are several opportunities for both short- and long-term services: doing dishes, cleaning one's room, doing housework, mowing the lawn, running errands, etc. As much as possible, rendering service without seeking reward. "Faithful God, your will is a lamp unto my feet: may our youth discover the joy of serving you."

#### **37. Prayer**

Marvel, trust, and generosity have the effect of attracting others, and they contribute to creating a more and more positive atmosphere for the birth, discernment, and support of every authentic vocation to celibacy. Prayer, too, is an essential and most precious aid. It is in prayer that one discovers the will of God in all things. The prayer of the whole Church and of each of its members cannot go unanswered. It is the prayer of the Spirit in the heart of every faithful, a prayer followed by the precious gifts of Wisdom and Strength, Knowledge, and Filial Affection. Prayer inspires every action and brings it to completion, because every vocation commitment has its source in God and receives its fulfilment in Him. Prayer makes us attentive to the signs of the times and the needs of our brothers and sisters. "Faithful God, watch over those whose life and commitment make them close to us: may their works show your wisdom and goodness."

#### **38. Testimonies**

##### **Openness to the World**

I believe that I am more free than those who are married, and I have more time to share my talents with the most needy. I personally often work with the handicapped. To me, celibacy is first and foremost a greater possibility of openness to the world, with a greater capacity to serve others because we have fewer family responsibilities. I believe that celibacy is a real vocation, a special call of God to be at the service of those

around me, especially the needy. The condition is that we be open to our milieu, and that we be available to serve others. A withdrawn celibate does not respond to these criteria of service and availability. Being celibate does not necessarily mean being an “apostle,” but it gives the opportunity to become so. I believe that celibacy has more than ever a future in the areas of sharing and serving, in our society which is trying to find itself and which is more wounded than it ever was. I know several singles who work in the fields of education, in parish services and ministries, with the handicapped, with the elderly, and in youth and sports organisations... Single people are to be found in just about every field of endeavour in our society.

Thérèse

### **“I shall be with you.”**

It was on my First Communion day that I knew I would never marry. The Lord was near me and he said: “I shall be with you, you will be my spouse, and you will work with the elderly. You shall bring them my body, and speak of me to them.” This is what I do. Besides, I continue my studies through adult classes. I always live in faith and in the hope that one day I shall peacefully see the Lord.

Edna

### **A Well-Filled Life**

I thank my Creator for having guided me in my life’s choice. I have had a fulfilling life and career. My faith in God and in Mary has been and always shall be my “daily vitamin”. If you only knew how often I have felt the presence of the Lord or Mary, close to me...

Lisa

### **Fidelity and Love**

Today, as nearly always in our society, celibacy is rather viewed as a state of life which does not produce anything extraordinary. However, every lifestyle, whether marriage or celibacy, is a call from God. Everyone is free to answer the call. I do not believe that a person’s value is measured by that person’s choice of lifestyle. What matters is fidelity to the choice, and the love which flows from it. As a celibate teacher, I believe that I have served society by forming my students as best I could, at the spiritual, health, educational, and instructional levels. I also had more time to devote to my work, since I did not have a family to look after. This allowed me to give myself fully to my teaching profession. I think that my life has been fulfilling. I have also given much time and energy to our Church because, since the age of ten I have always been in the parish choir, in various roles. I am certain that I have been useful to society, and that my life is meaningful. My work has brought me much satisfaction and I have always been happy in this my chosen state of life. There will always certainly be calls to celibacy. Even today, many lay people are joining new communities and commit themselves through vows of chastity.

Jeannine

### **My Love of Children**

I grew up in a Christian household, not too rich, financially, but our parents placed much importance on their children’s Christian education. In adult life I chose to be a teacher; a government grant allowed me to attend “teacher’s college”. I was anxious to help my parents financially. However, the main reason for choosing the field of education was my love of children. It was wonderful to see the children in my care grow and develop. I took seriously their academic, moral, and religious development. My life was totally dedicated to this. I felt a responsibility to my mother who was widowed in my early years of teaching, even if she never kept me from my life’s choice. I was happy in my lifestyle, and the children in my keep fulfilled my motherly instinct. In the family I was known as “the spoiling aunt”. Now retired, I am involved in a number of volunteer activities in my parish and my local community. I feel good in what I do. The smiles on the faces of the elderly and those I help are to me a spiritual experience. Celibacy is a lifestyle which has made me happy.

Claudia

### **Events Speak**

I had found a religious community that accepted people with poor health; I had been admitted, and I remained there a good part of my life. One day I received a letter from my mother and my sister looking after her, asking me to come help them. What should I do? I took a vacation and visited home, to discover that my sister was exhausted, that her husband was ill, and that there was a conflict in the family. I saw in this a call of God. I felt that if I refused their request, I would regret it for a long time. After arranging things with my community, I accepted the request, and was always at peace and happy with it. After my mother’s death, the parish priest needed help to look after the church and rectory. When I was asked to come I saw, here, too, a call of God, and I worked there some fifteen years. In an act of faith I thank God for leading me along these

paths. Events speak: health quietly breaks down, one's walk is slower, and, with shingles in the right eye, this requires rest, although I can still read and write. God fashioned my life, and I thank Him for it. All lives would be beautiful if there were more justice and honesty. How can we remedy this? Only prayer can.

Anne-Marie

## A Gift from Heaven

Because of my epilepsy people were afraid to approach me or talk to me. I developed in the warmth of a home with the most affectionate parents. I always felt perfectly well at home. After graduation from high school I was invited to engage in vocation discernment, and according to God's will I decide to remain single, since I could not become a priest because of my illness. The Gospel says that this illness can be cured through prayer. I prayed for several years, and at 25, I was completely cured. However, today I suffer from another illness, gout, which is very painful. Since I cannot work, I live in poverty. My celibacy is certainly a call of God: He alone can give me the "Spirit of solitude". Celibacy is not a sacrament but a vocation, a gift from heaven to help my Church and my community. The most positive point in my life is to live a vocation I love and which I hold dear. As a Knight of Columbus, I was put in charge of religious activities and other functions. I have had the opportunity to work on my parish's economic affairs and liturgical activities. The Church is my family, even if I was not able to be a priest. Being single does not mean to live alone on earth, but to breathe the fresh air, the air of loving others, of praying, and of serving through many hours of volunteer work. What I find the most painful in my life is to never get a gift at the holidays, and never to give any because of my poverty. I find joy in giving, and I pray the Lord to always help me do good to others, and he has always been faithful.

Roger

## 39. Conclusion

I gratefully thank all those who have collaborated in the writing of this pastoral letter, especially those who have given a personal testimony. I conclude this letter with an excerpt from Bishop Gerard Dionne's recent book, *Je suis votre frère* ["I am Your Brother"], page 104 ff (on celibacy): "Without being a sacrament, celibacy for the Lord totally conserves its value of witness and liberation. It is a gift of heaven made to the Church, and we must not risk depreciating it or losing it. Celibacy is not chosen only by members of religious communities, but also by a multitude of people who remain single, not always as a form of witness but for reasons of some political, social, or family commitment. If it is well integrated, this form of celibacy, too, is a sign to be appreciated accordingly, also." Bishop Dionne then quotes Pope John Paul II: "Christian perfection finds its measure in charity, not in abstinence. No word of Christ furnishes an argument proving the inferiority of marriage or the superiority of virginity or celibacy. Marriage and abstinence are not opposed to one another, nor do they divide into two camps, with the perfect on one side, who practice abstinence, and the imperfect, less perfect than the first, who marry."

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