

MINISTERIAL DIMENSIONS TO CELIBACY

At the present time, the conversation regarding celibacy takes on different shapes and forms depending on the cluster of ideas under discussion. Celibacy, in the past, has been proposed as a way of living, an ideal. Yet, it can be said today in conversation or discussion groups that perhaps celibacy has become one of the more destructive dimensions of priesthood in the life of the Church and her priests today. Such a statement 10 years ago would have been most shocking. Yet, today, such a statement is but another item for further discussion and consideration.

Another cluster of conversation centers on the impact of Vatican II. The Council put special emphasis on family life, the importance of marital love, the clear articulation that there are many ways open to people today to seek perfection. Celibacy no longer seems to have the exclusive ~~status~~ ^{aura} about itself as perhaps it did in the past.

The third cluster of conversation centers around the reality of the departure of many priests from the priesthood. This phenomenon raises the question of the possibility of a temporary commitment to celibacy, the further question of a temporary priesthood, and the reality today of married priests wishing to continue to exercise ministry in some way, shape or form.

Celibacy involves an awareness of our own sexuality. Previous training for living a life of celibacy emphasized celibacy as an expression of caring and sharing for others. Yet, today, there is a greater awareness of the priest's own need for intimacy and his own awareness of his own sexuality. The priest is indeed a sexual celibate. In this whole process, there can be a great deal of pain and suffering involved. More and more priests are struggling to give content and substance to the commitment which they have made.

In the past celibacy could be looked upon as ~~an experience~~ ^{an ideal}, an eschatological experience, a charism. Today there seems to be a shift in the discussion regarding celibacy. No longer is the discussion of celibacy based alone on the fact that it is the discipline of the Church whereby we are told that it is good for us, or that it involves a commitment to Christ. Rather, now, many priests are searching for the meaning of celibacy in their own lives as they experience it. Moreover, celibacy is seen as being a life style that gives silent witness to oneself and others. But the question is raised of what does it say, what does it mean?

A discussion of celibacy should be seen in the context of living a celibate commitment. This involves two affirmations of basic realities followed by questions that result from the concrete living out of a celibate commitment.

The first affirmation is WE ARE HUMAN. In saying that we are human, ~~conscious~~ we are aware that we are made of human stuff. This becomes obvious when we listen to people who live out a marriage commitment and we see ourselves in their conversation regarding their experience of living out a commitment to each other and to God. What strikes the listener is the fact that what is most personal is a link to what is most common.

Our awareness and consciousness of the marriage relationship emphasizes the fact that as celibates, priests are built for espousal.

In living out celibacy, we are living out a deprivation. But this is true also for any other vocation because there is always a waste involved in any choice. But the choice for celibacy can and does produce fear. Seminarians today and young priests don't want to end up as a "herbie." So often priests wind up as strange characters who are pompous in their attitude and style and become ineffectual and uneffected. It seems that in a celibate life, strange things can happen to us.

The fear regarding celibacy is rooted in a fear of becoming and being institutionalized. This involves a narrow focus and outlook on life and experience. It manifests itself in a work effort which becomes our life. It has ramifications in our relationship to friends who become such because of their connection with the Church. In the whole process, we empty ourselves out as human beings.

It is interesting to note in the recent conference held in Detroit on the ordination of women, the statement was made that women could make a tremendous contribution to priesthood because they would bring affection and love to a Church and ministry that desperately is in need of it. It seems that male celibate priesthood has taken us away from a caring and loving possibility of Church.

In the deprivation experience of celibacy, we are at a pivotal point where our lives can go one way or other. As we reach out to people, we could withdraw. There could be the temptation to control or to insulate ourselves. But, on the other hand, there can be experiences of surrender, of giving, of living in trust, openness, and simplicity.

Celibacy for the priest can be looked at in a very narrow way if we forget the numbers of others who are also unmarried. The priest celibate could be the sign of all people who are unmarried, a sign of God's blessing. Celibacy offers the possibility of seeing God's blessing present in other ways than in the experience of marriage.

fragleness This experience of deprivation offers to the celibate a confrontation with one's own ~~own~~ fragility, one's own experience of death. The question each must ask himself is: can we face this?

The second affirmation essential for discussion of celibacy is WE ARE PARTS OF FLESH. In saying this, we are saying that we must know and experience love in our lives. Rev. Michael Buckley, S.J. has stated that most religious people who have made a commitment to celibacy have had an early experience of God's love in their lives. He maintains that they spend the rest of their lives searching out the meaning of that experience and constantly seek to be touched gently by God's love in day to day living.

In this experience^{of} an awareness of one's own ability to love, there is the need for a "solitude of heart." There is also the need of friendship and the satisfaction that we find in the service we give to others. In being aware of our own flesh existence, we must be open to the love that surrounds us.

3.

An example of this is in the life of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. We read about her and she touches us. Our ~~of~~ awareness of her work and life offers the opportunity to discover a deeper experience of God's love for each of us. This consciousness makes us search for love in our own humanness and our own deeper appreciation of ourselves as parts of flesh.

These statements of affirmation regarding the dimensions of celibacy also raise some questions. The questions come from listening to the newly ordained and from our own reflection on the reality of celibacy.

In walking into our first assignment, or for that matter into any assignment, there is the predictable insertion into people's lives. From this initial contact, there comes involvement. The involvement is scattered at first, but at some point, a decision must be made to invest oneself. We make choices and a commitment comes as a result. As priests we experience ourselves as celibate men in our relationship to others. The question that is asked is what am I telling myself as a celibate man in these experiences? How do I experience myself? Previous images ~~for~~ celibacy and priesthood would demand that a priest is available to all men. However this doesn't speak to us today in the same way that perhaps it did in the past. A response to celibacy is often enough beginning a very strong individual lifestyle which is characterized by a "functional overload." This awareness demands that we look at our own use of time and the pace at which we live. There is a constant struggle of trying to be faithful to people and to oneself. The tension that confronts us as celibates is in response to the question of what we want to say about ourselves. What do we say to others in the clothes that we buy or wear, in the cars that we drive, in the things that we possess that surround us. Consequently, there is an uncertainty or restlessness, an insecurity because celibacy not only tells me who I am, but also poses the problem of what I want to say about myself.

A second question that comes as a result of the experience of celibacy is the question that results from wondering about what we tell ourselves about others. Do others come into our lives as stranger or neighbor, as foe or friend. Placing people in these very categories goes against ^{the} service model of Church and priesthood that has been such a tradition with us. The frustration question that we ask over and over again in so many ways: "Am I available to all people?" Father Develan, S.J., the psychologist and psychiatrist, was asked why do you work so hard? His response was "People are so needy." Father Develan literally gave his life for the needs of others.

This points to the tension in celibacy in the service that we give to people. The question is raised as to what do I begin to say about others in living out celibacy. What causes the resentment in us as people draw upon us. In the give and take of ministry, do we operate out of strength and power or out of a caring and tender side of ourselves? What do we say about others in our relationship to them? Are others brother and sister to us and are we part of a common family? In trying to understand our celibacy, ^{we ask how} as it affects others. The third question asks us to confront our celibacy in our relationship with God. God's presence is a reality, but what is our experience of his presence? Is he close or far away, is he outside or within ourselves? As we live as celibate ministers, does he claim us or draw us to himself?

SAINT MARY OF THE LAKE SEMINARY
MUNDELEIN, ILLINOIS 60060

4.

There seems to be a shift in the experience of ministry in our relationship to God. This shift is focused in the question that is often asked today by priests: "Where do I hear God speaking to me?" The shift seems to be that we find and discover God in the ministry that we perform whereby God touches us and we touch God in our work and in our involvement in the lives of people. We seem to have shifted from the personal experience of our own relationship to God to the more active experience of God in the lives of people. In our ministry to people, we listen to the voice of God and experience our own redemption.

In conclusion, celibacy had previously been seen as a sign of God's love and a commitment of the priest. It had been previously seen as a sign not so much for others, as much as it was personally. Celibacy was seen as a challenging and ~~revealing~~^{revealing} sign to the person living that reality. However, the question is being raised more and more today of what is the substance of that sign, what is the content behind the sign? This involves the affirmation of the fact that we are human, and we are parts of flesh. Consequently, the celibate priest has to ask what his celibacy says about himself, about others, about his relationship to God. Does celibacy reflect who we are and what our relationship is to others and to God? Does it speak to us? Does it point us in a direction? These are the questions to which the celibate must find, discover and answer for himself in the context of his faith and his living out his commitment.