



From A Bishop's Journal (607)

For the Kingdom of God (5)

For the twelfth consecutive year I have been writing a Pentecost pastoral letter. This year I write about the Christian vocation to celibacy for the Kingdom of God. The excerpts below tell us about the different Christian positions held, down the ages.

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).

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.”

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.”

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.

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.

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