



From A Bishop's Journal (608)

For the Kingdom of God (6)

Among the books consulted, that of Claude Plettner makes the most difficult reading. I hope the following words of great depth help us better discern the vocation of celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom, as it was desired by the Lord.

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."

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."

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.”

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.”

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.”

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.”

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